

# TO MAKE A RAINBOW – GOD’S WORK IN NATURE

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**Abstract.** The Torah lays out a rich idea of God’s governance in the Scroll of Esther: Circumstance lays the warp, but human choices weave the woof of destiny. God remains unseen. Delegation of agency, including human freedom, is implicit in the act of creation: God does not clutch efficacy jealously to his breast. Biblically, God acts through nature, making the elements his servitors. Miracles do not violate God’s covenant with nature. Maimonides, following rabbinic homilies, finds them embedded in that covenant. Divine agency is clearest today in evolution and its special case, the emergence of autonomy and the rise of consciousness and personhood.

The book of Esther stands alone in the Hebrew canon as the one book that does not mention God.<sup>1</sup> Its record of a redemptive moment that Jews still celebrate joyously as miraculous is framed as a court romance, drawing its sense of realism from a narrative strategy that casts a penetrating eye on episodes of palace intrigue, hushed conversations, secret plots, private messages, a sleepless king, a golden sceptre, royal ring and seal, palace chronicles, and rescripts sent by courier throughout the polyglot satrapies of a vast empire, foiling a monstrous, genocidal plot blown up from pride and pettiness but exploded by the courage of a lovely queen and her resourceful uncle and guardian. If God is active here, his hand is unseen. The closest Esther’s scroll comes to mentioning God is Mordecai’s challenge sent to Esther when she informed him of the mortal danger she faced should she approach the king unbidden:

Do not imagine yourself in the palace surviving every Jew. If you keep silent now relief and rescue for the Jews will arise elsewhere, but you and

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<sup>1</sup> God is mentioned only obliquely in Song of Songs 8:6, where passion is called a *Godfierce flame* – but the rabbinic tradition takes the thought of peace in the name Shelomo in the song’s first line as an allusion to God, as the source of all peace.

your father's house will perish – And who knows if it was for a time like this that you came to royal rank (4:13-14).

Mordecai's tone takes its edge from the gravity of the crisis. But his trust in God's salvation is hedged in reticence. The danger is real, despite the hopes piety musters; and Mordecai does not know what form rescue might take. He pointedly reminds his ward of who she is, lest palace life has loosed her loyalties. But he speaks cautiously of providence. More courtier than theologian, he makes doubt the ally of his argument: Who knows if it was for just such a moment that you, of all women, became a royal consort. Lots were cast twice, then, in a way: overtly in choosing a day on which the Jews of every province were to die; more hiddenly, in Esther's choice as queen.

Facing her moment, Esther asks that her people fast for her – a fast still kept. She and her maidens will fast too. Then she will approach the king, despite the dictates of prudence – *and if I perish, I perish* (4:16). She does not echo Mordecai's bluff assurance that *somehow* God will act but makes her choice not knowing if she will be God's instrument or just another victim in the maw of injustice.

Punning in Hebrew on Esther's Persian name,<sup>2</sup> an eponym of Astarte, as her uncle's was of Marduk, the Talmudic rabbis see hints of God's hiddenness: *haster astir panay* (Deuteronomy 31:18, quoted at Babylonian Talmud Hullin 139b) – *I shall surely hide My face...* The loss of intimacy with God may be the scar of spiritual exile warned of as Moses' warms to his cautionary final song to Israel. But it is also part of the human condition. As Roger Scruton writes, drawing on Simone Weil's reflections, 'God can show himself in this world only by entirely withdrawing from it: to appear among us clothed in the divine attributes would be to absorb and annihilate what is *not* God, and so to undo the work of creation.... "thou canst not see my face, for there shall be no man see me and live" (Exodus 33:20).'<sup>3</sup>

Isaiah takes up God's hiddenness when he pictures potentates from several nations saying *Indeed, You are a God that hides yourself* (45:15), but almost in the same breath acknowledging God as the sole true divinity, *there is no other* (45:14). Ibn Ezra (1093-1167) parses that double-edged thought: God was hidden, yet active in saving Israel: 'As

<sup>2</sup> Her Hebrew name was Hadassah (Esther 2:7), a name taken from the fragrant myrtle.

<sup>3</sup> Roger Scruton, *The Soul of the World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 71; cf. p. 10: 'God reveals himself by concealing himself.'

the commentators say, although unseen God showed himself for Israel's sake.<sup>4</sup> Like Esther and Mordecai we do not know when or how God will act. Unlike them, we often fail to notice just when or how God *has* acted in our lives. That makes the Book of Esther keenly relevant for us.

Esther and Mordecai are not marionettes. Their actions are their own. That is part of what it means to say that God created heaven and earth and all living creatures: God gives more than bare existence – as if anything had bare existence with no character or nature of its own, no dispositions or capacities – or, in the human case, no power to choose and plot a course.

Esther faced a momentous choice. So, in his way, did Mordecai. He needed to think through the options and shoulder risks that others might have shirked. The choices of the two would have a lasting impact on Israel, and on the choosers. They were making decisions about who they would be. Esther, above all, at her critical moment, became the person of her choice. But, despite its prominence, her situation is paradigmatic of human choices, even those too close, familiar, or routine to dominate awareness for most of us most of the time. God set the stage, just as Mordecai proposed, seeing an opportunity in the midst of danger. But Esther's choice was hers.

