

CHAPTER 3, MISHNA 19(B) : CAN MAN DESTROY THE WORLD? - PART II

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Everything is foreseen, yet free will is given. The world is judged with goodness, and all is according to the majority of deeds.

Last week we began discussing the concept of man's free will -- as referenced in our Mishna's second statement. We asked to what extent is man truly granted free will. Don't the Sages teach us that G-d controls the world and every event which occurs therein -- down to the smallest detail ("short of catching cold" -- as we discussed last week)? If so, man's free will would have to be severely restricted. He can't really do anything not included in the Divine plan. Thus, if person #1 wants to harm person #2, theoretically he should not be able to do so without Divine sanction.

And this created a dilemma for us. We don't need to search very far and wide to see a world in which man is constantly perpetrating terrible evils on each other, ranging from supertime telemarketers to the Holocaust. Now if G-d is truly behind such behavior -- or is at least acquiescing to it -- we are left with a very frightful image of our G-d. Where is the kindly, loving, all-merciful Creator Judaism has preached to the world ever since Abraham?

Conversely, say we remove G-d from the picture: G-d is **not** behind all the evils of the world. They are all the fault of man, who is grossly and blatantly abusing his free will. (This runs contrary to many statements of the Sages on the matter, but for argument's sake...) If so, a very dark and evil image of the world emerges. The world has run amok; it has gone out of control -- even the control of the G-d who created it. And G-d is perhaps watching helplessly as man destroys the world beneath Him. Man, misusing his free will, is undermining all the wonderful plans G-d had for His universe, perhaps even making the world unworthy of the era of Messiah which G-d had so openly promised.

And finally, if G-d **is** in control all along, practically speaking how does He restrict man's free will? Can't I harm, kill or insult my fellow if I so choose? The world is not as afraid of nuclear holocaust as we were 30 or 40 years ago, but what's to stop man from destroying the world? And even short of that, how is it possible that G-d is orchestrating the course of history, bringing the world to its fruition, if man is a very unwilling accomplice to the Divine scheme? Who is directing the drama of world history? G-d may have written the script, but who's to say man will follow it?

Before I begin to address this, I should state that there are drastically different approaches to this even among the classical commentators. Where do we draw the line? To what extent is man

granted free will? Where does G-d's providential control begin? And how do these seemingly-contradictory axioms coexist? Even before we answer, we must accept that there **is** no simple and unequivocal response -- even among the great Jewish thinkers. There are approaches and theses -- and below I present what I feel is the most accepted -- but there is simply no intellectual magic bullet. For better or worse, some of the deepest and most nagging issues of Jewish theology must simply be approached with the recognition that they may well be beyond our ability to fully comprehend. It certainly behooves us to make the effort, but we may simply have to accept that it is not for us to fully know the ways of an unknowable G-d.

That said, let me pose our dilemma once more, taking a more specialized instance. Say Joe wakes up one day and decides to kill Bob. Joe takes his gun, walks up to Bob and shoots him dead. Joe exercised his free will. A man who may have otherwise lived another 50 years has just died. Where was G-d? If we believe that everything that occurs in this world is a part of G-d's plan, does this imply Bob would have had a heart attack and died just then anyway? And again, if not, did not Joe just defy G-d's will?

This question, tragically, was posed in a non-hypothetical situation by a thinker of no lesser stature than Elie Wiesel. In *Night* he describes a particularly gruesome hanging in his concentration camp -- of two adults along with an innocent young boy with angelic face. Unlike the adults, the boy was too light to be strangled instantly by his own weight. The inmates filed past while the boy struggled agonizingly between life and death for over half an hour. Wiesel writes that behind him he heard a man muttering: "Where is G-d? Where is He?" He heard a voice within him answer: "Where is He? Here He is -- He is hanging here on this gallows..."

Far be it from us to judge a man who saw and suffered so much. The human element of tragedy and holocaust, both personal and national, can never be properly addressed in the written word. But we must attempt to offer at least some words of explanation, if only on an intellectual level.

Let us return to our hypothetical situation. The premise of practically all traditional Jewish thinkers is that nothing in this world occurs outside of G-d's purview. G-d does not direct the evil man perpetrates on his fellow -- that is man's doing and his responsibility -- and for it he alone will be held accountable. Yet G-d would not have allowed it to be successful if it were against His wishes. Thus, if G-d wants Bob alive, Joe will not be able to kill him. How so? G-d will see to it that Joe's plans are not successful. The gun will not fire, Bob will miss his bus, Joe will oversleep etc. G-d has an infinite number of natural means at His disposal to control the outcome of events. In the most extreme case -- if all natural means fail -- G-d may even perform an open miracle to save the victim.

