

FORCED CHOICES

by Nechama Stamper

Forced Choices¹

Now, Yisrael, what does Hashem your G-d ask of you? Only to fear Hashem your G-d...

Rashi: Chazal derived from this that all is dictated by Heaven, other than the fear of Heaven.

Maharal: There is a wondrous teaching in this statement. We generally see HKBH as able to do anything at all, since nothing lies outside of His power. Nonetheless, there is a class of actions (really non-actions, since they cannot happen!) that we maintain even Hashem cannot perform, as stated by Rambam in Moreh Nevuchim. ² These are logical impossibilities. For instance, contradicting opposites cannot both be true within the same object, and Hashem cannot bring them about. Something cannot exist and not exist at the same time. We do not limit Hashem or His greatness by saying that He cannot make such an object. No reasonable person disputes this.

A less obvious, but equally impossible, activity is the creation of a person as a tzadik who fears Heaven. There are people who speak about Hashem creating such people, not realizing that they have described a contradiction in terms, a logical impossibility. If one is created to fear Hashem, then he does not do so, because fear of Heaven, once compelled, is not fear of Heaven at all! Yir'as Shomayim has to originate within the person to be considered such. It has to be an outgrowth of a person's reaction to his grasp of the existence of Hashem and Who He is.

We readily understand that a person who is compelled to perform some forbidden act cannot be called a sinner, because he had no choice but to perform. Part of the sin is in the exercise of free-will, in the choosing to transgress, rather than obey. Yir'as Shomayim is the mirror image of this. It is only authentic when a person chooses to act in accordance with the Will of his Creator. If he is created to act perfectly righteously, he exercises no choice, and evidences no yir'as Shomayim.

Chazal speak of only two things that are not dictated by Heaven: yir'as Shomayim, ³ and illness brought on by cold or heat. ⁴ Why these two?

Yir'ah is reflexive. It is not imposed from without, but is a reaction within a person brought about by the person himself. He senses the greatness of Hashem. This sensation within him causes him to draw back from the Being he fears. (Love is the polar opposite. It is a sensation that causes the

person to draw closer to it object, and to cling to it. Thus we find Chazal speaking of yir'as Shomayim, but never of ahavas Shomayim. The word "shomayim" connotes a region that cannot be reached, an unbridgeable chasm between a person and Hashem. Yir'ah causes him to see himself as infinitely separate from G-d. Ahavah, love, does the opposite. It knows its object; that Being has a Name. Thus, we speak of Ahavas Hashem.)

The greater the fear, the greater the sense of distance. Conversely, the closer the distance, the less room for fear. This alone would prove that yir'ah cannot be created or programmed. If it were, the very relationship of Hashem acting upon him to cause it establishes connection and relationship - and where there is connection, there cannot be a sense of an absolute gulf of separation.

Illness brought on by cold and heat stands in much the same position, applying the principle we've developed above to a different area. Heat and cold do not directly harm a person. Rather, people make decisions about how to deal with them, and those decisions often result in illness. Stay out in the cold long enough without cover, and you might very well get sick. Keep active in extreme heat without hydrating, and there will be consequences. Too much strong sun will result in sunstroke. People make the choices about dealing with extremes in the weather. When those choices are poorly considered, they should not blame the weatherman. Or the Divine Weatherman. In that sense, Hashem doesn't cause the illness as He might in other circumstances; the illness is not dictated directly by Heaven.

Ultimately, everything flows from Hashem's Will, because that Will empowers and sustains everything in the universe. Ein Od Milvado. This core understanding should not prevent us, however, from understanding the role of human choice, and the responsibility that comes with it. We should not blame G-d for catching a cold after walking in a cold downpour without a coat. Nor can we blame him for not having created us as tzadikim. That is our job.

Sources:

1. Based on Gur Aryeh, Devarim 10:12; Derech Chaim 1:3
2. 3:15
3. Berachos 33B
4. Kesubos 30A