

COMMANDMENTS INCREASE FREE-WILL

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

G-d told Moshe, "Command Aharon and his sons regarding the law of a Burnt-Offering." (Vayikra 6:1-2)

"Command" is strong language and seems to leave little room for free-will. In fact, Rashi points out that G-d used it here because there would be some financial loss to the kohanim, (they did not get to eat the meat of the Burnt-Offering), and therefore they might be less "inspired" to carry out the mitzvah.

However, in truth, commandments increase free-will, not reduce it. They "antagonize" the yetzer hara and instigate the conscience. True, "a person does what he has to do," but only once he realizes and accepts that he has to do what is expected of him. Until such time, he can do a masterful job of justifying and rationalizing the mitzvah away.

The concept of free-will is one of the most important of all ideas known to man. It is also one of the most difficult to understand and therefore it is often misunderstood and misused, and sometimes just missed all together. As such, it is never to be taken for granted especially during difficult times in history, such as ours.

Life is one on-going process of decision-making, from beginning until end. It is both entertaining and exciting to watch a little baby focus on an object of his desire and then decide to seek it out. It is both frustrating and sad to watch an elderly person focus on an object of his desire and then decide that he cannot seek it out. However, in all the cases in-between throughout the many years and stages of life, life is about making decisions.

In Hebrew, the word for decision is "breirah," which comes from the word that means "to separate." For, that is what decisions do: they distinguish, for the most part, between at least two things based upon a pre-determined set of good and bad, often subjective by nature. The idea is to identify the good idea or thing and to separate it out from the rest of the lot, rejecting the rest.

Choosing takes a conscious act of will. To choose anything in life requires an awareness of the opportunity and appreciation of the choice. The less the awareness and appreciation, the less the choice will be to the point that a person can become oblivious to the choices that can be made, often at a later irreversible cost.

In a sense, the idea of making an "informed choice" is misleading since it implies that one can make an "uninformed choice," when in truth that is never really the case. For one to make a choice, one must be aware of what he is choosing and why, otherwise he cannot properly evaluate what he is choosing and therefore can act contrary to his true will, through ignorance. It is only a choice in the limited sense of the word.

What is free-will? What must one's will be free of? If you were to ask the average person, he would probably answer, "Free of anyone telling me what to do. Free-will means doing my own thing the way I want to do it, when I want to do it." This, of course, would be this person's reason for rejecting Torah and mitzvos.

However, such a person is ignoring an important reality that will guarantee him anything but free-will. Such a person has forgotten, or was never made aware of the fact that he is constantly being told to do this or that by something that is constantly trying to influence his viewpoint in order to pull him in directions that ultimately he will reject and regret. Something that resides within him so insidiously that is not only not a part of him, but it seeks his destruction, daily (Kiddushin 30b).

It is called the "yetzer hara," and it is responsible for the biggest con job of all history, promising free-will when in fact it delivers just the opposite: servitude to a foreign, but internal, entity.

Shabbos Day:

The snake was the most cunning of all the animals of the field which G-d had created. He said to the woman, "Didn't G-d say not to eat from any of the trees of the Garden?" (Bereishis 3:1)

As the Ramchal explains, before Adam sinned, evil was external to man, in the form of the original snake. Any mention of doing that which was counter-productive to the purpose of creation, clearly came from that direction. If Adam decided to do the snake's bidding it was perfectly clear that this was what he was doing - the will of the snake, or yetzer hara incarnate.

After the sin, it was as if Adam "swallowed" the snake - physically and spiritually. Now, both voices shared the same mind, his and that of the yetzer hara's, to the point that it was much easier to confuse one for the other than it was to tell them apart. Sinning became a function of everyday life as a result.

Of course, if you don't believe or accept this idea, as is the case with much of Western Society today, then the only choice is to think that any voice or desire emanating from within one's mind is in fact one's own voice. Be it a good desire or a bad one, if it comes from you it IS you, like it or not, and violating the desire can only be a violation of self.

By necessity, one learns to identify the will of the yetzer hara as his own will, and by extension, free-will comes to mean giving the yetzer hara free reign to exercise its will. Thus, if commandments come to restrain the yetzer hara and to reveal its modus operandi, then commandments will be seen as constricting one's own free-will and therefore, psychologically and even spiritually dangerous!

