



## Foundations of Judaism: Lesson 3: Free Will

© M. Zauderer 1999

### LESSON OUTLINE

- 1) The Foundation of Free Will
- 2) The Benefit of Free Will
- 3) Boundaries of Free Will
- 4) Divine Intervention In Man's Free Will
  - a) Exceptionally Evil Behavior
  - b) Leaders of the People
  - c) Requesting Divine Assistance in Exercising our Free Will Wisely

### Introduction

Any discussion of free will raises a number of difficult questions, for the concept encompasses some of the most profound issues that touch upon man's purpose in this world, and on the role of Divine Providence in our lives.

- How do we know that we have free will?
- What is the benefit of exercising our free will?
- Do all our actions result from free will?
- Under what circumstances does G-d interfere with people's free will?

Before beginning our discussion, it is necessary to clarify that we are dealing with the issue of free will only as it relates to moral behavior. Free will in decisions that are not of a moral nature are not relevant to our approach to the religious issue of free will.

\*\*\*\*\*

### The Foundation of Free Will

As the Jewish people prepared to enter the Land of Israel and begin their national life, Moses transmitted G-d's message of mankind's free will:

[Note: We have incorporated the Torah commentary of Rabbi Ovadiah Sforno (1470-1550, Italy) into the verse.]

### Torah Verses

*See! I have set before you a free choice between [eternal] life and good [in this world] and [eternal] death and evil [in this world]. I have commanded you today to love G-d your L-rd, to walk in His paths, and to keep His commandments, decrees and laws. You will then survive and flourish, and G-d your L-rd will bless you in the land that you are about to occupy.*

*But if your hearts turn aside and you do not listen, you will be lead astray to bow down to foreign gods and worship them. ... Choose life, so that you and your descendents will survive.*

### Rabbi Bachyai

These verses state the Torah's doctrine of free will. G-d has given man the ability to choose between good and evil. Were man to function without free choice, [the fulfillment of] Torah commandments would not be possible, nor would there be reward and punishment for human behavior.

G-d informed the Jewish people of their choices for physical and spiritual rewards or punishments in this world and the next world. G-d, however, did not merely present a choice; He advised the Jewish people to choose wisely. A midrash metaphorically describes G-d's advice:

## Midrash

"Choose life" – "I am counseling you to choose life." This can be compared to a father who instructs his son to choose a quality tract of land for his inheritance. In his love for his son, the father brings him to the choicest plot of land and points to it, saying, "Choose this portion."

The fact that G-d gave man the power of free choice does not mean that He is disinterested in our decisions. G-d wants us to choose life. By giving the Torah to the Jewish people, G-d provided the Jewish people with the means of choosing the "choicest plot."

\*\*\*\*\*

## The Benefit of Free Will

The above verses describe free choice as the nucleus of G-d's system of reward and punishment. What are the benefits of this arrangement? Why does G-d not grant undeserved reward to man? Rabbi Sa'adiah Gaon explains:

### Rabbi Sa'adiah Gaon

G-d's purpose in Creation was to bestow goodness on created beings. G-d could have achieved His goal by freely granting blessing to man rather than only rewarding for fulfillment of commandments. However, our human intellect concludes that one who receives goodness as a result of effort enjoys much more happiness than he does when he receives goodness as an undeserved gift. There is simply no comparison between these two means of acquiring goodness. Therefore, G-d commanded us to exert effort in order to earn our reward.

Rabbi Sa'adiah provides the basis for Torah commandments: we value benefits that we have earned over unearned gifts. The following example illustrates this value:

Imagine a person exerts much effort in building his dream house. He spends years planning the structure and style, laying the foundation and erecting the walls, installing the plumbing and electricity, and finally decorating and furnishing the rooms. He will have infinitely more pleasure from his house than if he were to receive a finished house as a gift. Similarly, the reward for a lifetime of effort in making moral decisions will be infinitely more valuable to us than undeserved reward.

[The Benefit of Free Will: A Deeper Look](#) (to be posted)

\*\*\*\*\*

## Boundaries of Free Will

### A Question of Free Will

We may well ask, are we totally free to make choices? Are we actually capable of changing the course of our lives, either for the good or for the bad?

The combined influences of upbringing, social and educational backgrounds, and innate character traits seem to contradict Moses' unconditional declaration of our free will. Consider, for example, that someone who was exposed early in life to frequent expressions of charitable behavior, generally will be inclined to act charitably. On the other hand, someone who was raised in an environment steeped in immorality, will find ethical behavior a far more difficult challenge. Thus, to a child who grew up in a home where guests were warmly welcomed on a regular basis, a friendly, sociable demeanor will come much more naturally than it would to a child who was raised in a hostile, disrespectful and self-centered environment.