It's natural enough to think of divine action as an intervention. When reporters appear after a tornado and press a microphone into the face of someone whose home was spared, and drop the formulaic gambit, 'What did it feel like when you saw your neighbours' homes swept away and yours was untouched?' we're ready for the formulaic answer, 'I guess Somebody up there was looking out for us.' But how reflective is that? Was God ignoring the neighbours? And if God made all things, did He not make the storm? Is God active only when a crisis touches us, and beseeched or thanked only by asking for nature to change course? That's unreasonable and self-serving. It's unjust to others and pays scant respect to God.

In the Book of Job we overhear God speaking from the storm wind, not in the still small voice He used in speaking to Elijah (1 Kings 19:11-13). But one still needs to know how to listen. The storm wind is not typically an instrument of judgment. It cannot discriminate, as divine judgment should – as pictured in the narrative of Noah's flood. Recall the covenant

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<sup>4</sup> Abraham Ibn Ezra, *Commentary on Isaiah*, ed. by M. Friedlander (London, 1873) Hebrew, 2.78; English 1.209; the translation here is mine.

with nature that follows: *seedtime and harvest* will endure (Genesis 8:22). God will no longer interfere. He knows that human beings incline to evil from their youth.

Mordecai's reticence gives us a hint of something distinctively Jewish in his reticence about God's action in our lives. Beyond that cultural caution, Jewish philosophy avoids setting freedom against nature. We tend to see human powers of choice as part of nature, not alien to it.<sup>5</sup> Freedom is Godgiven. By the same token, we do not play off nature against God in a zero-sum explanatory game, as though natural causes somehow excluded divine action, so that the more we know scientifically the less room remains for God. On the contrary, the better we understand nature's workings (including those of human minds and souls) the abler we are to see and celebrate God's work.<sup>6</sup>

If we see God's work everywhere, as Maimonides says a true monotheist will, and regard nature as an expression of God's wisdom – and nature's bounty as a gift of God's grace – we gain a sense of miracles everywhere. Thus, in an ancient prayer still recited, protesting our inability to thank God adequately for one thousandth of His millions of favours, each drop of rain is counted among the favours for which we owe God gratitude (Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 59b, Ta'anit 6b).

Clearly rain can be a blessing. And, like any natural occurrence, it can also be a trial. Yet a trial too can be made a blessing – much as a poet, or creative artist, or inventor makes an opportunity of a difficulty. So Abraham is blessed when he surmounts his trial when hearing that he must offer up his long awaited son (Genesis 22). His crisis leads him to discovery of the unity of holiness with love, and its incompatibility with violence and violation. The God of monotheism is not the *mysterium tremendum* that beckons wantonly to pagan piety. It is through that discovery that Abraham becomes a blessing to all the nations of the earth.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See, inter alia, Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah* I, *Hilkhot Teshuvah* V, edited and translated by Moses Hyamson (Jerusalem and New York: Feldheim, 1974), pp. 86-88; 'Eight Chapters', 5 and 8, edited and translated by Joseph Gorfinkle (New York: Columbia University Press, 1903).

<sup>6</sup> This thought is developed in Lenn E. Goodman, *Creation and Evolution* (London: Routledge, 2010), especially Chapter 5.

<sup>7</sup> See Lenn E. Goodman, *God of Abraham*, Chapter 1, and *Judaism: A Contemporary Philosophical Investigation*, forthcoming.

Esther too faces a test, not of faith in the familiar sense. Her trust is not that God will reach out and catch her if she falls. Her courage rises as she acknowledges that she might die. Her faith is her commitment to God's truth. She manifests it in choosing the nobler act. God set the conditions. But it was she who rose to the test – summoning Israel to fast with her, to ensure them to be worthy of her risk. God acted, but not by disrupting nature's course. In less momentous crises too, although our penchant is to treat our crises as a test of God, it is not God but we who are tested, and who need the test, if we are to become the human beings we can be.<sup>8</sup>

To think of miracles as exceptions to nature's course one must have some core idea of nature. So it's strange to find Leo Strauss arguing, 'The Old Testament, whose basic premise may be said to be the implicit rejection of philosophy, does not know "nature": the Hebrew term for "nature" is unknown to the Hebrew Bible.'<sup>9</sup> But, as Nahmanides (1195-1270) said, a cow would not notice a miracle if it saw one.

The word Strauss finds missing biblically is the *medieval* term for nature (*teva*), based on the Arabic (*tabi'a*), a term well attested among Arabic translators of Greek works and among philosophers who wrote in Arabic.<sup>10</sup> The base meaning is to sink, as in the Song of Moses, where Pharaoh's host are sunk in the Sea of Reeds (Exodus 15:4), or David's stone sinks into Goliath's forehead (1 Samuel 17:49). So the term was a natural choice in medieval philosophy, suggesting the impress or stamp of a thing, as in the biblical word for a signet ring (*taba'at*). The root acquires overtones of the idea of nature when Proverbs speaks of mountains sunk as piers anchoring the earth (8:25). In the Psalms (102:26) those foundations assure stability: *He anchored the earth on its footings, never to totter* (104:5). Perhaps Strauss missed that thought, presuming nature must be set apart from any thought of God's commitment to it.

While the Torah does not use the root *t-b-* to signify nature directly, it has other words to do that job. One is *yetzer*, one's inclination, as in *the bent* (*yetzer*) *of a man's heart is evil from his youth* (Genesis 8:21), reading

<sup>8</sup> See Exodus 17:2-17, Deuteronomy 6:16.

<sup>9</sup> Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 81. For philosophy in scripture, see Lenn E. Goodman, *Judaism: A Contemporary Philosophical Investigation*, forthcoming.

