

RAMBAM AND THE RAV VAYERA



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In the pasha of Vayera Moshe begins to carry out the mission of delivering the Jewish people from Egypt. Central to this deliverance is God's producing of miracles- the ten "makos" that precede the exodus. The pasha states::

And I will harden the heart of Pharaoh, and I will multiply My signs and my wonders in the land of Egypt. But Pharaoh will not listen to you, and I will lay My hand on Egypt, and I will bring out my hosts, My people the children of Israel, out of Egypt by great judgments. (Shemot: 7: 3-4)

From this verse it is clear that God is the source and cause of the miracles that occurred in Egypt. But what is the role of Moshe in bringing about these miracles? Did he play a passive role in the occurrence of a miracle- a type of "announcer" - one who merely has foreknowledge of the miracle and it's timing; or did he play some type of active role, being something of a "miracle worker"? This more active role appears to be the position held by Maimonides as he states in his work the "Guide for the Perplexed":

Scripture, therefore, declares that no prophet will ever, like Moses, do signs publicly in the presence of friend and enemy, of his followers and his opponents; this is the meaning of the words: 'And there arose not a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses, etc, in all the signs and wonders, etc, in the sight of all Israel.' Two things are here mentioned together; namely, that there will not arise a prophet that will perceive as Moses perceived, or a prophet that will do as he did; then it is pointed out that the signs were made in the presence of Pharaoh, all his servants and all his land, the opponents of Moses and also in the presence of all the Israelites, his followers. This is a distinction not possessed by any prophet before Moses; nor, as is correctly foretold, will it ever be possessed by another prophet....Your mind must comprehend the distinction of the prophecy and the wonders of Moses, and understand that his greatness in prophetic perception was the same as his power of producing miracles."

So, for Maimonides, the prophet is more than a passive player in the miracle. Only Moshe, he states here could "**produce**" the public miracles of the plagues and the Exodus. He did more than announce them through foreknowledge. But what was Moshe's role in the production of the miracles? To explore this passive versus active role of the prophet, I would like to revisit the difference of position of Maimonides regarding whether the miracle was designed with the initial creation of the world (Chazal) or whether it was produced at the time of its occurrence? Maimonides states:

When I, however, said that no prophet ever announced "a permanent change of any of its properties," I intended to except miracles. For although the rod was turned into a serpent, the water into blood, the pure and noble hand into a leprous one, without the existence of any natural cause that could affect these or similar phenomena, these changes were not permanent, they have not become a physical property. This is my opinion; this should be our belief. Our Sages, however said very strange things as regards miracles; they are found in Bereshit Rabba, and in Midrash Koheleth, namely, that the miracles are to some extent also natural; for they say, when God created the

Universe with its present physical properties, He made it part of these properties, that they should produce certain miracles at certain times, and *the sign of a prophet consisted in the fact that God told him to declare when a certain thing will take place, but the thing itself was effected according to the fixed laws of nature.*" (Guide: Par 2, Chapter 29)

Upon reflection, the difference of opinion between Maimonides and Chazal seems difficult. It is true that miracles occur at a point in time. There is a timeline for all events that take place from beginning of the creation of the world up to the present moment. For example the splitting of the sea occurred in the Jewish year of 2448 on the 22nd day of Nissan. This is at a specific time. Both Maimonides and Chazal, of course, agree on this. So what do they disagree on? It seems, at first, that the disagreement is whether the miracle was designed within the structure of the initial creation (Chazal's position) or whether this structure was "disturbed or altered" at the time of the miracle. Here is where it gets difficult. Maimonides holds, as does Chazal, I would assume, that G... is outside of time. G.. created time with the other elements of creation. This concept has always been, as I understand, a foundation of our belief. So, if we accept that G... is outside of time, as time is a property of the material creation, how can there be a disagreement between Maimonides and Chazal as to the timing of G...'s causing of the miracle?. There are no "different times" with regard to the act of creation by G... The idea of arguing whether a miracle was pre-programmed by G... at the initial time of creation or done "on the spot" seems meaningless since G... doesn't act within the timeline. If time was created at the moment of "the Beginning" it would seem that everything that was created was created at that point including all future time and its miracles. Time just keeps "rolling out" for us as we experience it in material existence.

So what is Maimonides' position that implies an alteration in the creation at the time of the miracle? He certainly does not hold that G.. creates within time or creates at different times. But perhaps there is another factor in the production of miracles that is in time. This temporal factor (one bound by time and existing on the timeline) is the prophet. Perhaps Maimonides agrees with Chazal that all miracles have a non-temporal element: the part of the miracle created by G... Who is outside of time at the point of creation. However, there is another element causing the miracle that is in time-the role of the prophet in bringing about the miracle. It is with this role that Maimonides and Chazal differ. This difference is whether the prophet plays a passive role as a simple announcer, knowing the timing and details of the miracle, but having no causative role (Chazal's position) or whether the prophet plays a co-causative role with G... in the production of the miracle (Maimonides view).

Rabbi Soloveitchik ("The Rav") states in his essay "The Emergence of Ethical Man" regarding miracles:

The word "miracle" in Hebrew does not possess the connotation of the supernatural. It has never been placed on a transcendental level. "Miracle" (*pele, nes*) describes only an outstanding event which causes amazement. A turning point in history is always a miracle, for it commands attention as an event which intervened fatefully in the formation of that group or that individual. As we read the story of the exodus from Egypt, we are impressed by the distinct tendency of the Bible to relate the events in natural terms. The frogs came out of river when the Nile rose, the wind brought the locusts and split the sea. All archeologists agree that the plagues as depicted by the Bible are very closely related to the geographical and climatic conditions that prevail in Egypt. Behind the passages in the Bible we may discern a distinct intention to describe the plagues as naturally as possible....The reason for this is obvious. A philosophy which considers the world-drama as a fixed, mechanical process governed by an unintelligent, indifferent principle, may regard the miracle as a supernatureal transcendental phenomenon which does not fit into the causalistic, meaningless monotony. Israel, however, who looked upon the universal occurrence as the continuous realization of a divine ethical will embedded into dead and live matter, could never classify the miracle as something unique and incomprehensible. Both natural monotony and the surprising element in nature express God's word. Both are regular, lawful phenomena; both can be traced to an identical source. (pages 187-188)