

CHAPTER 3, MISHNA 19(C) : FREE WILL VS. G-D'S FOREKNOWLEDGE

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 discussed the concept of man's free will -- and the apparent contradiction with the belief that G-d controls all that occurs in this world. This week I would like to deal with yet another well-known philosophical quandary alluded to in our mishna: man's free will versus G-d's foreknowledge.

Our mishna begins by stating "Everything is foreseen" -- meaning that G-d knows in advance every event which will occur in this world. It then continues, "free will is given" -- that man is given free reign to act as he chooses. The question raised by Maimonides and many other thinkers (both Jewish and Gentile) is as follows: If G-d knows the future and every act we will do for the rest of our lives, do we truly have free will? Do we truly have a choice how we will behave? It is already known, so to speak, that I will sin at a particular time and place. And if so, there is no possible way I can avoid it! I am **going** to do it! G-d knows it already! There is no humanly possible way for me to alter my predetermined future! And so, isn't my life merely a meaningless exercise -- a futile performance of an already-written and predetermined script?

Further, the question goes, if I do not have any real control over the actions I will do, how can I be held accountable for them? I have no choice -- literally! And if my fate is out of my hands, how can G-d punish me for my deeds? And so, not only is free will compromised but yet another great pillar of Jewish theology comes tumbling down: reward and punishment.

Maimonides discusses this issue briefly here, and in greater detail in some of his other works. He does state here how fitting it is that such a profound topic is discussed by none other than R. Akiva, one of the greatest scholars of the period of the mishna. (R. Akiva's name appears at the start of Mishna 17; both Mishnas 18 and 20 begin with the words, "He used to say..." It is a curious aside why Pirkei Avos did not choose to attribute this mishna (#19) to him as well -- even indirectly. But it is a safe assumption that he is the author here as well.)

The Talmud states that all the major works of Jewish law of the period of the Mishna, including the Mishna itself, are based on R. Akiva's teachings (Sanhedrin 86a). It further states that Moses himself, in a prophetic vision, recognized that R. Akiva's scholarship would be greater than his own, and even

asked G-d why He did not give Israel the Torah through R. Akiva rather than himself (Menachos 29b).

I believe there is another reason for the appropriateness of R. Akiva here. Our tradition teaches us that R. Akiva was an unlearned shepherd until the age of 40. At that age he passed a stream in which water was slowly dripping down onto a rock. When he noticed that the water had over time carved a hole in the rock, he reasoned that with slow but continuous effort he too could penetrate the Torah's unfathomable teachings. That -- together with his wife's encouragement -- was the inspiration R. Akiva needed to embark on his career of greatness.

Not only is R. Akiva's life a personal story of the triumph of the human spirit, but it provides us with another possible explanation why he authored this mishna. R. Akiva was a person who first experienced Torah study as an adult -- and not a young one at that (or so I used to think). Such a person will certainly have to overcome great disadvantage and do much catching up -- and R. Akiva did so extraordinarily -- but in a way, he will be at an advantage. He will take nothing for granted. He will ask and tackle the tough questions of life which others fail to notice -- simply because that's how things have been as long as they can remember. R. Akiva, the quintessential "ba'al teshuva" ("returner to the faith"), was to seek -- and find -- truth and meaning where others saw nothing but the ordinary.

Maimonides in his Mishne Torah (Hil' Teshuva [5:5](#)), when he discusses the quandary of free will versus G-d's foreknowledge, begins by stating that this issue is "longer than the land and wider than the sea," and that many fundamental truths depend upon it.

He then explains as follows: G-d's knowledge is not external to Him, as is man's. And, just as man cannot comprehend G-d's essence, he cannot comprehend G-d's knowledge. Therefore, although it is beyond our understanding how G-d can be aware of an indeterminate future, His awareness is as removed from our universe as G-d Himself and thus in no way impacts on the reality of free will. Thus, our futures truly are our own to decide. G-d's knowledge of our eventual decisions is so to speak not yet a part of this world -- and has not assumed a form which impinges on the independence of this world. And so, as far as our universe is concerned, the future is still wide open. (I discuss this answer in much greater detail in the class cited above.)