### Limitations in Free Will: A Battlefield

Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler created an allegorical "model of free will," which can greatly enhance our understanding of our human limitations in this area, while at the same time helping us to devise an effective plan for exercising our free will:

Picture the armies of two warring countries, facing each other on a battlefield. Between the two armies lies a stretch of no-man's-land. Although they are fighting for control of a large region, the current battle is being fought over only the narrow strip of land that separates them. When one army prevails over the other, the victorious army seizes control of additional territory from its enemy, and the battlefield shifts. Although a series of battlefronts may extend over a wide area, each individual clash remains confined to just the narrow strip of land that separates the two armies.

A person's moral character is shaped by innumerable past experiences, as well as by hereditary factors. These influences help to shape our moral strengths and weaknesses and determine the limits of our available choices. Free will exists in those areas and situations where we can recognize the difference between the correctness as opposed to the impropriety of a given behavior, *and* we are capable of taking action to correct it. Where we are not capable of recognizing such conflicts, whether due to upbringing, habit, or any other causal factor, our behavior is not a result of free will. Thus, although we almost always have the *freedom to choose*, nevertheless, in any given instance, we have only limited *free will*.

### Example

Robert, an alcoholic, knows that his addiction is harming himself and his family. A good friend gave him the number of the local chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous. Robert may not have the ability to stop drinking through his own free will. Rather, the realm of his free will lies in his decision to join a program that can help him to overcome his destructive habit.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Divine Intervention in Man's Free Will

There are times when G-d chooses to set aside His commitment to allow man to function with free will. In this study we will examine three instances of G-d's withdrawal of man's free choice:

### Exceptionally Evil Behavior

In the story of the Exodus, G-d informs Moses of how Pharaoh will respond to the miraculous plagues that will afflict the Egyptians:

#### Torah Verse

*G-d said to Moses... I will make Pharaoh obstinate ("harden his heart"), and will thus display many miraculous signs and wonders in Egypt. This is why Pharaoh will pay no attention to your message...*

Maimonides discusses why G-d intervened to deprive Pharaoh of his right to exercise his power of free choice.

#### Maimonides

Someone may willfully commit a sin of such magnitude, or sin so frequently, that G-d punishes him by removing his ability to exercise his free will, so that he can no longer choose to correct his evil behavior.

An example of this type of punishment can be found in G-d's removing Pharaoh's free will, which would have enabled him to free the Jewish people. As is recorded in the Torah, Pharaoh willfully committed monstrous crimes against the Jewish people in the oppressive enslavement to which he subjected them [and in murdering their infant sons]. As punishment, G-d prevented Pharaoh from repenting his evil ways.

If this was Pharaoh's punishment, if indeed he had lost his ability to free the Jewish people from his land, why did G-d send Moses repeatedly to warn Pharaoh of the terrible consequences that would ensue each time he would refuse to release the Jewish people? G-d's purpose was to publicize throughout the world the extent of Pharaoh's evil, and to let the world witness his downfall. The miraculous plagues that afflicted Egypt would serve to proclaim to everyone the dire consequences of such corrupt behavior.

Maimonides' explanation gives us a new perspective on our understanding of the essence of free will: Free will is a privilege that G-d has granted mankind, for the express purpose of allowing us to attain the highest level of closeness to G-d that we are able to achieve. In almost every case, G-d is committed to preserving human free will. Nevertheless, people who willfully allow themselves to act with an excessive amount of villainy and evil, can effectively forfeit their right to exercise their free will, and G-d takes it away from them. Maimonides points out that the loss of free will is G-d's punishment to a person for the evil he did *prior* to his having relinquished his own free will – he actually forfeited his privilege to function through his free will, through the indiscriminate application of that free will.

In addition to this concept of G-d's removing one's free will in punishment for one's evil acts, Maimonides explains that at times, G-d makes an example of the villain, so that through him, other people can come to recognize the consequences of sin. In fact G-d incorporated this lesson within the Torah's account of the Exodus: "*G-d said to Moses, 'Go to Pharaoh. I have made him and his advisors obstinate ('hardened their hearts'), so that I will be able*

*to demonstrate these miraculous signs among them. You will be able to relate to your children and grandchildren how I made fools of the Egyptians, and how I performed miraculous deeds among them. You will then fully realize that I am G-d.*" [Exodus 10:1-2] The miracles of the Exodus teach us that G-d *did* exact punishment of the Egyptians for the centuries of their oppression of the Jewish people.