On the other hand, free-will from the Torah's perspective is a will that is free of the influences of the yetzer hara, either your own or someone else's. It is the type of choice that comes about as a result of a desire to do the objectively moral thing, decisions that are based upon awareness, understanding, and appreciation of the ultimate issues of life. Commandments only act as a way to convey this message and to inspire one to achieve its goal by "forcing" the issue that is addressed by the particular commandment.

For example, there is a Torah commandment for a male over the age of 13 years to wear Tefillin on a regular weekday. Ideally, he should wear Tefillin all day long until sundown, but since most men are too distracted to remain focused on their Tefillin during the day, especially when working amongst the gentile nations, we fulfill the mitzvah only during the morning prayer session. Some may even learn Torah with them on for a while after the prayer session has ended, and according to Kabbalah the effect of doing so is supposed to be tremendous.

However, wrapping oneself up in leather straps and black leather boxes is not the most natural of human activities, you have to admit, especially in this post-religion day and age. When the time comes to don Tefillin, a little voice can be heard from within the person saying, "What, these again? You're not serious, are you? We did this yesterday! How many more times do you plan to torture yourself with this ancient and out-dated Jewish tradition?"

A more "religious" yetzer hara might have a different tactic. It might be heard saying, "Ah, Tefillin. Aren't we just the holiest person who ever walked the face of the earth?" inciting one's pride, or "Think about why we're doing this? Naaaah, we don't have to do that. Why, we've done this so many times already, we're an expert!"

These were just two basic examples of what he or she might say to a person; the yetzer hara is far more creative than we can ever be. However, whatever it might say in response to a mitzvah being "imposed" upon it from without and within, it MUST respond, and having responded it illicit a counter-response from us.

Thus, the spiritual dialogue begins and moral issues are forced to the surface for evaluation and decision-making. The more demanding the mitzvah, the more this is true, and in this way G-d has provided mankind with a "device" to reveal the yetzer hara from within man and give him a chance to channel its energies in a spiritually positive direction. Or, rather, provide man with a chance to rise above his influence to free one's will while making a mature and informed choice. The most freed will of all mankind is that of the righteous person who abides whole-heartedly by Torah, and if you don't believe it, watch how your yetzer hara kicks and screams as you make an effort to understand.

For, understanding leads to acceptance, and acceptance leads to implementation, and implementation leads to a primordial scream from the yetzer hara that goes something like this, "YOU'RE KILLING US WITH THIS, DO YOU KNOW?! WE'LL NEVER SURVIVE!"

SEUDAH SHLISHIS:

Go and see the works of G-d, awesome (allilah) in deed toward mankind. (Tehillim 66:5)

Thus, with the creation of man on Day Six of creation, the stage was set upon which man was supposed to act out his life. Creation appears, on the surface and for the most part, quite peaceful. Once in a while, the situation explodes and there can even be world wars. That is an illusion that belies a deeper reality, one of inherent chaos and potential for evil, to force mankind to use his gift of free-will to act like G-d, and earn closeness to Him in this world and The World-to-Come.

It sounds simple, but life has proven that it is anything but this. In fact, the following verse hints to a whole new dimension of free-will that has yet to be addressed.

Go and see the works of G-d, awesome (allilah) in deed toward mankind. (Tehillim 66:5)

According to the Radak, these are words that will be said at the End-of-Days, when one man will invite another to see and take awe in how masterfully G-d brought creation to fulfillment. The Midrash concurs, but adds another element to this explanation when dealing with sale of Yosef by his brothers:

Yosef went down to Egypt . . . Rebi Yehoshua ben Korcha said, "Even the awesome things that you do to us, you do them with trickery." Come and see how when G-d made the world, He created the Angel of Death on the first day. Where do we see this? Said Rebi Berechya, "Because it is written, 'Darkness upon the face of the deep' (Bereishis 1:2), which refers to the Angel of Death, who darkens the faces of the creations. Adam was made on the Sixth Day, and through trickery death was blamed on him, as it says, 'On the day you eat from it [Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil] you will certainly die.' To what can this be compared? To a man who wished to divorce his wife, and who before returning home wrote out her Get. He came home with the Get in his hand, but he wanted to make it appear as if it was her fault. He told her, 'Make me something to drink,' and she did. When she handed the cup to him, he told her, 'Here is your Get!' She asked, 'What did I do wrong?' He told her, 'Leave! You made me a warm drink!' She asked him, 'You knew that I would make you a warm drink in advance that you were able to come home with the Get in your hand?' Here also, Adam asked G-d, 'Master of the World! For 2,000 years before the world was created you kept Torah close to You . . . Yet it says, 'This is the law for when a man dies in a tent . . .' (Bamidbar 19:14). If you hadn't intended to bring death to Your creations, would it have been written thus? Rather, You just wanted to blame death on me!' (Tanchuma, Vayaishev 4)

