

CHAPTER 5, LAW 4 - DOES G-D CONTROL MAN?

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

If G-d had decreed on a person to be righteous or wicked, or if there were some factor drawing him, in his basic nature (lit., 'in his primary genealogy'), to one particular path, knowledge, personality type, or action, as invent out of their imagination foolish stargazers (lit., 'those who pronounce [based on] the heavens'), how could [G-d] command us through the Prophets, 'Do this and do not do this; improve your ways and do not follow your wickedness' -- [while] it was already decreed upon the person [one way] when he was created, or if his genes (lit., 'genealogy') draw him towards something that it is impossible to depart from? What place would there be for the entire Torah? And based on what judgment would [G-d] collect from the sinner or reward the righteous? 'The One who judges the entire land does not mete out justice?!' (Genesis 18:25).

Do not be surprised and claim how can a person do whatever he pleases, with his actions given over to him? Can a person do in the world anything without the permission of his Creator and against His will? Does not the verse state, 'All that He pleases G-d does in the heavens and on the earth' (Psalms 135:6)?

Know that everything is according to His will even though our deeds are in our control. How is this? Just as the Creator wills that fire and air rise up while the waters and the land go downwards, and that the firmament rotates circularly, and so too the rest of the world's creations to be according to their practice that He wishes, so too does G-d wish that man be granted his own free will, all his actions should be granted to him without anything forcing or drawing him. Rather, he on his own and using the understanding G-d has granted him may do anything human beings are able to do.

Therefore, a person is judged according to his deeds. If he does good they (i.e., the heavenly tribunal) do good to him and if he does bad they treat him badly. This is as the prophets say, 'From your [own] hand was this to you' (Malachi 1:9). 'They too have chosen their paths' (Isaiah 66:3). Regarding this matter Solomon stated, 'Rejoice, youngster in your youth... [and go in the ways of your heart]... and know that for all these the L-rd will bring you to judgment' (Koheles / Ecclesiastes 11:9). Meaning, know that you have the ability to do and that you will eventually give accounting."

The Rambam is continuing his discussion of free will, a discourse which will cover over two chapters. Here the Rambam makes some of his most fundamental points. He first explains that free will is basically the entire premise of Judaism. G-d can command us how to behave only because we have the free will to determine our behavior. And He can likewise reward and punish only because our actions are our own doing.

The Rambam then turns to one of the great theological difficulties engendered by the notion of free will. If man can do as he chooses, does that mean the entire fate of the world is in his hands? If a madman gets ahold of sufficient weapons of mass destruction, can he destroy the world? But didn't the Prophets promise that the Messiah will ultimately arrive to herald the idyllic End of Days? Or more conventionally, can George kill Steve -- or hurt him or insult him -- if it is not G-d's will? G-d granted Steve 90 years of life. Comes George, exercising his G-d-given free will, and mows him down at the age of 25. Or even more prosaically, can Sam's boss chew him out when Sam does not deserve such treatment on the Divine scales? Doesn't his boss have the free will to let off some steam? And if so, does it cancel the Divine providence which we would suppose would protect Sam from undeserved harm?

The dilemma here is a profound one: How does man's free will reconcile with G-d's control of the world? If we take the concept of free will to its extreme, then man would presumably be able to thwart G-d's plans for humanity, wreck the planet, and bring terrible misery upon mankind -- misery undeserved according to G-d's perfect justice. Not only would such in itself be horrible to fathom, but equally bothersome, it would make the world a very dark and godless place. What happens down here would not be the manifestation of the will of a perfect and infinitely good Creator. It would be no more than the cruel, capricious, and arbitrary doing of wicked man.

On the other hand, if G-d does control the world, and every little thing which happens to us is G-d's precise will, then we would have to say man's free will is severely limited. He can only do (at least to others) what G-d wanted to happen to them anyway. And of course, this would raise yet another serious theological difficulty, that we would be forced to say all of the injustices, all of the terrible evils we see human beings inflict upon one another in this world are really G-d's will. "Innocents" are not maimed and killed in wars and terrorist attacks -- only people whom G-d Himself wanted to harm. Could such horrific manmade catastrophes truly be G-d's will?

I don't want this class to get too heavy or lengthy, so I will only attempt to offer a rough outline of an approach to these issues. I will also mention that I discussed this issue at greater length in *Pirkei Avos* ([3:19](#)). Anyone should feel free to view our discussion there.

Whenever one person harms another on this earth, we could basically envision three levels of Divine involvement:

(a) A's hurting of B was G-d's direct will. G-d wanted B to receive harm just then. A's choosing to do it was basically volunteering to be G-d's emissary, but had he not done so, G-d would have given B an equivalent amount of harm regardless.

(b) G-d did not want B harmed. A's actions were against the will of G-d and actually foiled His plans for humanity. G-d will have to "pick up the pieces" after the fact, punishing A for his unwarranted act as well as compensating B for his undeserved suffering. In a bigger sense, G-d will have to work

against the evil designs of man to carry out His plans for the universe.

(c) G-d would not have harmed B had A not done so, but G-d must have **acquiesced** to A's doing. Nothing occurs in this world contrary to G-d's will. True, man has free will and can harm others in ways G-d would not have done Himself. But G-d did **allow** it to occur.

