

CHAPTER 60

Providence

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

According to Scripture, God guides the universe to its ultimate goal. Later the notion of divine providence was developed in rabbinic sources. For the rabbis the belief that God is concerned with all creatures was of central importance. In their view, God affects the lives of all living things – even the gazelle and the wild ox come under God’s care. Concerning human beings, the *Talmud* declares: ‘No man bruises his finger on earth unless it is decreed in heaven.’ Speculation about God’s providence extended to a consideration of what would occur at the end of history. After the Temple was destroyed and the Jewish people driven out of their homeland, the nation was bereft. Jews longed for a king who would lead them out of exile and restore the holy city. Basing their theology on Biblical precedent, the *Apocrypha* and *Pseudepigrapha* foresaw the coming of divine deliverance when all people would recognize the God of Israel. Such conceptions encouraged rabbinic speculation about the nature of the messianic age and the World-to-Come.

During the Middle Ages, Jewish theologians wrestled with the concept of divine providence. Some writers, such as the twelfth-century philosopher Moses Maimonides, defended the notions of general and special providence. In his view, special providence extends only to human beings, and is in proportion to a person’s intellect and moral character. Other writers, such as Hasdai Crescas in the fifteenth century, however, argued that God created human beings out of his love for them. Therefore, providential care is not related to their personal characteristics; all persons are able to enjoy special providence. The kabbalists, too, were concerned with this doctrine, and in the eighteenth century Joseph Ergas explained that there were different kinds of providence. In his opinion, special providence was limited to humankind. Hasidic

thinkers, such as Phineas of Koretz, however, disagreed. In their view, divine providence extends even to inanimate objects. Other theologians discussed God’s foreknowledge as it relates to human freedom. If God knows everything, they asked, how can human beings be free? In considering these issues, you should deliberate whether it makes sense to think that God concerns himself with all things. Was Phineas of Koretz right? Or Maimonides? Does God exercise providential concern only over humans, or is He concerned with all creatures? If so, how does one account for suffering? Further, is it conceivable that human beings possess free will if God has foreknowledge? Is Maimonides’ solution to this dilemma satisfactory?

THINGS TO DO

- Go to Google. Search for websites dealing with divine providence, such as <www.torah.org>.
- Imagine that you are a Holocaust survivor. Write a poem about God’s providential care, or lack of it, during the Nazi onslaught against the Jews.
- Go to Amazon.com. Search for books dealing with Jewish theology.

TIPS FOR TEACHERS

- Divide the class into small groups. Ask them to discuss whether it makes sense to believe that God exercises providence over all things, or just human beings.

- Ask a science teacher to speak to your class about causality in the natural world. Have a discussion about whether God intervenes in human history.
- Stage a debate. One side should defend the view that God exercised providential care during the Holocaust. The other side should argue that this did not happen.