

CHAPTER 3:1 HUMANKIND

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Derech Hashem - The Way of G-d 1:3:1

To reiterate, we alone among all beings are able to draw close to G-d and to attach onto His presence¹; and we're indeed able to achieve the sort of moral and spiritual perfection that would allow for that (as well as the imperfection that would disallow that). But if we're to achieve that sort of perfection we'd need to strive for it by our own volition and free choice². Because if we were to somehow come upon perfection by happenstance, by dint of inborn characteristics, or by legacy, then we wouldn't have chosen to achieve it freely, as we must do.

That's why humankind was originally placed in a situation in which each person could freely choose between perfection or imperfection and could achieve either³, and why each was born with both a *yetzer harah* and a *yetzer hatov* either of which he could choose to favor⁴.

Notes:

¹ This chapter encapsulates a lot of what had been said in the previous one (especially 1:2:5), which is why we referred to this as a reiteration. These ideas are restated -- better said, *underscored* here -- because this chapter, which is entitled "Humankind", will take what had been said before about humanity and build on it. In fact, that's the basic underlying methodology of *Derech Hashem*: ideas are offered, expanded upon, and then further build upon.

² While the idea of free will was discussed in the previous chapter, this is the first actual mention of it in *Derech Hashem*. As was pointed out in 1:1:2, we're only free on an ethical, spiritual level. That's what sets us apart from all other beings (see *Da'at Tevunot* 158). The *yetzer hatov* can be seen as a bias toward righteousness and subsequent closeness to G-d; and its antithesis the *yetzer harah* can be seen as a bias *away from* all that and toward worldliness and wrongdoing.

For more on free will see 1:5:4-5, 2:1:3, 2:2:3, 2:4:2, 4:4:1, and 4:6:1 below; *Adir Bamarom* p. 88; *Da'at Tevunot* 43-44, 48 (as well as the other places cited here); *Messilat Yesharim*, intro.; "*Da'at Tevunot* Part 2" 4-6, 16, 18 (found in *Ginzei Ramchal* pp. 21-23, 26, 31); etc. Also see Rambam's *Hilchot Teshuvah* 5:1 and *Moreh Nevuchim* 3:17.

It's vital to note, though, that while free will allows us greatness and it defines the human experience,

it's is only a "temporary" phenomenon and will be eradicated in the end, when it will no longer be needed (see *Da'at Tevunot* 40), since its purpose would already have been served and humanity will no longer strive toward spiritual excellence of their own volition.

There's another point to be made. We in the Western world consider ourselves to be quite free, quite at liberty to do and say as we please. But that's political freedom rather than the sort of primal, transcendent, moral freedom which we're granted and would need to bolster in order to achieve the kind of spiritual perfection we're addressing here.

For the truth be known, our real power lies not in the civic realities and other circumstances that G-d alone controls. It lies in the freedom we have to fulfill ourselves on a deeply personal, existential level. And that's what free will is all about. It touches on your essence rather than your trappings, your soul's place in the cosmos rather than your personal place in the world.

³ It's important to point out that while we were *originally* "placed in a situation in which each person could freely choose between perfection or imperfection and could achieve either", that changed after Adam and Eve's sin, as we'll see in 2:4:2 below.

⁴ *Yetzer harah* is usually translated as "the evil inclination", and *yetzer hatov* as "the good inclination". Now in truth, most of us (with obvious exception) aren't "inclined toward evil"; most can be said to be inclined toward good. But we *do* do wrong because of the *yetzer harah*, which is a pull downward toward the spiritually mundane, a settling for an existential B or C. What we're to do then, is to strive to live up to the demands of the *yetzer hatov*, the inclination to be truly good (even great) on the deepest levels, and to thus attach onto G-d.

For more on the *yetzer harah* and *yetzer hatov* see 1:4:6, 2:2:2, 2:3:1, 2:6:2, and 4:8:1 below, as well as *Adir Bamarom* p. 88; *Klach Pitchei Chochma* 14 (in Ramchal's own comments); *Messilat Yescharim*, Ch's 2, 3, 5; etc.

Notice that the rest of the chapter doesn't expand upon the *yetzer harah*-*yetzer hatov* dynamic, but rather on the body-soul interplay. In short, that's because the body tends to encapsulate the expressions and needs of the *yetzer harah* while the soul does the same for the *yetzer hatov*, but much more can be said about that.

Rabbi Yaakov Feldman has translated and commented upon "The Gates of Repentance", "The Path of the Just", and "The Duties of the Heart" (Jason Aronson Publishers). His works are available in bookstores and in various locations on the Web.