Contemporary thinkers have demonstrated the wisdom behind Maimonides' approach with our knowledge of Einstein's Theory of Relativity. Time as we know it is relative; it is not a constant. It is an invention of G-d just as are space and matter, and its apparent rate of passage is affected by external factors such as gravity and velocity. G-d Himself exists outside the times-space continuum, it being merely one of His many creations. He therefore does not know the future because He **foresees** its occurrence, but because it is no more removed from Him than the past or the present.

One of the names the Torah employs to refer to G-d consists of the Hebrew letters yud-hey-vuv-hey. These letters constitute a contracted form of the Hebrew words "was - is - will be" ("haya, hoveh, yihyeh"). This conveys the sense of G-d's eternity, not in the sense that He exists forever

but in that He is above time altogether.

The same is true regarding space. Our Sages teach: "G-d is the 'place' of the world; the world is not His place" (Bereishis Rabbah 68:10). G-d is not contained within physical space, just as He does not exist within time. Time, space and matter are all different forms of G-d's creations -- as man understands fully (or at least vaguely) only today -- and in fact are all different manifestations of the same phenomenon. We who are confined within the imaginary worlds of time and space are simply incapable of truly comprehending G-d, much as we are incapable of comprehending what is beyond the "end" of the universe, or what existed "before" the world was created -- or as primitive man was capable of understanding what lay "after" the edge of the horizon, for that matter.

A good treatment of this issue is found in The Science of G-d, pp. 161-5, by renowned physicist and scholar Gerald Schroeder. He observes that light is the one creation which too is above time. Light waves (or theoretically anything traveling at the speed of light) are not bound by time. (Light, as all forms of energy, can enter the world of time by transforming into matter through $E = mc^2$.) Prof. Schroeder thus sees significance in that fact that "Let there be light" (Genesis 1:3) was G-d's first utterance of creation. As he writes, "Light is... the metaphysical link between the timeless eternity that preceded our universe and the world of time, space and matter within which we live."

(As an aside, I strongly recommend his book, in its groundbreaking treatment of many apparent contradictions between Torah and science. Though aspects of his theories are not without controversy, the primary theme -- undeniable to anyone with intellectual honesty (IMHO) -- is that the more science understands of the universe and the natural world, the closer it comes to converging with the millennia-old teachings of the Torah and Jewish tradition.)

Rabbi Avraham ben Dovid of Posquieres (known as the Ravad) of 12th Century Provence authored a collection of glosses on Maimonides' Mishne Torah. There he suggests a different approach, perhaps less philosophical, which he too admits does not do justice to the question. He writes that G-d's foreknowledge does not decree; it is only foreknowledge. He compares it to astrologers who predict the future. Although astrologers may often predict accurately, man, with his free will, can overcome the influence of the stars, as well the influence of friends, family and background. G-d knows these influencing factors and our abilities to overcome them. He even knows the final decisions we will make. But He does not decree; He only knows.

The Ravad also levels a criticism against Maimonides: He was not wise in posing a question which he himself admits is beyond man's ability to answer. Better not to raise the issue at all, stirring doubts in many formerly innocent minds.

The response to the Ravad -- and presumably Maimonides' position -- would seem to be that we Jews are simply not that way. We ask. We question anything and everything we are commanded and all that G-d does to us. Do we always receive the answers? Are we even capable of comprehending them? This week's class (as well as last week's) is yet one indication that all

question will never fully be answered. But a questioning mind is one which is seeking truth. It may be troubled, it may be plagued with questions that give it no rest, but it is searching. It is a mind which houses a soul -- one which seeks its Creator. And that soul, in its search for truth and G-d, will ultimately be directed to the source it so desires.

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