<sup>10</sup> Ilai Alon and S. Abed., *Al-Farabi's Philosophical Lexicon* (Cambridge: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2008), 1.238, 2.655.

nature in its familiar local sense, referring to the character of a thing or a person rather than cosmic constancy. But the Torah does broach its idea of nature from the outset, by contrasting God's handiwork with the primordial *tohu va-vohu*. It carries the idea further when it tells of the sprouting herbage, the seed-bearing plants yielding fruit of their kind (Genesis 1:11), the sun and moon presiding over day and night (1:16), and living creatures reaching for transcendence by the avenue open to them, striving to be fruitful and multiply (1:20-25). The focus is on God's creation of all these: *You are Lord, You alone. You made the sky and the sky beyond the sky, and all their host, the earth and all that is upon it, the seas and all that they contain. You give life to them all, and all the host of heaven bow before you* (Nehemiah 9:6).

God empowers living beings to perpetuate their kind, a blessing directly spoken in the human case since the first couple receive not just the breath of life but also articulate speech (Genesis 1:28). Creation, is God's act, but vitality, procreation, thought, and speech are gifts freely bestowed. In recognizing the diverse and fecund, swarming, flying, swimming, and creeping creatures, scripture defines nature ostensibly, surveying God's creatures and the nusus of their claims, making nature the backdrop of Israel's history and mission and the anchor of its argument for God's reality and act.

The Torah does not alienate God from his work. So God is typically said to act by way of his creations: Pharaoh and his people are afflicted by lice and boils, frogs and darkness, swarming creatures, cattle plagues, locusts and hail. The first and last plagues, the bloody waters and the slaying of the firstborn, have their impact, if not their origins, on the natures they affect. Only at the outset does God create from nothing.

Israel, trapped with their backs to the sea, crossed dryshod when *the Lord drove back the sea with a strong east wind all that night* (Exodus 14:21). Pharaoh pursues his departing slaves, after a natural change of heart (14:5). God shields Israel behind a dark cloud (14:19-20). When the people reach the far shore, *the sea returned to its steady flow* [*aitano*, its regular course – another way of citing nature; cf. Psalms 74:15] (14:27). It is the returning waters that allow the song of Moses to say that God *cast Pharaoh's chariotry and his host into the sea* (15:4). The implements of all the miracles are natural.

In Job, as Saadia explains,<sup>11</sup> nature is the theme of God's speech from the stormwind. Again we hear of God's laying earth's foundations, but the imagery of sound design is followed up in allusions to the earth's measure and cornerstone (38:6). God set limits to the reach of the waves (38:8-11; cf. Psalms 104:9). Snow and hail, torrents and thunderstorms, sprouting grass, frost, rain, and ice, serve at His command. God, not man, reins in the Pleiades or looses Orion. Rains fall on wastelands (38:22-31). For man is not the be-all and end-all of creation. God imparts reason (38:36) but also provides the lion its prey and feeds the ravens' young (38:39). He knows the seasons of birth and gestation for deer and mountain goats (39:1-2) and gives the onager his freedom. For a wild ass would laugh at city throngs (39:5); a wild ox would hardly lodge at some farmer's crib, or plough his furrow, or gather his seedcorn from the threshing floor (39:9-11). Nature is wild and free, overseen by God, whose mercies are on all his works (Psalms 145:9). The greatest land or water creatures are scarcely playthings to God (Job 40-41).

It was Hume who had a weak idea of nature. His dogmatic empiricism undermines the idea of an inner regularity in things, leaving him no better case against miracles than his finding them unusual. That sets his brief against miracles on the same footing as his refusal to believe a Black man could be talented.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Saadia, *The Book of Theodicy*, tr. by L. E. Goodman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), at Job 38 and 39, pp. 383-84, 393-94.

<sup>12</sup> In 1753 Hume added a note to his essay, 'Of National Characters,' maintaining 'the negroes and in general all other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to whites'. His evidence: "There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent in either action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no sciences. [...] Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men. Not to mention our colonies, there are Negroe slaves dispersed all over Europe, of which none ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity; tho' low people, without education, will start up amongst us, and distinguish themselves in every profession. In Jamaica, indeed, they talk of one negroe as a man of parts and learning; but 'tis likely he is admired for very slender accomplishments, like a parrot, who speaks a few words very plainly.' David Hume, *The Philosophical Works*, ed. by T. H. Green and T. H. Grose (London, 1882), 3.253. Criticized by James Beattie, an Aberdeen professor, for ignoring the civilizations of Mexico and Peru and failing to survey 'all the negroes that now are or ever were on the face of the earth' (*An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth in opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism* (Edinburgh, 1770), pp. 48-82), Hume revised his note for what proved the posthumous edition of his

Biblically there's bound to be some tension between talk of miracles and thoughts of nature, with God its guarantor. The Talmudic Rabbis seek to ease the tension by imagining the prominent exceptions to nature's regularity woven into its fabric from the start:

Ten things were created on the Sabbath eve at twilight: the mouth of the earth [that swallowed Korah and his cohort (Numbers 16)], the mouth of the well [of Miriam<sup>13</sup>], the mouth of the she-ass [of Balaam (Numbers 22:28)], the rainbow (Genesis 9:13-17), the manna (Exodus 16:14-26), Moses' rod (Exodus 4:17, etc.), the Shamir [whose tracks cleaved the stones for Solomon's temple, lest any iron tool desecrate it with even a suggestion of bloodshed (Exodus 20:22, 1 Kings 6:7)], the letters, writing, and tablets [of the Decalogue (Exodus 24:12)]. Some say, imps too, Moses' grave [prepared by God (Deuteronomy 34:6)], the ram of Abraham (Genesis 22:13). And some say, the tongs made with tongs. (Mishnah Avot 5.8)