The Midrash cites other examples of the same thing, including how G-d arranged it that Ya'akov should love Yosef more and favor him over his brothers, making their jealousy of him inevitable. This, of course, made it almost impossible not to sell Yosef into slavery, though like Adam before them, they appear every bit as blameworthy for their evil deed! This is what King David referred to as *allilus*, which is translated as "awesome," but which can also mean "cunning."

As if the concept of free-will and Divine Providence wasn't paradoxical already! From the above Midrash, it seems as if free-will is a complete illusion, and that we are destined to follow pre-determined paths toward ends we may not like, but which we can't do anything to avoid. It seems that, as important a concept as free-will might have been in the planning stages of creation, it has been sacrificed for G-d's master plan instead, and that we might as well be walking zombies marching to the beat of someone else's drum. However, this is not so, and we see this by a discussion that occurs elsewhere.

The question has been raised, why did G-d punish Egypt for enslaving the Jewish people? Had they not merely fulfilled G-d's master plan, as the verse prophesized:

He [G-d] told Avram, "Know that your seed will be strangers in a foreign land and will serve them; they will afflict them for four hundred years. Also, the nation that they will serve I will judge, and afterwards they will leave with great wealth." (Bereishis 15:13)

The answer to this question is a point of disagreement between Rambam and the Ramban. According to the Rambam, the above verse never specified which people was to be the nation to oppress the Jewish people. According to the Ramban, each Egyptian had the choice to not be party to the suffering caused to the oppressed Jewish nation. By not abstaining, they had all become punishable.

The Ramban disagrees, and instead interprets the above verse to read:

Just as I decreed exile and affliction for your children on account of sin (that is, when Avraham went down to Egypt when famine came to the land of Canaan), so will I bring judgment upon the nation that will enslave them for the violence they will do to them . . . (Bereishis 15:14; Ramban)

That is, for what they will do above and beyond what I decreed to occur.

In other words, the Egyptians had been slated from day one to be the future oppressors of the Jewish nation. Why were they punished? Because, who said anything about throwing children into the Nile river, or embittering their lives, or eradicating their name from memory? For doing their job "too well," G-d judged the Egyptian people and took them to task, and likewise the rest of us for our free-will involvement in the sins we have been party to.

Hence, according to the Rambam, though events may have to happen by Divine decree, the people who will carry the events out are not forced into anything against their own free-will.

MELAVE MALKAH:

And if a man does not lie in wait [to trap and kill the person], but G-d let him fall into his [killer's] hand . . . (Shemos 21:13)

This is further indicated by an example in the Torah itself, as explained by Rashi on the above verse:

What is this verse referring to? It refers to two men, one of whom killed a man with premeditation, and the other who killed inadvertently. In neither case were there witnesses to the deed, and consequently, the former could not be put to death for premeditated murder, and the latter could not be forced into banishment to a refuge city, as is the law for accidental murderers (Bamidbar 35:11). How does G-d accomplish justice in this case? He brings them together at the same inn, and arranges it so that the one who killed with premeditation happens to sit under the ladder while the other who killed inadvertently ascends the ladder. When a rung on the ladder happens to break, the accidental murderer falls on the murderer and kills him. This time, however, there are witnesses present who can testify against the inadvertent killer, forcing him to flee to the refuge city. Thus, the one who killed with premeditation is killed, and the one who killed inadvertently is banished to a refuge city. (Rashi)

What brought these two people together was a series of free-will decisions that helped shape their directions in life. When someone needs to be killed by Divine decree, G-d chooses from a selection of people who have become murderers, whether they killed previously premeditatively, or accidentally. This is why it is so important to remain sensitive to the value of life and to avoid negligence, because G-d has a way of showing us what our attitudes can lead to, and sometimes the results are tragic and irreversible.

Adam could have been right. Death was destined to come into the world. On the other hand, who said that he had to be the one to bring it about? Likewise, the Jewish people had been destined to go down into oppression, but who said that it had to be the result of the brothers' jealousy over Yosef? On the contrary, Adam and Yosef's brothers, through the power of choice, made themselves into the kinds of people who could act this way, and G-d chose them to do the deed for this reason.

