

EIGHT CHAPTERS □ CHAPTER 8:2

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Some people insist that we're impelled by birth, circumstance, upbringing, or makeup to do one thing or another: that we're wired from the first to follow through on only certain, limited options. But Rambam insists that we're not. We're more likely to do this or that, to be sure; but we're never pressed to do anything, as he'd explained.

Now, many today would argue against that and say that we're indeed very likely, even fated to act certain ways. After all, they argue, we're born with specific genes and a particular chemical makeup, and we follow a long line of family-related "givens", so we're surely going to come to this or that.

Don't think, by the way, that this line of reasoning is completely original; astrologers had long thought like that. (In fact, astrology was once considered to be quite sophisticated and insightful, and was taught * as a science* in universities for centuries.) It had been thought in the past that the "star" we were born under fated us to do things. As Rambam explained it, astrologers "imagined that a person's birth date determines whether he'll be lofty or flawed and that one is compelled to act accordingly".

Not true, Rambam insists; * nothing* we do or don't do is preordained. We're bound to have a certain hair color and to be of a certain body type, but none of our actions are predetermined from birth. In truth, "your actions are in your own hands, no one compels you to do anything, and nothing other than yourself ever inclines you toward a character virtue or flaw".

He then goes on to explain how problematic it would be to argue that we're impelled to act one way or another. After all, "if you were compelled to act the way you do, then all the Torah's imperatives and prohibitions would be in vain and utterly meaningless, since you wouldn't be free to do as you wish". That is, how could you be charged to do or not do anything if you had no choice in the matter?

The other point is that if our actions were indeed beyond us, then "all study, education, and practical training would be in vain, too, since something other than yourself would be compelling you to do something in particular, to be familiar with a particular subject, or to exhibit a particular trait".

All reward and punishment for things we'd done "would be utterly unfair" Rambam adds. "For if a person killed another because he was forced or had to kill, and his victim was forced or had to be killed, then why should the killer be punished?"

"And how could it ever be said that G-d, who is just and fair, punished someone for doing something

he was compelled ... to do?" Besides, "any precautions we'd take, like building houses (against the elements), procuring food, running away when frightened, etc. would be meaningless" he adds, "since what was decreed to be simply had to be".

The idea that were forced to act one way or another is thus "nonsense, utterly meaningless, counter-intuitive and illogical" Rambam concludes. We're free to do as we see fit - and thus held responsible for all that we do. At bottom it comes to this: G-d has authorized us to be adults, morally speaking, with all the freedom and responsibility associated with that. If we're wise, we'll bask in the rights and privileges of our adulthood and avoid the snares.

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