The first tongs, mentioned, as if in an afterthought, stand for the difficulties inherent in the emergence of higher from simpler things: How were tongs made without tongs to handle them at the forge? If nothing comes from nothing, how can the greater emerge from the less? Theism, along with Plato's thesis as to the primacy of absolute over relative value

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writings, 1777, deleting his general reference to non-white races and with it the word 'species', with its overtones of polygenism, thus focusing his diatribe more sharply on Blacks and bypassing Beattie's counterexamples. Hume had let the offensive note stand in all editions of his essay down to and including that of 1770, when Beattie's criticism appeared. Henry Louis Gates identifies Hume's 'man of parts' as Francis Williams, a Cambridge graduate and teacher of Latin and mathematics, who also published poetry in Latin. Hume ignored Williams' public protest of his parrot remark, leading Richard Popkin to call Hume a 'lousy empirical scientist' and a 'dishonest researcher', for failing to acknowledge 'the facts that disproved his claim'. Richard Popkin, 'Hume's Racism Reconsidered', in *The Third Force in Seventeenth-Century Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), pp. 64-75. See John Immerwahr, 'Hume's Revised Racism', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 53 (1992), 481-86. Hume did not confine his prejudice to blacks. Writing from Izmir in 1748, he declared, 'The ingenuity, industry, and activity of the ancient Greeks have nothing in common with the stupidity and indolence of the present inhabitants of those regions.' What matters here is that Hume allowed himself to generalize on the basis of slight and narrow experience and to transform his generalization about a race (or congeries of races) into a pronouncement about what was possible for all of those he felt licensed to despise.

<sup>13</sup> Immediately after Miriam's death we read: *there was no water for the community* (see Exodus 20:1-2). The Sages infer that while Miriam lived a miraculous well followed the Israelites during their wanderings.

(and thus the possibility of emanation as well as creation), depends on a coherent answer to that question.

The letters of the Decalogue and substance of the tablets on which a supernal God might inscribe his teachings again raise questions of causal and ontic primacy, and God's creative role. Aristotle touches the question when he speaks of the role of the Active Intellect:

... one does not decide to decide, which would presuppose some prior decision. There must be a starting point. Nor does one think after first thinking one will think, and so ad infinitum. So thought does not originate from thinking, nor a decision from a prior decision. What, then, could be the starting point but chance? So everything would start from chance? But perhaps there is a starting point with none before it, that can act just by being what it is. That is what we are looking for, the origin of movement in the soul. The answer is clear: In the soul as in the universe, all is moved by God. For in a way the divine within us is what moves everything. Reasoning begins not from reasoning but from something greater. And what could be greater than mind and knowing but God? (*Eudemian Ethics* VIII 1248a18-29).

If we hope to wrestle with what it means to speak of God's act in nature and the mystery of the nexus of the Transcendent to the here and now in ourselves or in the cosmos, we must address such questions about the priority of the Infinite to the finite. But consider first the other things created in the twilight of the sixth day.

None of them, plainly, sprung from nature's familiar order. Yet neither did they breach God's plan. All ten served Israel's welfare and mission. Built into nature's fabric, they underscore the subtext of the numerous liturgical blessings that acknowledge God's grace in 'sanctifying us with His commandments'. What that subtext pronounces is the thought that the Torah reveals concretely what the Supernal wills *for us*. Israel's destiny is woven into nature's fabric: The warp of history unfolds in natural events; the weft is added by our individual and communal acts and choices. Unlike the threads spun and cut by Hesiod's fates, these do not preempt our opportunities to act. Hence the irony of Esther's Scroll: Haman's lots fell out as they would, but history reversed his plans. The outcome arose not simply from God's judgment but from Esther's choice. Plato, similarly, gives freedom its say, putting into the mouth of Lachesis, the daughter of Necessity, the speech that countermands her ancient, fatalistic role:

No divinity shall cast lots for you. You shall choose your own deity. Let him to whom falls the first lot first select a life to which he must cleave. But virtue has no master over her; each shall have more or less of her as he honours or despites her. The blame is his who chooses. God is blameless. (*Republic* X 617e)

Like Plato, Maimonides holds God above reproach (cf. Deuteronomy 32:4-5). Like Heraclitus he finds the key to destiny in character, not the stars. His God, like Plato's, is above change as well as above reproach. Reading the list of things created in the twilight of the sixth day, Maimonides says of the Sages, 'they did not believe that God changes his mind. At the outset of creation He set into nature those things by which all would be done that would be done.' God used and augmented the natural powers of things. 'Outcomes that were frequent were natural; those that were extraordinary, reserved for a remote future, were marvels. But all were alike.'<sup>14</sup> All expressed the natures God imparted.

Maimonides outdoes the ancient rabbis in naturalizing miracles, weaving yet more tightly into nature's fabric marvels not listed as created in the twilight of the first Sabbath: The parting of the waters for Israel (Exodus 14:21) and Joshua (Joshua 3:13-17),<sup>15</sup> the natures that made possible the miracles of Elijah (1 Kings 17-19) and Elisha (2 Kings 4-7), the halting of the sun and moon at Gibeon (Joshua 10:13), and every other scriptural miracle.

The occasionalists of the kalam devised a different strategy. Rather than naturalize miracles, they made every event an act of God. Since nothing can do or be more than God pleases, nothing can outlast its instant or exceed its place. Beings were atoms. Each had a position but no lasting duration, no size, and no causal power. All power belongs to God (Qur'ān 18:39).