Now if G-d allowed it, B must have deserved it. But if B deserved it, why didn't G-d punish B Himself? The answer is that G-d is merciful -- what the Torah refers to as "slow to anger" (*"erech apayim"*) (Exodus 33:6, Numbers 14:18). Although we all owe G-d many debts for our sins, He does not pounce upon us immediately, punishing us every time we fall short. G-d gives us ample time to repent. However, if A comes along, exercising his free will, and comes to harm B, G-d so to speak is not particularly inclined to protect B from the harm he really does deserve. G-d was in no hurry to punish B Himself. But if A comes along to do it, G-d would hardly bother "going out of His way" to protect B.

(Note also that G-d generally does not need perform open miracles to protect someone if he really deserves Divine protection. A's gun will misfire, his aim may fail, he'll get delayed in traffic. Or B may miss his bus, be stuck at home with a bad cold, etc. We've all heard many stories -- especially in Israel -- of people having annoying, unexpected changes of plans and as a result missing that disaster looming in their paths.)

Above are basically the three approaches to Divine providence versus man's free will. It's actually interesting to note that there is a surprisingly wide range of opinions among the classical Jewish thinkers -- if one studies their words closely. This is actually not an issue spelled out in the Talmud -- although many individual statements can be marshaled supporting many shades of opinion. This just tends to reinforce a point I've made in the past (heard from R. Berel Wein) -- that Judaism is much more a religion focused on man's behavior -- how are we to live fulfilling, wholesome lives on this earth, earning us eternal reward -- rather than on how G-d runs the world. The former is our concern and what the Torah deals with almost exclusively. The latter is really G-d's problem.

As I wrote in the referenced class, I feel that approach (c) is the primary one among Jewish philosophers -- that man's free will can never do anything against G-d's will, but can at times "hurry up" G-d's justice system, upsetting His "slowness to anger." The Rambam himself appears more to be in camp (b) -- that all is in man's hands. Man's doing is only G-d's will in the sense that G-d willed it that man be granted free will. (See even more strongly the Rambam's "Shemoneh Perakim" Ch. 8.)

Clearly, this would have to be qualified to some extent since at the very least G-d is orchestrating history. If not, there would be nothing stopping man from utterly thwarting G-d's plans for the universe -- and the many prophecies foretelling it. In fact, Proverbs 21:1 states, "As forks of water, the heart of a king is in the hands of G-d. However He desire He inclines it." The implication, as noted by many Jewish thinkers, is that major events of world history are most certainly orchestrated by G-d. He determines the

decisions of the high and mighty. (And in fact many U.S. presidents who no one expected to be good for Israel were surprisingly well-inclined and vice versa.) Thus, even if we'd question G-d's involvement in the small interactions among individuals, the basic course of world history is most definitely in G-d's hands.

Again, this sort of discussion can go on forever, especially if we begin quoting sources -- something I'm quite certain few of my readers would appreciate. Instead, I'm going to close up fairly quickly having presented this basic outline. I would, however, like to offer what I feel are two important quotes from the Talmud on the matter.

Deuteronomy 22:8 states as follow. "When you will build a new house, you shall make an enclosure for your roof, so that you do not bring blood upon your house when the faller falls from it." The Torah thus obligates us to fence up our roofs / balconies so that a dangerous situation is not created, possibly resulting in a person falling off our roof and dying.

The Talmud (Shabbos 32a) notes the language of the verse: "when the **faller** falls from it." Why the "faller"? Explains the Talmud that clearly the person was destined to fall and die: he was a "faller" by nature. My roof didn't kill him. If he died, G-d must have willed it; his time had come.

But if so, why the obligation to build an enclosure? Only people who **deserve** to die will fall anyway! Answers the Talmud that in heaven "they bring about merit through the meritorious and guilt through the guilty." Meaning, true -- only the guilty fall -- but I should not volunteer to become G-d's rod of chastisement. The very fact that I disobeyed G-d's command and neglected to build a protective fence turned me into G-d's vehicle for bringing about harm in the world. But again, the harm itself -- certainly in matters of life or death -- was decreed by G-d Himself.

On a bigger scale, the Talmud (Sanhedrin 97b) discusses the events which will precipitate the Messiah's arrival. After a lengthy debate, the Talmud follows the opinion of R. Yehoshua: If Israel repents G-d will redeem them and the Messiah will arrive. If not, "G-d will appoint upon them a king whose decrees are as harsh as Haman's, Israel will repent, and this will bring them to good."

In other words, it is true that our behavior is in our hands. Much of what we do on this earth is our own doing -- and the often disastrous results are caused by none other than ourselves. But in the grand picture, G-d orchestrates world events. (Recall that G-d controls the hearts of kings. He appoints tyrannical rulers and wills their decrees.) If we repent, we will merit the Messiah in our own right -- and the end will come so much more smoothly, painlessly -- and spectacularly. If not, G-d will bring Messiah all the same -- preceded by our very same repentance. But it's going to be a mighty rough show. G-d will see to it that we (or many of us) repent -- just before it's entirely too late. "As I live," says the L-rd G-d, "if not with a strong hand, an outstretched arm, and with poured out fury will I rule over you." (Ezekiel 20:33). We pray that the long-awaited end is near. And thanks to free will, how it will arrive is entirely within our hands.

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