(A number of years ago I read the story of a great rabbi who was fleeing a mugger. The assailant shot him point-blank from a few feet away. The rabbi kept running, only to discover later that the bullet had lodged itself in his coat and went no further. He insisted on wearing that same coat with the bullet hole for years after, long after it wore out, as a reminder of the great kindness G-d had

performed for him.)

Let's say, however, Joe does kill Bob. This means that G-d acquiesced to the murder. G-d must have determined that on some level Bob "deserved" to die. And this of course raises two important questions. First, can we really say every innocent bystander, every child who dies violently deserved his or her fate? Second, if Joe kills Bob, it certainly seems that he snuffed out a life which would have continued for many more years. Are we forced to say the victim would have died just then anyway? And if not, hasn't Joe just changed the course of G-d's world -- killing someone who would otherwise have continued living?

The first question I will deal with only very briefly. Did Bob really deserve to die? On one level we must say yes. There are a number of approaches to this issue, each valid in its own context. Yet here I feel we must accept that G-d's justice is not something truly understandable to man. Why every unfortunate victim "deserved" it -- what is the answer to Wiesel's "Where is G-d?" -- is clearly beyond our ability to discern. And so, I will only suggest a few of the basic approaches, and we will have to content ourselves with that.

One answer is that G-d's justice is exceedingly strict. We all carry some degree of guilt, and G-d alone knows the proper compensation for each wicked deed. Even the most worthy among us might well have brought upon himself sufficient guilt to be deserving of death.

Second, it's possible the individual did not deserve death himself, but suffered as an atonement for his generation. (I realize people view this as a Christian concept, but it is actually quite Jewish (see for example Ezekiel 4 and Talmud Sanhedrin 39a) -- although we certainly believe the Christians blew it way out of proportion.)

Third, the concept of reincarnation -- though barely hinted in the Talmud (to my knowledge) -- is well-established in Kabbalistic sources. Perhaps even a child deserved death as atonement for sins of a past life.

Fourth, the Sages state that G-d may take away small children from this world as a punishment to the parents (see Rashi to Deuteronomy 24:16).

Finally, there are times -- and this is supposedly rare -- in which G-d has no way of saving a victim from his assailant via natural means. And performing an open miracle is not viable because it would reveal G-d's Presence too openly in this world -- something man is hardly prepared for. Thus, to preserve G-d's concealment, G-d at times must allow unfortunate victims to perish. There is supposedly a special place reserved in the World to Come for innocents who are sacrificed for such.

We now turn to our second question. If G-d truly wanted Bob to die, would he really have died then anyway without Joe's bullet? And if not, didn't Joe just terminate a life which surely would have continued?

The answer is that the Torah describes G-d as "slow to anger" (Exodus 34:6). He does not punish a

person as soon as he sins. As above, we must assume Bob bears some guilt on the Divine scales. But he, as all mankind, is given the opportunity to repent. **G-d** would have granted Bob more years -- perhaps a lifetime -- in the hope he will make expiation before his death. But let's say Joe has it in for Bob. By the laws of nature Bob's death is inevitable. The only thing that would save Bob is G-d's "going out of His way," so to speak, to save him -- whether through hidden providence or open intervention. Would G-d do such -- impinging on Joe's free will -- to save a man who really deserves death anyway -- only preserved to begin with through the good graces of a patient G-d? Perhaps not.

Well, at this point we have presented the beginnings of an approach. Have we answered satisfactorily? Can we really feel good and content about the many evils we see in this world, the suffering of innocents, accidental murders which seem so avoidable? Have we really answered the "Where is G-d" of Elie Wiesel? We have only just begun to make sense of a senseless world. And perhaps this week you, esteemed reader, will walk away disappointed. We made many valid points, but can we even pretend we have a workable and soul-satisfying theory of "how G-d runs the world?" Perhaps we've even raised more questions than we were able to answer.

Yet there is something of great importance I feel we did accomplish today. We were not afraid to ask. And this is one of the great lessons of Judaism and of Pirkei Avos in particular. The Sages were never afraid to raise such issues, even if they could not fully fathom the responses. For G-d expects us, as thinking human beings, to be plagued by such issues. No question is too challenging -- or too stupid -- to be raised. And if we sincerely seek G-d, we may not become philosophers who foolishly believe they can answer all, but we can be certain G-d will be patiently awaiting us, slowly guiding us towards the Truth.

There is a midrash which compares G-d's control of this world to a rider on a horse. The horse may decide precisely how to place its foot down, but the direction and the route is wholly in the rider's hands. We only hope and pray that G-d hold steady His course, and that the day soon be when all wrongs are righted and all questions answered.

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