The notion of dimensionless atoms was pilloried by Avicenna for the geometrical paradoxes it entrained. Even earlier, al-Ash'arī, within the Islamic kalām, had seen the difficulties for perceptual realism entailed by denying natural causality. Maimonides sharply criticized the kalām occasionalists for erasing the very idea of nature and undermining God's role as Creator of a coherent cosmos. Why, he asked, would God create things no one needs if, say, food does not sustain us and medicines

<sup>14</sup> Maimonides' Commentary Mishnah Avot, at 5.6.

<sup>15</sup> Y. Tzvi Langermann, 'Maimonides and Miracles', *Jewish History*, 18 (2004), 147-172 (p. 151).

cannot treat our illnesses? On the contrary, God's providence, working through nature, grants resources in proportion to our need – air most abundantly, then water, then simple, wholesome foods. Nature, by God's grace, provides mother's milk for babes until they're ready for solid food. God, through nature, lets some life forms depend on others, as all animals depend ultimately on plants. The Psalmist (104) sweepingly alludes to all four elements – wind and fire, earth and sea – as God's instrumentalities (*Guide* II 6). God loses nothing by empowering natural things, and it does not diminish his sway to delegate human powers of free choice. Langermann finds Maimonides warmer toward miracles in his later works. Yet, at no time, he stresses, did Maimonides surrender his belief in nature's causal continuity. From his youth, 'the regularity of natural events' was for him 'the greatest proof' of God's rule.<sup>16</sup>

God's covenant found confirmation, Maimonides holds, not in miracles but in its content (cf. Deuteronomy 18:15-25).<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Maimonides found the strongest ground for loyalty to that covenant, as he states in writing to the beleaguered Jews of Yemen, neither in the natural order nor in miracles but in the giving of the Law. That theophany was normative. The Torah's bestowal did not disrupt the laws of nature but touched the minds of all: God reached out, and Israel responded by reaching up toward Him.<sup>18</sup>

That thought captures a second strategy of Maimonides' for naturalizing miracles, perhaps more welcome than the midrashic twilight to those who share Maimonides' belief that causal regularity is the surest sign of God's rule. All the movements of Balaam's ass, he argues, were brought about by an angel (*Guide* I 6). But in Maimonides' voluntaristic version of neoplatonism, angels are the forms and forces God imparts, allowing things to act.<sup>19</sup> They are the natures of things. But later in the *Guide* (II 42) Maimonides locates Balaam's conversation with his she-ass in a prophetic vision. Likewise Jacob's wrestling match (Genesis 32:25-33)

<sup>16</sup> Langermann, 'Maimonides and Miracles', p. 148.

<sup>17</sup> Maimonides, Epistle to Yemen, tr. by Abraham Halkin, in *Crisis and Leadership: Epistles of Maimonides* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985), p. 113.

<sup>18</sup> Maimonides, Epistle to Yemen, tr. by Halkin, in *Crisis and Leadership*, p. 104; *Guide* I 54, 63, III 6, 'Eight Chapters', citing Mekhilta to Exodus 15:2.

<sup>19</sup> See Lenn E. Goodman, *Maimonidean Naturalism in Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought*, edited by L. E. Goodman (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), pp. 139-72, and in *Maimonides and the Sciences*, edited by Robert Cohen and Hillel Levine (Boston: Kluwer, 2000), pp. 57-85.

and Joshua's encounter with an angel (Joshua 5:13-15). Generalizing, Maimonides writes: 'Do not imagine for a moment that an angel can be seen or heard to speak unless in the dreams and visions of prophecy, as the principle is clearly stated: *in a vision do I make myself known to him, in a dream do I speak to him* (Numbers 12:6).'

Even as he presses that universal thesis, Maimonides stresses the reality of angels as God's intermediaries: Subjectivity need not entail unreality. The mind is the meeting place of the finite with the Infinite. God governs nature through minds, celestial or human. So bracketing the miraculous within the realm of experience need not mean its dismissal. And the experience, as Sinai reveals, need not be private.

Bible scholars tell us that poetry like the Song at the Sea antedates its prose settings, which relate an ancient living experience to a later moment. Hence the opening word (*az*, then) of the verse introducing Moses' song: *Then did Moses and the Children of Israel sing this song to the Lord*: (Exodus 15:1). God's fighting for the Israelites, so recently slaves whose children were cast into the Nile and whose taskmasters expected to beat them with impunity, belongs to their experience: The tide turned, Egypt's chariotry sank like a stone, like lead in the mighty waters, the sea seemed to part, its waters to stand up like walls as Israel passed.<sup>20</sup> No Israelite heard the foe promising themselves booty. But the people, singing joyously, could taste the irony of Egypt's defeat as God's breath sent back the sea. The shared epiphany was captured in the poet's words – just as Deborah's song seizes its moment, picturing Sisera's mother at her lattice, reassured by her tactful ladies that only the rich booty can have detained the brigands' chariots; then the perspective shifts from the uneasy reassurance of the ladies awaiting the ravished Israelite women (Judges 5:30) to Israel's realization that the roads are safe (cf. 5:6-7), and the prose historian's verdict: *the land had peace for forty years* (5:31).