The same can be true for the rest of us as well. The events of the world may have to occur in order to fulfill some higher mandate (which we discussed in the previous chapter). However, what role we play with respect to these events can depend solely upon what we do with our own lives beforehand, and how we do it. We can choose to be a "maker" in G-d's world, or a "pawn" within this master plan; it's our own free-will choice (albeit not an absolutely free-will choice, but a free-choice none-the-less).

HOWEVER, once the choice is made, it can lead to our own loss of free-will. This is because our decisions are based upon our perceptions, and our perceptions are based upon our assumptions

about life and our role within it. If the assumptions are faulty from the start, so will a person's perceptions of reality be mistaken, and consequently, so will the person's decisions.

For example, the rabbis tell us that by the fifth plague Pharaoh had lost his free-will. However, if you read the account of the ten plagues it seems as if Pharaoh was making decisions - bad ones perhaps - until the very end. Why do we say that he lost his free-will?

On the other hand, reading the story we can't understand why Pharaoh would even consider rejecting G-d's request to free the Jewish people, given all the miracles that He was performing to free them. Either Pharaoh had a death wish for his nation, or he just could not see it the way we do now, which, of course, is what the rabbis are teaching us.

As the Midrash explains, Pharaoh lived with the assumption that G-d does not become "personally" involved in the affairs of man, and that magic was extremely powerful. Therefore, he had difficulty believing that the plagues were a direct war against his treatment of the Jewish people and not just a function of Moshe's superior magic.

All G-d had to do to "remove" Pharaoh's free-will, was to make the plagues occur in a way that took advantage of his assumptions in a way that would allow Pharaoh to fall back on his faulty perceptions as a way to perpetuate his spiritually destructive behavior, measure-for-measure. Just like the suicide-bombers of today, who believe with all their hearts and lives that what they are doing is morally justified and admirable, when in fact it is deadly wrong. They can't stop themselves even if they wanted to.

If you think this idea only applies to people such as these, think again. For example, what is happening today in Eretz Yisroel, ironically, is having two very different and distinct effects on Jews. Some Jews perceive the situation as a reason, or perhaps as an excuse, to avoid Eretz Yisroel all together and feel justified in not yearning to be there.

However, others feel an intensified pressure to be there as soon as possible, strangely enough. No, they are neither suicidal nor homicidal, but usually "geulah-cidal." In other words, they are big believers and hoppers for redemption, which they feel is imminent and evident. Nothing seems to make sense today, and that is a very big sign that Heaven is controlling the events and not man, usually an important sign that redemption is on its way and they want to be in Eretz Yisroel when it comes.

This attitude is not the result of recent events but the result of years of learning and contemplation. It is based upon assumptions that have been derived from the Torah and Jewish history, and now recent events are playing right into these assumptions. Where other Jews perceive "Danger! Stay away!" They perceive, "Danger IF you stay away!"

It's all in the assumptions, and in times like this the wrong assumptions can deny a person the free-will choice to value that which the Torah values, like Eretz Yisroel. I know, because I have watched

on countless occasions how angry and restless people become when the issue of Eretz Yisroel is raised these days.

Perhaps, this is why the Talmud says that redemption will come in the month of Nissan. It does not take much to transform the Hebrew word "Nissan" into the word "nisayon," which means "test," the root of each being the word "nes," which means "miracle" and "banner." Redemption is going to be a test, one VERY big test for all the Jews around the world.

History, as the Rambam says, is going to play itself out based upon an immutable 6,000-year old plan, if not older. It is set in stone that we cannot chisel away at. However, that does not deny us the chance to use our gift of free-will to determine how we will respond to that master plan and our potential role within it. But, that will depend upon our perceptions of reality, which, in turn, will depend upon our assumptions about Torah and life.

And, that is precisely what the events of history come to reveal to us, and test. They are no different than commandments that impose their will upon us, arousing and instigating our yetzer haras in order to make us confront the issues of life that truly free us and provide us with the only true path to free-will decisions and our portions in the World-to-Come.

These are exciting times. Scary, sad, and nerve-wracking, but exciting just the same. Where they go from here is up to us, the Jewish people, and those people bold enough to remain true to the concept of free-will. This is really what Pesach is all about. Freedom, ultimately, is the result of a choice to live free of the yetzer hara by using Torah to rise above.

Have a great Shabbos HaGadol,
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