

CHAPTER 6: DIVINE PROVIDENCE □ PART 3

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

The point is that G-d interacts with each one of us, given how much responsibility He has granted us. But He does it by degrees, depending on what we're doing. Because He acts one way when it comes to things that carry a lot of moral and spiritual weight, and another way when we do more pedestrian kinds of things.

For while there are very many things we're asked to do that truly matter in the course of things, there are countless others that are secondary at best or even insignificant. The most momentous things of course are those that touch upon the mitzvah-system. For when we do a mitzvah we set off sparks that themselves set fires that ignite whole worlds and domains which then shimmer back down to us, they're that powerful. In fact, if we knew enough about the actual might and reach of mitzvahs, we'd do each with the sort of alacrity and drive a surgeon would summon to save a life.

In any event, while there are many such opportunities, most of the time we're not asked to do mitzvahs, since many of them only come into place at particular times of the day, week, month, year, or lifetime, and are otherwise not called for. And so when I do things like tie my shoe, look for a parking spot, wait for an elevator and the like, I and my actions aren't particularly significant just then. They're thus morally and ethically neutral, and of less consequence.

This actually brings us back to our free will (see 6:1 above). And this is a phenomenal point with fascinating implications that we'll arrive near at the end. Ramchal says that "when it comes to fulfilling a mitzvah or committing a sin ... humans have full free will, and G-d doesn't intervene" in our decisions. But "when it comes to doing things that are neither mitzvahs or sins, then humans are no different from other entities", which is to say that G-d doesn't interact with us that closely in those instances.

That's to say that G-d allows us a full measure of "personal space" -- i.e., full free will -- when we're engaged in mitzvahs. For He allows us to decide to do them or not, to the degree we would care to, with the attitude we would decide to do them, and more; He steps back as far as all that's concerned. But He disallows us any free will when it comes to the everyday, non-mitzvah-like things we do; He alone controls all that from beginning to end and our free will is irrelevant.

(Now, some have argued rather convincingly that our free will still factors in when we're deciding whether to do or not do a particular mundane thing, since we can opt to do a mitzvah at that point, but they say that our free will is then undone as soon as we decide against doing a mitzvah.)

Here's one of the implications we can derive from this. The argument has been made that we can -- and should -- turn such moments around by infusing them with mitzvahs. By perhaps pondering Torah while we do mundane things, by attending to others' needs before our own at the time, or by avoiding gossiping, lying, or hypocrisy in the process, etc. The line of reasoning then goes that should we decide to mix mitzvah with non- mitzvah by bouncing back and forth from one to the other, that G-d would then be engaging with us both fully and peripherally, back and forth, at each moment. And in fact, we contend that that's how we interact with G-d most of the time indeed!

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.