A shared moment is again captured when Joshua orders sun and moon to halt while he completes the enemy's rout – the poet's words, preserved from the vanished Book of Jashar (Joshua 10:12-13). The stars did not literally battle Sisera, but the triumph was no less real for that – and no less real in the Six Day War, or at Entebbe in the year of America's

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<sup>20</sup> The midrash tellingly calls the Sea of Reeds a swamp. See *Mekhilta Shirata* at Exodus 15:5, tr. by Judah Goldin in *The Song at the Sea* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), p. 139. Much depended on perception: Israel felt trapped by the sea before the tide turned – the tide of the sea, and the tide of trust. The waters that had seemed an impassable barrier were soon to engulf Pharaoh's chariotry.

bicentennial. Each generation has its triumphs and visions. If the cause is just, there is no blasphemy in seeing the work and hand of God. The clearest shared theophany for Israel was the moment when all stood before God at Sinai and, according to their capacity, experienced the commanding Reality inviting each to rise in emulation of God's holiness by following the Law that articulates Israel's way of life. The moment was no messy ecstasy but a gateway. Midrashically, every future generation was present; liturgically, later generations relive the moment, rising to hear the Decalogue read out from the Torah scroll.

It's natural, not least in times of crisis for outstanding characters to be adorned in popular imagination or sacred history with tales of marvels like those that decorate the memory of Elisha or Elijah, or the latest *wunder-rebbe*, giving charisma its glister. But greatness needs no tinsel. Little clings to the real Lincoln or Gandhi. The Church can routinize the awe by requiring documented miracles of its saints, an expectation Anselm tried to duck, more focused on God's epiphany to the mind than on the laying on of healing hands. For Israel the epiphanies that matter most are experiential, yet shared: The biblical miracles of Moses relate more to his people than his person – to Israel's sense of providence and chosenness for a mission. Even the heaviest midrashic embellishment cannot overwrite the events or disable with credulity or incredulity the meanings we naturally seek and find in historic patterns. Human beings are meaning makers, but our penchant to connect the dots does not make every construct as good as any other, as though life and experience were a duck-rabbit whose chief message was its own ambiguity.

Natural miracles are distinguished less by their rarity than by their reception. Yet events can have a real significance. Most tellingly, the very existence and dynamic of beings, as I've long argued, sets real value before us. The fact of life, or the existence of anything at all, come closest to what I call a miracle, not for rarity, or even improbability, but for the natural marvel. Scientists as well as poets see these things – and moderns see nothing different from what the ancients saw – although scientists today may be as reticent as Mordecai in naming them. The rainbow is a sign, not in spite of optics, but by its beauty. Diverse interests may lay claim to its meaning. But that cannot make one construal no better than another.

In Israel's case the memory of Egypt is made a moral imperative, from God's mouth, to love the stranger, since we were strangers (Deuteronomy 10:19). That memory, so construed, defines a sense of destiny and

a mission chosen. How unlike *Geworfenheit*! Its moral truth seconds its historical verisimilitude. Vengeance was not the message taken. If Israel has long been the suffering servant, as Isaiah saw,<sup>21</sup> there is no less truth in her glimpses of herself in memory as God's once youthful bride and lover, sometimes bereft but never divorced or forsaken. Jeremiah recounts God's words: *I remember you for your youthful grace, your love as a bride, how you followed Me in the desert, a land unsown...(2:2).*<sup>22</sup> The prophets, seeing God's hand in Israel's sufferings, can honestly claim a license to see the same hand in her triumphs.

There's both power and weakness in construing all that occurs as meaningful for oneself, or one's people. The moral use made of such a construal helps draw the line, but so does our command of science, general and human. Henchard's last delusion in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is his conviction that fate has conspired against him. There's a similar mingling of self-pity and self-congratulation in the existentialists' idea of life's absurdity, and its mirror image in their notion that warm embrace of any choice can make the choice right – much like the moral solipsism of the egoist who casts himself as the hero of the piece and takes every person, thing, and event he meets as stage business, props and settings meant to show off his own acts and passions.

Knowing one's place in nature is the real start of wisdom, pointed to in the Delphic admonition to self-knowledge, the maxim as it stood before Plato inverted it by portraying Socrates as finding there a hidden hint of the divinity of the self. The ancient maxim was a counsel of piety that links hands with the admonition of the Psalms: *Piety is the start of wisdom* (111:10). Piety counsels modesty, and modesty knows that

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<sup>21</sup> See Lenn E. Goodman, *On Justice*, p. 168.

<sup>22</sup> In the liturgy of the Day of Atonement these words of Jeremiah's recur repeatedly. Rashi introduces his commentary on the Song of Songs: 'Through the Holy Spirit Solomon saw that Israel would be exiled time and again and suffer desolation upon desolation, taunted in exile with her former glory. Recalling the early love that once favored them above all nations, they would say, *I will return to my first husband. It was better for me then than now* (Hosea 2:9). They would remember his love, *how faithless they had been* (Leviticus 26:40), and the favors he had promised them in the end. So he wrote this book, inspired by the Holy Spirit, in the voice of a woman, bereft and forlorn, yearning for her husband, longing for her sweetheart, recalling her young love of him, and confessing her wrongs. But her lover suffers with her (cf. Isaiah 63:9), remembering her youthful grace, her charms, and the fair actions that bound him to her in love in days past. He never meant to make her suffer (cf. Jeremiah 3:33). She was never divorced, He says, but was still his wife, and He her husband (cf. Isaiah 50:1, Hosea 2:4). He will yet return to her.'

others too have needs and projects, that they as well as we live in a natural world where all things exercise a conatus that may affect or concern us but hardly turns exclusively to serve or thwart our interests. Plato was right, of course – up to a point. There is a bit of God in us, breathed into our bodies in the breath of life and light of consciousness. That's why Mordecai and Esther were able to act, to hear the still small voice, and take their people with them.

