

This week's selection, from ShDL, or Shmuel David Luzzatto (a 19th Century commentator whose biography is, of course, available on Wikipedia), and discusses the question of whether taking a direct Jewish census is actually dangerous. Shadal grants that the "evil eye" is a superstition, by which he means a belief in supernatural causation that has no purpose. But he outlines three different approaches to superstitions. The first, which he attributes to Ralbag, seeks to provide a natural explanation of the apparently supernatural. The second, which he attributes to his contemporaries, dismisses the supernatural. SHDL himself believes in supernatural causes that have purpose – he argues that moral cause and effect is woven into the fabric of Creation, such that Napoleon's arrogance triggered the early Russian frost via the law that "Pride goeth before a fall".

This position seems derived from the Maimonidean position on Divine Providence, that wisdom generates Providence, but it has come a long way. ShDL's explanation of why this census was taken indirectly is also in the Maimonidean tradition of interpreting Torah against the backdrop of the presumed anthropology of the Dor HaMidbar, especially in the clever way he argues that the Torah here assumes that its audience believes in the evil eye, devises a ritual that is effective only in the context of that belief, but nonetheless should not be read as endorsing the belief.

That last element fascinates me – like the claim that the Torah regulates slavery without endorsing it, it argues that while the existence of Revelation likely (with apologies to R, Saadia Gaon) testifies to the inherent epistemological insufficiency of reason, Revelation is also not entire unto itself. Torah can only be understood properly when approached with the proper ethical, scientific, and other premises, and those premises necessarily are external to Torah.

One last point - it seems to me that ShDL may be a useful example of what I call anti-philosophic rationalism. This stance regards the cosmos and everything within it as rationally ordered and intelligible, but does not feel the compulsion to minimize the number of its premises and in general is unimpressed by abstruse academic demonstrations. I hope to discuss this more in future installments.

Shabbat Shalom!

כי תשא וכו' –

כשאדם מונה את כספו ואת זהבו, או כשהלך מונה את אנשי צבאו, קרוב הדבר מאד שיהיה בוטח בעשרו ובריבוי חייליו ויתגאה בלבו ויאמר "בכחי ועוצם ידי עשיתי חיל", או "אעשה חיל"; ואז יקרה על הרוב שיתהפך עליו הגלגל ותבואהו שואה לא ידע (כי גם זה ממשפטי ההשגחה, "לפני שבר גאון", וזה התאמת ומתאמת בכל הדורות, גם ביחידים, גם באומות ומלכים). ומזה נולדה בכל העמים אמונת העין הרע. ונראה שכבר התפשטה האמונה הזאת בישראל בדורות שקודם מתן תורה, והנה לא רצה ה' לבטל האמונה הזאת מכול וכול, יען יסודתה על אמונת ההשגחה והיא מרחיקה את האדם מבטוח בכוחו והונו, וזהו עיקר כל התורה כולו.

