

PARTNERS IN CRIME?

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

When He finished speaking with him, G-d ascended from upon Avraham. Then Avraham took his son Yishmael ...all the males of Avraham's house...and circumcised...^[2]

It is one of the oldest and most intractable problems in thinking about G-d. Does He participate in Man's actions, essentially propelling him to do good or evil? (We understand G-d to be the cause of everything. We should therefore think of Him as directly producing all phenomena, including our own actions. But if this is true, He essentially leaves no room for Man's freely-willed choices; He is the cause of all the consequences – including, for that matter, ones that are evil.)

Alternatively (largely to avoid the problems associated with the other approach), we could understand Him as keeping away from Man's decision-making. This leaves lots of room for reward and punishment, but leads to the absurd conclusion that Man succeeds – operating on his own power - to act against the wishes of the Creator, or without His knowledge. Some conceptualize Hashem as not causing human actions, but driving them after a person has exercised his ability to choose between right and wrong.

Chazal, at least when taken at face value, seem to support some of these competing options. Thus, we find references to Man operating as a free agent and thereby requiring G-d to reach and deal with the consequences of his choices ("Says HKBH: Not only do the wicked use my die for a sela coin as if it were ownerless, but they trouble Me and cause Me to sign the consequences of their actions against My will."^[3]) On the other hand, we find them insisting on Hashem's will as the cause of all phenomena ("No person stubs his toe on earth unless they have declared it upon him from above."^[4])

I reject the notion that G-d directly causes Man's actions – with an exception, from time to time, when He desires that a particular deed be done. Man acts according to the freedom of will that is granted to him. In all other cases, G-d should not be seen as driving Man's actions, but rather – in a manner of speaking – of sustaining Man's free-willed actions. Should a man have an illicit relationship with a woman forbidden to him, her pregnancy will require – and receive – the assistance of Hashem's craft in shaping the fetus. This is comparable to an artisan creating a utensil, which can be used for both good and evil purposes. Should the purchaser use the vessel for some terrible purpose, you can view the artisan as involved in that evil by enabling or sustaining it. It would be overreach, however, to see the artisan as fully causing it.

We reap a curious benefit from the fact that HKBH is involved in sustaining the consequences of our choices. This provides us with a bit of a moral cushion. We reduce our culpability somewhat by being able to point to Hashem Himself as an enabler of sorts of our decisions, including the bad ones. It certainly doesn't exonerate us. But it helps a bit. It allows, as it were, Hashem to impose a lighter sentence on the guilty when He judges them.

Let us return to our main point – that Hashem does not force Man's hand, neither in his performance of mitzvos, nor in his transgressions. Our *pesukim* forcefully drive home this realization. No sooner is Avraham commanded in the mitzvah of *milah*, then Hashem takes leave of him. "When He finished speaking with him, G-d ascended from upon Avraham." Hashem did this so that all would understand that Avraham had to perform the mitzvah on his own. Hashem was not going to push or guide his hand. He didn't do that for Avraham; upon reflection we realize that He does not do that for anyone else either.

Yet no sooner than Avraham finished circumcising all the males of his household than his loneliness ends. The very next episode we read about in the text finds Avraham visited by three angels, and HKBH himself.^[5] G-d is back, close to Avraham once again.

And so He is to us – even when he won't force us to make the choices between good and evil

1. Based on Meleches Machsheves by R. Moshe Cheifetz 1663-1711.
2. Bereishis 17:22-23.
3. Avodah Zarah 54B.
4. Chulin 7B.
5. Bereishis 18:1.