Piety is not reticence or abdication. Mordecai might have held his peace and told himself that nothing could be done. He might have convinced himself that speaking out would only make things worse. Isaiah Berlin, a brilliant man and beloved teacher, chose tragic silence (as he would confess) when his British masters held him back. He spoke out later, courageously, against communism. But he saw no way to do what Jan Karski or Raphael Lemkin did before Nazism had borne its full measure of dark and ugly fruit. And many others, close to FDR, the Ahasuerus of our times, allowed themselves to be silenced, fearing loss of face or influence, while six million died. Not so Natan Sharansky in the Soviet case, or Avi Weiss. Their words and acts reached the ears of Scoop Jackson and other Senators and rescued millions of their people from the Soviet bear's paws.

It took no praeternatural powers for Theodore Herzl to foresee the denouement for European Jewry – only intellectual honesty and moral courage, refusal to hide from the facts or from his own flesh. Lemkin could document the *nisus* of Axis legislation in the occupied lands. Even before he coined the term he knew the stench of genocide. Herzl did not live to see the State of Israel, any more than Moses lived to enter the Land. But Herzl's 54 years were long enough to launch the Zionist movement that would build the state. As for Avi Weiss and Natan Sharansky, they lived to see the Soviet empire collapse, and both still speak out for truth, which in the lexicon of Judaism is synonymous with justice. Even Lemkin, in just 59 years, lived to see the fall of the Reich to last a thousand years and served as father, mother, and midwife in making the United Nations pay at least lip service to his judicial vision branding genocide a crime.

Returning, as promised, to the primacy of the actual and precedence of the Infinite, from which the finite springs. Emergence is the theme I'd like to close on, a cosmic rather than local truth. For part of what makes one reading of events more credible (and saner) than another is fitting

together the facets of experience into a coherent whole.<sup>23</sup> That's the standard science uses, and theists too should use it when they speak of God's governance or of creation, not reserving separate epistemologies for one day of the week.

Natural miracles are not alien to the work of science. I'll focus on two special cases of emergence here, one sheathed within the other: the work of evolution, and the rise of souls and minds.<sup>24</sup> I see evolution as evidence for theism, given the localization of value in the history of every species. In the same light, the emergence of mind and soul from their biological roots points to God's work in nature. For there is a directionality to evolution in the groping (as Teilhard put it) of the lineages of life toward the light – that is, toward self direction. That arrow points toward God. We can see it whether we look upward from our lab benches and writing desks or vault upwards, as the prophets do, and try to see things from God's universal standpoint.

We face an objection here, not so much to the fact of evolution, which has become all but sacred doctrine in most educated circles, but perhaps to emergence, and almost certainly (surprisingly enough) to consciousness, which might have been thought (and has been thought) the most salient fact we know. The present essay is hardly the ideal place to vindicate as fully as they deserve the claims I've made here, no more than naming the chief instances of what I take to be God's special actions vis a vis the world in which we live. Each of these claims is such that many books could be devoted to it, and have been. Several of those books are mine. But I'll try, at least, to suggest the arguments they broach at far greater length than is possible or appropriate here – and hope to whet the reader's appetite for a fuller exposition.

(1) I've suggested that God acts in there being something rather than nothing. It's true, as Hume proposes, that there's no necessity in seeking an absolute cause for all contingency. But I caution, as I did in *God of Abraham*, that there's a price to pay in abandoning the search for an ultimate beyond all conditioned causes: The quest for understanding breaks down, and science is emptied of content if all things are explained in terms of one another or in terms of something else that's left without

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<sup>23</sup> See Lenn E. Goodman, *In Defense of Truth: A Pluralistic Approach* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2001), Chapter 5.

<sup>24</sup> See Lenn E. Goodman, *Creation and Evolution* and Lenn E. Goodman and D. G. Caramenico, *Coming to Mind: The Soul and its Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

an explanation. In such a case the wholesome impulse of inquiry ends in circularity or in an infinite regress; the promise of understanding that prompted inquiry deadends, leaving nothing in the end explained – for A is explained in terms of B, and B in terms of C, but N, on which the entire chain depends, is left unexplained, being simply brought back to A or some combination of those earlier terms, if it is not left a surd, and the hope of understanding pinned to the wall by positivism.

(2) I've read evolution theistically. That's not an inevitable or even a very familiar reading. But biological evolution calls to our attention the local goods that organisms pursue in their myriad ways – not just for the immediate individual but for its kind and lineage. The purposiveness we see in evolution – easily denied or overlooked, since it's hardly *our* purposes that life at large pursues – is redolent of the goods that drive or draw organic nature, inviting us to reconsider another kind of causal sequence and another kind of causal ultimacy alongside the causality of mechanism, which so typically is pressed into its service in the living world. It's the telic kind of causality and ultimacy that inspired both biblical and classical thinkers to read the dynamism of nature in theistic terms. I have much more to say about evolutionary theism in *Creation and Evolution*. So I commend that Darwinian book to readers who would like to see that argument articulated more fully, or who simply would like to see why theism and neodarwinism are not conceptually the foes they've been cracked up to be.

