

IT'S ALL FREE WILL

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

Do you doubt that we have free will? Do you wonder about the age-old question, "If G-d knows everything, past present and future, He also knows everything what we will do before we do it. G-d even knows whether or not at the very last moment we will decide to not do whatever it is we want to do. Therefore, it is impossible for us not to do the things that G-d already knows we will do. Therefore, we do not have free will. It must mean that we are each preprogrammed to do and be whatever we will be and do throughout our lives, whether good or bad. Therefore, how can free will exist?

There are many approaches to dealing with the question including the Rambam's fundamental approach of not seeking an answer. However, over the years I devised an approach to dealing with the question that I would like to share with you.

I imagine a neshama ascending to its final judgment before G-d's throne. I imagine the soul calmly listening to the angels reading the list of his good deeds and bad. I imagine the silence that follows the reading as the celestial court awaits the soul's attempted defense and justification for his sins.

The soul clears its throat and presents the ultimate argument. "If it pleases the Almighty I personally believe that none of the deeds just read are my responsibility! I believe that I had no other choice but to do the things I stand accused of doing! I could not have stopped myself whether I wanted to or not! Is it not true that You knew what I would before I did? Therefore, how can You hold me responsible? I had no choice!

At this point I imagine the amused looks being exchanged between the myriads of angels and other such attendants. I imagine G-d looking with loving patience at the defendant as He awaits the end of an argument He has heard since the beginning of time. (As King Solomon wrote, "There is nothing new beneath (or above) the sun.")

In the ensuing silence G-d's thundering voice calls out. "Bring Me the socks!" The angelic spectators part as the ministering angel brings out a drawer of perfectly folded and matched stockings. All imaginable and some unimaginable colors are represented in the drawer, some with patterns and others without.

Gesturing to the soul to step forward, G-d points to the drawer and says, "It is Monday morning and you are getting dressed for the office. Your suit is charcoal gray with a light blue pin stripe. Your shirt is white and your tie a delicate pattern of burgundy on a field of light gray. Go ahead, choose

the appropriate socks to go with your black wingtips." (Even lawyers will eventually be judged.) Digging through the drawer of socks the soul selects what it believes to be the appropriate match. Proudly displaying the choice to the assembled crowd the soul awaits G-d's justice.

Looking down on the somewhat arrogant soul G-d asked, "Dearest child, I will not ask you if that is your final answer, because I of course knew which socks you would select before you did. The argument you present in your defense has great philosophical merit; however, please tell Me, when choosing the fine pair of stockings that perfectly compliment your ensemble did you feel compelled in any way to choose it over another?

The soul, although getting a sense of where G-d is going with His analysis has no choice but to answer truthfully. "No. I chose the matching socks on my own. No one forced me to choose the pair that I did." G-d continued, "Just as you had the free will to choose the pair of socks that you chose, so too you had free will throughout your life to choose between good and evil."

All imagery aside, the answer is practical, not philosophical. It does not make a difference if we can balance the apparent contradiction between free will and G-d's knowledge of everything. Let's just be honest with ourselves! We all know that we make our own decisions and that G-d and society should hold us responsible for those decisions.

In this week's second Parsha the Torah introduced the evil prophet Bilam. Bilam was not a false prophet. He was a true prophet who chose to be evil. Given the attention paid by the Torah to Moshe's worthiness (ever since the end of Parshas B'Haloscha with the incident of Miriam's leprosy) we can assume that part of G-d's intent in telling us the story of Bilam is to contrast Moshe with Bilam and display the extremes of free will.

On the one side is Moshe the true servant of G-d. On the other side is Bilam the evil prophet. Both were equal in their prophetic ability. Both came from the family of Terach and shared similar genetic stock (Bilam was Lavan's son). Both had been chosen by G-d to receive His communications. Both had been given opportunities to experience and study G-d (Bilam studied with Yakov after Yakov came to Lavan's home). Yet, Moshe chose to humbly ascend the mountain and serve G-d and Israel while Bilam used his talents for personal gain and the destruction of G-d and the Jewish people.

