

# THE DUTIES OF THE HEART, GATE 3:8

*by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman*

We turn now to the nearly unfathomable subject of freewill vs. Divine compulsion. The operative question behind the issue at this point of our discussion is this: if we're compelled to do whatever G-d would have us do (as some suggest), then how could we be said to actually \*serve\* Him as we're supposed to do? Wouldn't we merely be playing out roles He'd assigned for us from the first -- and ones that could have absolutely nothing to do with personal choice and growth? How could we possibly achieve spiritual excellence if that were the case? So let's delve into that now.

There seems to be a conflict in the tradition itself about just how free we are to do as we will. We're taught that "G-d does whatever He wants to do in Heaven and on earth" (Psalms 135:6), that "G-d brings to death and He brings to life; He sends down to the netherworld and He brings up from it. G-d makes people poor, and He makes them rich, He lowers them and raises them up" (I Samuel 2:6-7), G-d Himself says "I fashion light and create darkness; I make peace and create evil" (Isaiah 45:7), it's stated outright that "unless G-d decides to build a house, those who build it work in vain; unless G-d decides to watch over the city, the watchman wakes in vain" (Psalms 127:1), and the like.

In fact, if G-d is indeed All-knowing and All-powerful, how could we ever hope to have free will or even imagine doing anything that might go against His own will? It's almost as if all we were ever meant to do was to embellish the world and follow orders left and right -- like interesting, talented, enchanting slaves. (The more positive side to that, of course, is the enthralling realization which the Kabbalists are granted that G-d is immanently and palpably present in the world, and cannot be denied.)

Yet, we're also depicted as being free, at liberty to make our own choices, and the masters of our fate. As when we're told, "See, I (G-d) have set before you today life and good, or death and evil ... therefore \*choose life\*" (Deuteronomy 30:15,19), and that it's "a man's own foolishness that makes his way crooked" (Proverbs 19:3), and the like. The fact that we're bidden to do certain things and avoid others within the mitzvah-system that we'll have to answer for in the end also seems to indicate that we're free to make our own decisions.

So how do we reconcile the two perspectives? Indeed, our Sages themselves were of two minds -- or more!-- when it came to the whole subject. Some things are clear, though. As Ibn Pakudah points out, "there seem to be times when we can actually accomplish what we set out to, and times when we can't. What that teaches us is that G-d reigns over us indeed, ... and that He allows the things He

Himself favors to come about, and forbids things He doesn't favor to come about."

But as Ibn Pakudah also says, "our ignorance of G-d's ways is well known and based on the weaknesses of our minds and the limitations of our understanding", so it would be wise of us not to delve too deeply into the matter.

The best advice Ibn Pakudah could offer is that we "act like those who hold that we act on our own, and are rewarded or punished for our deeds... But also trust G-d as much as those to whom it's clear that all deeds, movements, and either good and bad fortune comes about by Divine decree" which is always rooted in G-d's love and justice.

After all, as the greatest scientists will themselves affirm, we really know very, very little about the mysteries of nature, and about the roots and consequences of things, as well as their true makeup. Thus, "someone as ignorant as we about the things we handle all the time" Ibn Pakudah concludes, "is obviously never going to become aware of G-d's ways..., or of the righteousness of His judgments which are infinitely more hidden and exalted than such things."

The person of faith and humility couldn't help but agree, and would put his or her trust in the One G-d. (Let it also be noted that more will be said about this dilemma at a later point in the work, though.)

[Subscribe](#) to *Spiritual Excellence* and receive the class via e-mail.