

EIGHT CHAPTERS □ CHAPTER 8:6

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Some believe that G-d compels each and every step we take; that "our rising up, our sitting down, and all our movements are dependent on G-d's will", as Rambam puts it. They honestly think that nothing we do is in our own hands -- that G-d alone decides what's to be done, when, and how -- and that at best we can come along for the ride happily or sadly, but come along we must.

But Rambam adamantly pooh-poohs that. After all, it suggests that we're incapable of independent action and that we haven't any free will which allows us to claim any number of inanities if we sin. That's unacceptable to Rambam, since we're specifically charged to do this or avoid that, and we're to answer for all of our actions.

(It's important to appreciate that this controversy lies at the heart of many disparities between the so-called "rationalists" and "mystics". Rationalists like Rambam -- who was not always the stark rationalist he's taken to be by the way, in that he certainly had his mystical side -- contend that G-d allows us complete independence. Mystics such as the Baal Shem Tov and others assert that everything, ourselves included, is utterly dependent upon G-d moment by moment, since He's omnipotent and can never be disobeyed in fact. But understand that this touches upon a world of arguments that are far beyond our scope here.)

Rambam does admit though that it can be said that G-d controls our moves in a certain, broad sense. For just as "if you were to throw a stone in the air and it came back down, it would be correct to say it did that because G-d wanted it to" since He set the laws of gravity in place, it's nonetheless "not true to say that G-d wants" that particular stone "to fall at that very moment". And so while I could certainly claim that G-d "wanted" me to touch a particular person's credit card if I lowered my hand down to it in order to steal it, I certainly couldn't claim that He wanted me to take it. That decision was my own.

Those who disagree -- who "contend that G-d's will manifests itself in everything, each and every moment" -- are wrong, Rambam asserts. He contends that "G-d had already expressed His will (about the general pattern of events) in the course of the six days of creation, and that things act in accordance with their nature from then on". In other words, He doesn't dictate nature moment by moment. Our sages said about it that, "the world always pursues its usual course"(Avodah Zara 54B), and they "always avoided ascribing G-d's will to particular things at particular moments" Rambam adds.

The bottom line as far as Rambam is concerned is that "just as G-d designated man to stand vertically, be broad-chested, and have fingers" and thus granted him the tools with which to act, "so too did He designate him to move about or stay in place at will, and to act freely, without anything compelling him to or preventing him from doing so".

So, there are a couple of lessons we're to take from this. First, since we're free to make our own moral decisions, we need to know the difference between right and wrong as the Torah lays it out, and to bear the consequences of our deeds. And second, that we're to "accustom ourselves to do good things and achieve character virtues, and avoid doing bad things" as well as to "undo any flaws we might already have" rather than claim that we can't change. Because, Rambam adds, "any circumstance can be turned round from good to bad or from bad to good-- the decision is in your hands alone".

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