

EIGHT CHAPTERS □ CHAPTER 8:11

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

"There's one more thing to mention briefly to complete this chapter" and this book, Rambam inserts here, that "I hadn't originally intended to mention, but which I must anyway" he adds quixotically. What is it? The subject of "G-d's foreknowledge"; that is, the notion that whatever happens on earth has already played itself out and been displayed in G-d's infinite mind beforehand.

It's an abstruse and mystifying idea to be sure, and a little frightening besides. For it implies that whatever I do, say, and think about has already been done, said, and thought by me even before I existed! It raises all kinds of philosophical conundrums, like: why would I have to be born anyway, if that's the case? Do I ever get a chance to get "under the radar" so to speak and say, do, or think anything on my own?

But Rambam decided to dwell upon this idea for other reasons: "because it forms the basis for the opinion of those who say that we're compelled to obey or disobey" G-d's dictates rather than being free to choose, which he'd been discussing for a while.

He explains the logic of those who think that we're really not free to choose thusly. They reason that since G-d knows everything beforehand, He "either knows that a certain person will be righteous or wrongful," from the first, "or He doesn't". If He in fact knows, well, "then we're forced to say that that person is compelled to be" either righteous or wrongful, "since G-d already knew that beforehand" and it was all a sort of *fait accompli* before the fact.

But if on the other hand "you argue that G-d doesn't already know" what kind of person that individual will be ahead of time, "then you're forced to say some terribly odd things that would topple walls" including the notion that G-d isn't omniscient and that He's less-than-perfect, which is sacrilegious.

What alternative is there? After all it seems to be either that G-d indeed knows all beforehand, and thus realizes the kind of people we'll be in advance, so we have no real choice in the matter; or He doesn't know, and so yes, we're free to choose on our own, which seems to imply that He's not G-dly, which is terribly problematical.

As Rambam accounts for it (and this will call for a bit of explanation), the truth of the matter is that G-d's ways of knowing things -- beforehand, on-the-spot, or ahead of time -- is different than ours.

"G-d doesn't know by means of 'knowledge'" as we do, Rambam offers. For, while we acquire

knowledge when we need to, that's not true of G-d. For to say that G-d acquires knowledge is tantamount to saying that some sort of "knowledge" was somewhere out there in the distance that G-d would then have to come upon, take to Himself, and add onto His Being. But that's absurd, since G-d is beyond the need to acquire anything whatsoever. His knowledge is an inseparable part of His Being.

We grant you, this is very rarefied and bewildering, but it's the corner that discussions about free will versus G-d's foreknowledge draw you into. At bottom, though, Rambam's point is that we simply cannot fathom G-d's knowledge — let alone His foreknowledge. And while He does indeed know everything that everyone will do, say, and think beforehand which seems to fly in the face of our own freedom to choose, His way of knowing all that is not what we think it is. And it doesn't impede upon our freedom of choice.

As Rambam concludes, "Hence it's clear in light of all we've said that our actions are in our own hands and that we're free to be either righteous or wrongful without G-d compelling us in either direction". May G-d grant us the wisdom to choose righteousness.

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