

# FREE-WILL

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

**See that I place before you this day a blessing and a curse. The blessing will come if you obey the commandments of God, your God, which I command you today; the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of God, your God, but stray from the way which I command you today, and pursue other gods, which you have not known. (Devarim 11:26-28)**

Of all things in life that is the most taken for granted, free-will has to come first. It is the trait that best defines what it means to be human, and yet so few human beings take advantage it, or even use it much on a daily basis. On the Final Day of Judgment, few of us will escape the shock that will come with finding out how few free-will choices we actually made throughout the course of our long lifetimes.

Which, of course, is a problem, since eternal reward in the World-to-Come is based upon having made good free-will choices. However, in order to make this world feel like the World-to-Come already, people spend a lot of time circumventing true free-will choices, avoiding the tougher decisions in life, whenever possible.

"But I make tons of choices everyday!" you might say, somewhat indignant.

Nothing personal, but there is a difference between simply making a choice, and making a free-will choice. Animals make choices daily as well, and even computers too. But, contrary to the belief of animal lovers (I like them too), and computer lovers (I am one as well), neither goes to the World-to-Come, because their choices don't count. They are choices, but not free-will choices, which they have to be in order to be considered moral or immoral, and relevant to increasing or decreasing a person's portion in the World-to-Come.

What is the difference? How does one know if he is making a free-will choice or not?

This is an excellent question, one of the most important a person can ask. Indeed, all of life comes down to understanding the answer to this question, believe it or not, and even religious people often take it for granted, which is why they too may too few free-will choices on a daily basis, even though their lifestyle promotes it.

To make the answer as clear as possible, let's break it down into parts. First of all, one should have a working definition for both parts, free and will. Since the simpler term to define is will, it is a good idea to do so first, which according to Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary, is defined as: used to

express desire, choice, willingness, consent, or in negative constructions refusal.

But, in life, it is possible to make a person go against his will. For example, one does not want to give his wallet to a thief, but the knife he is brandishing compels him to do so. One may not want to give charity, but the embarrassment, or guilt, from not giving compels him to give anyhow. In each case he will give that which he wishes to keep for himself, and he'll feel lousy for it.

One might think, therefore, that free-will means, free his will. Protect him from thieves, so that he can keep his wallet. Ask him for charity, but in a way that it cannot be known that he refused to give. Free our will from the will of others, and our lives can become dreamlike, especially, many people say, if that other's will happens to be God's.

The Talmud, of course, disagrees. And, it happens to mention an interesting example to prove its point regarding the matter of divorce, which, as many probably already know, has to originate with the husband. In Jewish law, a woman cannot sue for divorce, even in cases where clearly she ought to. Today that presents a big problem for some women, but in the old days, there was a way to deal with it:

A letter of divorce under coercion is sometimes valid and sometimes invalid, the former when the man declared, "I am willing," and the latter, when he did not declare, "I am willing." For it was taught: "He shall offer it" (Vayikra 1:3) teaches that the man is coerced. It might [be assumed that the sacrifice may be offered up] against his will, therefore it says, "according to his will." How then [are the two texts reconciled]? He is subjected to pressure until he says, "I am willing." It is likewise in the case of letters of divorce for women: The man is subjected to pressure until he says, "I am willing." (Yevamos 106a)

The question, of course is, how does this help? It certainly helps the woman, which is great, but it does not help the halachah, which is not great. For, everyone knows that the man is being forced to give the Get against his will, otherwise he would have already given it to his wife without any trouble.

No, says the Talmud, revealing instead what might be called a Chiddush Atzum-an amazingly novel idea. For, explains, the Talmud, in truth the man would much rather give his wife her Get, because that is the right thing, the moral thing to do. And, assumes the Talmud, people inherently want to do the moral thing, because, as the Torah says, they were made in the image of God.