## Leaders of the People

*As water channels [can be rerouted by man,] so too is the heart of a king in G-d's Hand, for G-d sways it according to His Will.*

### Rabbi Yonah :

Due to the immense power invested in a king [or in any national leader], which allows him to make decisions that radically affect the lives and well-being of masses of people under his jurisdiction, G-d "controls his heart," directing those decisions he makes that bear upon the public welfare and national security. This verse teaches us that in such matters, we should pray that G-d sway the hearts of leaders, so that they will act mercifully toward us.

This verse, one of King Solomon's proverbs, teaches us that, contrary to popular belief, the fate of large populations and of entire nations are *not* determined by the whims of their leaders, whether or not those leaders be qualified or wise. Though it may often appear that world leaders determine both wars and peace treaties, in truth G-d is the Source of all major national decisions. With this insight, Rabbi Yonah derives the practical lesson that the most efficacious approach we can take to matters of national import is to direct our prayers to G-d, asking Him to ensure a favorable outcome in any given circumstance.

[Note: As will be explained in detail in the upcoming lesson on the subject of the balance between human effort and Divine providence, G-d expects us to work with the available channels, to influence government policy. Nevertheless, King Solomon's message teaches us the importance of recognizing the limits of our human efforts, and of turning to G-d as a vital part of our efforts.]

## Requesting Divine Assistance in Exercising our Free Will Wisely

The Torah's account of G-d's ultimate redemption of the Jewish people reveals another area in which G-d intervenes in human free will:

### Torah Verses

*There shall come a time when you shall experience all the conditions of the blessing and curse that I have presented before you. There, in the midst of all the nations among whom you will be scattered, you will reflect on the situation. **You will then return to G-d your L-rd, and you will obey Him...**G-d your L-rd will then bring you back to the land that you ancestors occupied...**and G-d will remove the barriers from your hearts...so that you will love G-d your L-rd with all your heart and soul...***

### Nachmanides

[These verses describe the Jewish people's return to a standard of observing G-d's Will, and it goes on to tell us that G-d will intervene in our emotional quest to draw near to Him, by eliminating all obstacles to our serving G-d.] This conforms to the general principle of Torah observance, "*One who makes a sincere effort to improve his moral behavior is granted Divine assistance to assure his success*". G-d is telling us that if we make a serious effort to improve ourselves morally ("*You will then return to G-d...*"), He will assist us and help us to succeed ("*G-d will remove the barriers from your hearts....*")

We began this lesson with the Torah's message that G-d has "*set before us*" the choice of good and evil, and that G-d advises us to choose good. Yet it might seem that we are left to our own devices to succeed in that choosing of good. However the above verses assure us that G-d will respond to our efforts at moral improvement – both efforts involving prayer and efforts involving action. If we truly make an effort to do the right thing, G-d will help us to make the right choice.

Does this involvement on G-d's part not contradict the principle of free will? Rabbi Avrohom Karelitz addresses this problem.

### Rabbi Avrohom Karelitz :

[In general] G-d does not *cause* a person to improve his moral behavior, for that would violate the principle of man's free choice. However, if someone prays to G-d for assistance in making correct moral decisions, then G-d's intervention in his decision-making processes would not constitute a violation of his free will, since it was the person himself – not G-d – who made the decision to act in accordance with G-d's will. G-d only *responded* to his decision, by helping him to actualizing his desire.

Rabbi Karelitz stresses the *source* of one's desire to choose good. In principle, G-d assumes a "passive" role in man's freedom to choose. G-d encourages people to make the right choices by instructing, rewarding, punishing, and through a variety of other methods of guiding us to choose good. However, should we ourselves express an earnest desire to improve, G-d will assume an "active" role in assisting us, by influencing our decisions to choose good.

---

## Questions

Address your correspondence to: [foundations@jewishstudies.org](mailto:foundations@jewishstudies.org)

1. Why is it important to have free will?
2. David, a *habitual* liar, tells you that starting today, he will never tell a lie.
  - A. What obstacle is David likely to encounter in implementing such a radical change in his behavior?
  - B. What would you tell David if he were to say that he could never change his behavior?
3. "*Purify our heart to serve you sincerely, O G-d.*" What are we asking of G-d?