לפיכך, מה עשה? ציוה שימנה בעת ההיא, בתחילת היותם לגוי אחד, ושייתנו כופר בקע לגלגולת, ויינתן הכסף ההוא על עבודת אוהל מועד לזכרון לפני ה' לכפר על נפשתיכם, באופן שמהיום ההוא והלאה יוכלו להמנות בלי שייראו מעין הרע, כי המשכן העשוי מכסף הכיפורים הוא יכפר עליהם. . . . קצת מן המתפלספים כגון רלב"ג ביקשו לפרשו על דרך הטבע ואמרו שהאידיים היוצאים מעיני המביט אל פני האיש הנשקף יוכלו להיות ארסיים ולהזיקו או להמיתו, הכול לפי טבע המקבל. וחכמי דורנו בהפך, רובם לועגים לאמונת העין הרע ולדברים אחרים רבים הבלתי מובנים על דרך הטבע. ולדעתי אלו ואלו טועים, אבל העולם אינו מתנהג על פי חוקות הטבע החומרי לבדן, אבל יש עוד חוקות אחרות, חקקה אותן החכמה העליונה בתחילת הבריאה, על פיהן תסובינה מסיבות המאורעות להביא על גוי ועל אדם יחד הטובות והרעות המעידות על ההשגחה; אשר יביט אליהן המתפלסף ויאמר מקרה הם; ויביט אליהן ההמון, ויאמר מעשה נסים הם; ובאמת הם מסובבים טבעיים הנמשכים בהכרח מסיבותם הטבעיות, אבל המסובבים וסיבותיהם כולם מסודרים מתחילת הבריאה בחכמת המסדר העליון ית' שמו; והיא שגזרה שיהיה הקור קשה ומקדים בשנת התקע"ג, למען הפיל מלך עריץ ולהשקיט ארץ ומלואה. . . . וההמון ייחס זה לעין הרע ולפעמים ייחס זה לקללת השונאים, ולפי האמת אין העין מזקת ולא הקללות מביאות רעה, אבל המשפט לאל-הים הוא, והוא צר וחקק בסדר השתלשלות מסיבות הטוב והרע, שגאות אדם תשפילנה ושפל רוח יתמוך כבוד. . . .

When a person counts his gold and silver, or when he goes and counts his men under arms, it is very likely indeed that he will trust in his riches and multiplicity of soldiers and grow arrogant in his heart and say “With my strength and the force of my hand I have accomplished greatly”, or “I will do greatly”; and then in most cases it will happen that the wheel will reverse on him and he will be visited by a devastation he had not foreseen (for this too is among the laws of Divine Providence (lit: Divine Overseeing: ADK), “before breaking comes pride” (or classically and far more elegantly, if less precisely, “pride goeth before the fall”: ADK), and this has been verified and is verified in all generations, whether for individuals, for nations, or for kings). From this belief in the “evil eye” has been generated among all nations.

It seems that this belief had already spread in Israel in the generations preceding the Giving of the Torah. Now Hashem did not wish to utterly nullify this belief, because it was founded on belief in Divine Providence and it distances a person from trust in his strength and wealth. And this is the root of the entire Torah.

Therefore, what did He do? He commanded that they be counted on that day, at the start of their becoming one nation, and that they should give as atonement one shekel per head, and that that silver be given over to the work of the Temple of Meeting as a memorial before Hashem to atone for their souls, in such a fashion that from that day on they would be able to be counted without fearing the evil eye, because the Sanctuary that was made from the atonement silver would atone for them . . .

Some of the philosophers, such as RLBG, sought to explain it naturalistically and say that the rays shooting from the eyes of the looker-upon to the face of the man beheld can be poisonous and wound or kill him, all in accordance with the nature of the receiver.

But the sages of our generation say the reverse – most of them mock belief in the evil eye, and also many other things that cannot be understood naturally.

But to my mind these and those err, rather the world does not act in accordance with the laws of material nature alone, rather there are other laws, legislated by the Highest Wisdom at the start of Creation, and on their basis various causes of events come about so as to bring on nation and individual alike goods and evil which testify to Divine Providence; which the philosopher will look upon and say “They are happenstance”; and the mass will look upon them and say “They are miraculous”; but in truth they are natural secondary causes that stem from their own primary natural causes, and the primary and secondary causes alike were all ordered from the start of Creation by the wisdom of the Highest Arranger may His Name be blessed; and that is what decreed that the frost would be hard and early in the year 5573, so as to cast down an overbearing king (Napoleon: ADK) and bring tranquility to the land and all that fill it . . . and the mass attribute this to the evil eye and sometimes attribute this to the curses of enemies, but according to the truth they eye does not injure nor do curses bring evil, rather judgment is the Lord’s, and He engraved and carved in the in the order of the chain of causes of good and evil that “the pride of a human will bring him low, whereas he lowly of spirit maintain their dignity” (Mishle 29:23)