Paired Perspectives on the Parashah

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Beshallah:

Natural Phenomena and Divine Purpose

One of the enduring tensions in the interpretation of the wilderness narratives concerns the relationship between natural causation and divine intervention. Modern readers often assume that identifying a natural explanation for a biblical miracle diminishes its religious meaning. Classical Jewish interpretation, however, moves in different directions. As we have seen in our discussions of the plagues, the Torah does not require a suspension of nature to assert God's presence in history. Even when events unfold through recognizable natural processes, their timing, scope, and moral direction reveal the unmistakable hand of God.

Nahum Sarna emphasizes this point in his analysis of the Exodus narratives (*Exploring Exodus*). Nature, in the biblical worldview, is a medium through which divine will is realized. The question, therefore, is not whether an event can be explained in natural terms, but whether it can be understood as purposive, responsive, and covenantally meaningful.

A striking example appears in the episode of the bitter waters at Marah. According to *Olam HaTanakh*, desert dwellers even today make use of certain plants to neutralize saline or bitter water, a practice anticipated by medieval

commentators such as Rabbi Yosef Bekhor Shor and Ramban. From this perspective, the tree cast into the water reflects practical knowledge conveyed through God's instruction to Moses. Yet the Torah's emphasis is not on botanical technique, but on divine guidance: Israel confronts a crisis, cries out, and God provides a solution precisely when it is needed.

The manna narrative develops this theme more fully and more dramatically. Modern researchers have identified a phenomenon in the Sinai Peninsula involving the tamarisk tree: certain insects infest the plant, extract sap, and excrete a sweet, sticky substance that crystallizes into small edible globules. This substance must be collected early in the morning before the heat causes it to melt or before insects consume it. Known to local populations through the turn of the twentieth century as *mann es-simma*—"manna of heaven"—it even bears the scientific name *Trabutina mannipara*.

Ibn Ezra and Rabbi David Zvi Hoffmann note both the similarities and the significant differences between this substance and the manna described in the Torah. Those differences are decisive. The natural yield of this material is limited—estimated at only several hundred pounds annually across the entire Sinai—and appears seasonally, for a brief period of the year. By contrast, the biblical manna responds directly to Israel's complaints, sustains an entire nation for forty years in all seasons, provides a double portion on the sixth day, fails to appear on Shabbat, and spoils if hoarded overnight *except* in preparation for the day of rest.

Thus, even if the manna is related to a natural phenomenon, its function in the Torah narrative transcends natural explanation. The message is clear: sustenance is not merely found in nature; it is granted by God.

The same pattern appears in the episode of the quail. Quail migrate in massive flocks between Europe and central Africa, passing through the region twice a year. Exhausted from their journey, they sometimes land along the Mediterranean coast in such numbers that they can be captured by hand or simple nets. Yehuda Feliks documents that until the mid–twentieth century, millions of quail were

caught in this manner. Rabbi David Zvi Hoffmann already pointed to this migratory behavior as a possible natural background for the biblical account.

Yet, as Ramban stresses, the Torah’s focus lies not in avian migration but in divine responsiveness. The quail appear precisely in response to the people’s demand for meat, in overwhelming abundance, and at great moral cost. Nature once again becomes the instrument, not the author, of the event.

Across these narratives, the Torah presents a consistent theological vision. God does not merely interrupt nature; God directs it. Natural phenomena do not undermine faith—they deepen it, revealing a world in which physical processes are aligned with moral purpose and historical destiny. For Israel in the wilderness, survival itself becomes a daily lesson in dependence, discipline, and trust, mediated through a world that remains fully natural and unmistakably divine.