Then what goes wrong? Elsewhere, the Talmud states in the Name of God:

"I created the yetzer hara, and I created the Torah as its spice." (Kiddushin 30b)

In other words, the yetzer hara interferes with man's moral imperative, and though some people can still follow through and do the right thing anyhow, others have a more difficult time knowing who is who and what is what. In such people, the yetzer hara creates such overwhelming emotions that the

person becomes selfish and spiritually shortsighted until he comes to believe that his will is really not to be cooperative.

For such people, the Talmud advises, a little coercion, by the right people at the right time, goes a long way to silence their yetzer hara just long enough for them to listen to their true will. The coercion frees them, and their will, from the will of the yetzer hara, allowing them to act in a Godly manner, as, and this is the amazing underlying assumption, people truly wish to do.

Hence, free-will is a will that is free to do the moral thing. This may be easy for people to do sometimes, or it may be extremely difficult. But, at the end of the day, a will that is free is one that can decide to do the moral act in spite of all the pressures, from within or from without. And, it is for this which a person is rewarded in the World-to-Come.

Fine. But that is not the end of the discussion, far from it. Rather, there is still the all-important issue of what is moral and what is not. And, furthermore, who says that the yetzer hara even exists in the first place, that we can just go ahead and make him into the bad guy? Maybe what the Talmud calls the yetzer hara is really our true will, and by spicing it with Torah, we are really just stifling our inner and most basic drives, and that certainly can't make for a very healthy society, can it?

And, for that matter, argue the atheists, free-will, if it even exists in the first place, something Social Darwinists would like to argue, may be just the opposite, one that is unhampered by social mores and judicial systems. Religion, they argue vehemently, does not come to free will, but to enslave it, and to that end, they are at war with all religious systems.

Except, of course, their own, but that is another discussion. The main point here is that, even according to such people, for free-will to exist, one is required to believe in three things. First of all, one must believe in an Objective Truth, without which, everything is just a matter of opinion. Without an Objective Truth, there is no right or wrong, which makes good and evil completely subjective, and therefore defined only by people.

Hence, though you may not like what Stalin or Hitler did, y"s, you cannot say that they were wrong. The best an Atheist can say is, "Keep those people away from me!" But they cannot say that they were morally wrong, since in an atheistic world, such terms get dropped from the dictionary.

However, as we see daily, lots of people do believe in some form of God, and therefore, some form of objective truth, but they do what they want anyhow. That is because they also believe that God keeps His objective truth to Himself, leaving man to work out the details of life on his own, which, according to history, he has not been so good at.

Therefore, free-will necessitates not only a belief and knowledge of an Objective Truth, but also a belief and knowledge of that objective truth. At some point, in some way, it has to have communicated to man and shared with him, so that man can have a moral measuring stick against which to determine the right or wrong of his actions.

Fine, again. But even if people pass Grade 1 and Grade 2, they sometimes flunk-out anyhow, thanks to the human trait of rationalization. In everyday life, religious people still sin, and at the extreme end, people murder ruthlessly in the Name of God, and as an extension of what they perceive is His will. The number one threat to mankind today, Fundamentalist Islam, is the foremost example of this.

Hence, free-will requires one more fundamental belief: man has a yetzer hara. And, not only does he have a yetzer hara, but it has the ability to impersonate us, or at least hijack our brain. That is what the Talmud says:

A person does not sin unless a spirit of insanity enters him. (Sotah 3a)

The spirit of insanity, of course, is the yetzer hara. The yetzer hara himself is not insane, merely doing his job of making our lives spiritually challenging. But, once he succeeds at his job well enough to make us believe that his will is our will, then we start to look the part of an insane person, sacrificing long-term gain for short term and trivial pleasures.

All of this is included in Moshe Rabbeinu's appeal to the Jewish people. He was telling them to make sure that everyone is real with the three conditions of free-will, so that they can exercise theirs, and not become victims of stupidity and the yetzer hara, like trillions of people have done throughout the last 5,770 years.

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