The Talmud relates the story of "Acher - The Other." He was among the four greatest Talmudic scholars to have ever lived. (As a point of reference, remember that the great Rabbi Akiva who is considered the greatest was one of the four.) Acher had attained the highest level of Torah knowledge and comprehension possible for a human; yet, he is called Acher ("The Other") because he became a heretic. In the end, despite his extraordinary scholarship he denied the divinity of G-d!

How is it possible for someone to attain such scholarship and still become a heretic? How is it possible for a prophet like Bilam to receive G-d's direct communications and still desire to destroy G-d's purpose for creating the universe?

Free will is a fundamental truth of the human experience. It is intrinsic to the human creature as is the need and ability to breathe. In fact, the Rambam states that other seemingly non-free willed creations also have free will (e.g. Sun, moon, constellations). The difference between humans and the other free willed creations is the degree of their awareness of G-d. The sun, moon and other such creations have an absolute awareness of G-d and it is impossible for them to do anything else but acquiesce to G-d's wishes. My Grandfather Ztl's illustrates this by comparing it to being burnt. We are all aware that a burn will cause terrible pain. Because we know that fire burns and burns hurt we would never willingly put our hands into fire except for the most compelling motives. However, we still have free will to plunge our hands into fire if we should so decide. That is the level of awareness that the sun and moon have in relation to G-d. They know with absolute certainty that to not do as G-d commands is tantamount to death and destruction. If so, how could the likes of Bilam and Acher deny G-d? Their awareness of G-d transcended mortal norms and yet they denied G-d!

In this week's first Parsha the Torah commanded the laws of the Red Heifer. The anomaly of the Red Heifer is that the same process that removes impurity from the petitioner conveys impurity to the ministering Kohain. My Grandfather Zt'l explained that this seemingly inherent and confounding contradiction teaches us a powerful lesson. In Maimonides Hilchos Dayos (Laws of Character Development) the Rambam plots a number of midos (character traits) on a continuum. He explains that character is a tool that can be used for either good or bad. Depending on the circumstances and the intended goal, a person can choose how to express any or all of his characteristics. Therefore, character must be understood as a reflection of our free will rather than the excusable whims of nature or even nurture.

Considering the victim mentality of our generation this is a challenging and disturbing reality. We can no longer blame who we are on anyone else but ourselves. Each of us was created different and distinct. Each of us was created with unique desires, inclinations, and challenges. It is incumbent upon each of us to accept that who we are is just the beginning. G-d intended that we take the raw material of our beings and use it in His service. In order to accomplish this G-d gave us free will to do with ourselves as we see fit. However, whatever we decide, either good or bad, will be our responsibility. We make the decision and we deserve the subsequent reward or punishment.

So too with the Parah Adumah - the Red Heifer. The petitioner and the ministering Kohain engaged the same raw material and ceremony. For one it removed impurity and conveyed purity. For the other it removed purity and conveyed impurity. In and of itself it was raw material whose purpose and efficacy is determined by each party involved.

As the Jews neared the end of their 40-year journey the need to define for them the challenges they would face in Moshe's absence became of paramount importance. Moshe vs. Bilam provided the Jews with the clearest illustration of humanities fundamental challenge and the opposing consequences of freewill.

At all times, regardless of personal station or scholarship, we are confronted by the choice to do good or bad. If we choose to do good the outcome is continued life and prosperity for the nation and the world. If we choose to do bad we visit death and destruction upon the world and us.

Had Bilam decided to advice Balak and the other nations to embrace and bless the Jewish nation rather than confront and curse them he would have become the catalyst for ushering in the Messianic era and the greatest hero in history. Instead, he chose to do evil and evoked death for himself, the demise of the other nations, and the death of 24,000 Jews. In the end it was all a matter of free will.

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