(3) I've called biological evolution a special case of emergence in a broad sense, the kind known in the history of stars, and throughout the cosmos. Emergence of that kind, I think, reveals the dynamism (rather than inertness) of matter. I've also called the rise of consciousness a special case of biological evolution. Many philosophers have treated consciousness as a mystery. But that outlook, I suspect, reflects the difficulty they find in reducing mind to mechanism.<sup>25</sup> If one thinks

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<sup>25</sup> There's a rich array of alternatives to mechanist accounts of consciousness represented in *The Waning of Materialism*, edited by Robert C. Coons and George Bealer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). To single out just one paper from that symposium, William Hasker notes the enduring good sense of Leibniz's celebrated windmill argument: Enlarging a putative thinking/perceiving machine to the scale of a windmill, inside which one could walk about, would still show us nothing more than 'parts pushing one another'. Nothing would reveal the (subjective) essence of perception – let alone other dimensions of consciousness. (I find it telling Leibniz is the author of this argument since he devised the second generation of computer after

explanation must mean reduction of complexes to their parts and outcomes to their origins, it's clear that consciousness, autonomy, choice, human agency, and creativity will never be understood – any more than we can explain the chemistry or taste of salt by delineating the properties of its elements, sodium and chlorine. Something new has happened here that goes beyond the properties of the elements. Any cook or chemist knows about such things. Indeed, to make sense of the chemist's critical distinction between mixtures and compounds, demands dealing with the notion of emergence – not abandoning reduction, but scuttling the dogma of reductionism.

Souls, as Greg Caramenico and I argued in *Coming to Mind*, do things quite impossible for the chemical constituents of the bodies in which they emerge. Souls, we argue, are not auras or wisps of smoke – or anything quasi-physical. The terms that properly describe their action are not the same as those describing the matter underlying their capabilities. The notional separability of consciousness from human behaviour that once inspired Descartes to set the soul (alarmingly) apart from nature has since been pled in some quarters to warrant claims that one's consciousness might be downloaded into a (powerful enough) computer, or to argue that there's no a priori reason why zombies might not walk the earth, indistinguishable from humans, but utterly without consciousness. But notional separability, I would argue, is a far cry from natural separation. I suspect that the intimacy and intricacy of our embodiment renders souls inseparable from their bodies. What matters for our present interest is that souls do emerge in bodies like our own – developmentally as we grow and learn, and phylogenetically in the course of evolution. The rise of souls and consciousness is not proof of divine action. But it is evidence, taking its place alongside nature's constancy and continuity, as an expression of divine love.

The human mind, I've intimated, is the meeting place of finitude with the Infinite. We can see that pretty clearly if we ask ourselves about the human capacity to conceive infinity – conceive and not imagine. Descartes illustrates the difference by pointing out that we readily conceive the difference between a chiliagon and a myriagon, although imagination

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Pascal's adding machine – and reflected seriously about a mechanism that could be made to perform conceptual analysis using a specially devised binary symbol system. With arguments like Leibniz's in mind, Hasker commends a strong form of substance emergentism comparable to the position argued for in *Coming to Mind*.

merely blurs the two. Similarly, we readily conceive a circle, although we have trouble imagining a perfect one. From one perspective, a circle is a polygon of infinite sides and angles. In saying so we acknowledge at least one fact about the infinite. Mathematicians, as we know, routinely work with quantities thought of as extended to infinity. A keen and creative mathematician like Georg Cantor conceived diverse *orders* of infinity, with demonstrable quantitative relations. Today we find a new sense in Nehemiah's words about the sky beyond the sky. To reach for God's infinity conceptually is more demanding than just to picture some vast expanse. When we speak of God, we're speaking of Perfection, and we must guard against tainting our ideas of that perfection with any tincture of our human limitations. But we reach in God's direction when we think of infinite goodness, wisdom, and uncompromised Reality.

If we ask ourselves the old midrashic question about the matter on which God's precepts might be written, it's pretty clear today that it would be the human brain, the organ of the soul. A product of evolution, but open to experience and groundwork of what we have that makes us capable of creativity and caring, each human brain builds as many synaptic connections as there are elementary particles in the universe. How a brain could arise from simpler matter, and how consciousness, memory, agency, perception, and creativity could emerge from the brains of persons are questions that our sciences address in promising and fruitful ways.<sup>26</sup> But the risk is everpresent, when we tell such stories, that reductionism will erase what it professed to explain. Darwin made no such error. He did not, in discovering how one species arises from another, erase the explanandum, or its *differentiae*, leaving explanation with nothing to explain.

The mind, we say, is made possible by the brain. That much was known to Galen, although we know much more now about just how that possibility must work. But we need to remain careful not to forget that the mind is not the brain, any more than human beings are apes, or apes are mere machines or chemicals. Consciousness makes us subjects, not mere objects. The fact of consciousness is rife with moral, aesthetic, and

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<sup>26</sup> Worth reading here: William Hasker, *The Emergent Self* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); Philip Clayton, *Mind and Emergence: From Quantum to Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Gerald M. Edelman, *Wider than the Sky: The Phenomenal Gift of Consciousness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); Evan Thompson, *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

spiritual implications. Spirit is part of the human story, whether it shapes a quest for God or pursues artistic, scientific, or intellectual purposes, or simply struggles to stay alive and preserve one's loved ones, or humanity, or nature. Reason is our guardian angel here. Analysis breaks things down conceptually. But it need not destroy them. Synthesis can relate things to one another and see a larger whole. So long as a reductionist bias has not denatured our understanding we will recognize an up and a down to complexity – and to value. Knowing up from down can help orient us toward God's work in nature, if we allow ourselves to look. The upward path faces the divine. But so, in a way, does the downward. For God's work is all around us waiting to be discovered.