

EIGHT CHAPTERS □ CHAPTER 8:3

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

"No!" Rambam reiterates. No one compels anyone to do anything. "The truth of the matter," he says "is that you're free to do as you will", period. "If you want to do something, you can; and if you don't want to, you don't have to. There's nothing forcing you one way or the other". You and I are as free as birds - to be the sort of birds we want to be.

Now, on one side of the equation that seems to say that we're utterly unrestricted and we need answer to no one. We can do as we will and live the life we'd like to, thank you very much. But as anyone with an inner sense of right and wrong - to say nothing of a dream of spiritual excellence - would know, that can't be. Are we indeed given carte blanche? Isn't more expected of us, and aren't there rules?

Of course there are rules; and yes, there's a higher call. The point is that we're free to be the moral beings we'd like to be ... or to not. We decide. And that's what "makes mitzvot compulsory", Rambam says. Because if we weren't free to choose, there'd be no point in our being charged with doing this or that on our own: it would have already been determined whether we'd do it or not from the first.

So, the very fact that we're impelled to follow a system underscores the freedom granted us, as only someone free can comply or not; the preordained haven't any options.

And so G-d said, "Behold, I have placed life and goodness, death and evil, before you today... therefore choose life"(Deuteronomy 30:15, 19), and thus offered us a choice that we're expected to follow through on, but which we may decide not to. The entire mitzvah system hinges upon this.

There seems to be a hitch, though. Our sages taught us that "Everything is in the hands of Heaven but the fear of Heaven"(Berachot 33A), which seems to deny much of free choice. Where does that fit in? We'll soon see.

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