

EIGHT CHAPTERS □ CHAPTER 8:7

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

But the whole idea of our own free will is even more theologically complex than this, as there are several verses in the Torah itself that seem to deny it.

We're told for example that G-d told Abraham that his descendants would serve the Egyptian people hundreds of years later, and that the Egyptians would oppress them. Doesn't that seem to signify that our being enslaved was "chiseled in stone" if you will from the first, so the Egyptian couldn't really be blamed for it, or for how they would oppress us?

"But the solution is as follows," Rambam offers. "It's as if G-d had said, 'Some people yet to be born will be disobedient, others obedient; others righteous, and others yet will be wrongdoers'" which is simply a statement of fact on His part. "G-d's saying that doesn't compel any one person to necessarily be a wrongdoer or anyone else to necessarily be righteous." In other words, the truth is that there'll always be good and bad people, and good and bad states of affairs; that's simply the way of the world (until the Messianic Era, which is beside the point of course). And included in this unfortunate equation is the fact that nations sometimes capture and take advantage of other nations. Rambam's point though is that no one citizen of the oppressor nation is destined to oppress; so if he does, he does so of his own free will and must answer for that.

"G-d's declaration wasn't directed toward anyone in particular" in Egypt, Rambam adds, "who might then claim to have been preordained. In truth, G-d spoke in general terms, and every individual (Egyptian) was free to make his own decision" about his role. This principle holds for all other such verses.

The point once again -- though in a larger context -- is that nothing is fated and inevitable: we each have it within us to affect our own lives, the lives of our friends and family, the makeup of our community and country, and the state of the world at large, since G-d has empowered us that way. The catch is, though, that we're accountable for what we do on all levels.

That's not to say that G-d doesn't oversee the world and that He leaves it entirely in our hands; after all, we're told that *"The king's heart is in G-d's hand"* and that *"He turns it anywhere He wants to"* (Proverbs 21:1) which indicates that G-d does indeed set limits and initiates actions on the very highest levels. Rambam's stance is that we each have it within us to choose the role we ourselves will play in all that.

But there is one Torah verse that's very problematic as far as individual free choice is concerned,

though, that has troubled many. G-d told Moses in Egypt that He'd "*fortified Pharaoh's heart*"(Exodus 14:4) -- purposefully made him too stubborn to acquiesce to G-d's own demands -- and yet G-d punished Pharaoh for disobeying Him! Doesn't that seem unfair, and to deny free will! Let' see how Rambam responds to that.

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