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FREE WILL – PIRKEI AVOT

3:14-15

הַכֹּל צָפוּי, וְהָרְשׁוּת נְתוּנָה, וּבְטוֹב הָעוֹלָם נִדּוֹן,
כִּי לָקַח טוֹב נָתַתִּי לָכֶם, "וְהַכֹּל לְפִי רוֹב הַמַּעֲשֵׂה
תּוֹרָתִי אֵל תַּעֲזָבוּ

"I have given you a good purchase; My Torah, do not forsake it" (Proverbs 4:2).
All is foreseen, and freedom of choice is granted. The world is judged with
goodness, but in accordance with the amount of man's positive deeds."

A discussion on Free Will based on Avot 3:14-15

A Related Story:

Throughout classic Jewish literature, absolute free choice is the domain of G-d alone. He chooses that heaven and earth should exist, He chooses their design the story they tell. Humans are created “in G-d’s likeness”, meaning that we like G-d have the capacity to do as we please. Indeed, after Adam and Eve eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, we read that G-d says, “This human being is unique, that he has his own mind to choose between good and evil.” Unlike G-d, we are limited by the nature of the world. We can’t choose to grow wings and fly, or to change winter into summer. What we can choose is whether to obey the will of our Creator or to ignore it. By doing so, we can choose our role within the story—whether good things happen because of us, or despite us. In other words, we can make moral choices within G-d’s story. G-d’s plans, after all, can unfold in innumerable ways. But it is the Creator, not us, who decides what that story is. As Rabbi Chanina, an ancient sage of the Mishnah, taught, “All is in the hands of heaven, except for the awe of heaven.”

Other sources:

Brachot 33b:

And Rabbi Ḥanina said: Everything is in the hands of Heaven, except for fear of Heaven. Man has free will to serve God or not.

Shemot 7:3:

But I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in Egypt

Rashi on Shemot 7:3:

AND I WILL ALLOW [PHARAOH’S HEART] TO HARDEN — Since he has wickedly resisted Me, and it is manifest to Me that the heathen nations find no spiritual satisfaction in setting their whole heart to return to Me penitently, it is better that his heart should be hardened in order that My signs may be multiplied against him so that ye may recognise My divine power. Such, indeed, is the method of the Holy One, blessed be He: He brings punishment upon the nations so that Israel may hear of it and fear Him.

Mishneh Torah – Repentance 6:3

And, it is possible that a man should commit either one grievous iniquity or a multitude of sins so that the Judge of Truth will decree against him that, whereas this sinner committed those sins of his own free will and consciously, repentance should be withheld from him altogether, and grant him no leave to repent, so that he might die and perish in the iniquity he committed.

Textual Questions:

- Has God ever intervened with any other character other than Pharaoh in order to alter their will?
- Why would God have created us with free will? He could have created us to be perfect like angels, and so why would he create something with the capacity for evil?

General Questions:

- Does God’s knowledge of what we are going to do negate our free will?
- Did the Jews at Har Sinai freely choose to come to God? Does God’s palpable presence impact on a person’s ability to have free will?
- How do we know that we are free? Are we able to break free of our nature? Are we able to undo the ideas instilled in us during our upbringing?
- What is the purpose of a Yetzer Hara? Are we free if every human has an internal will to do bad?

Personal Questions:

- Do you find Rashi or Mishneh Torah’s explanation of the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart more convincing?
- Do you like having free will? If you could opt out of having free will, would you?
- Do you think the world would be better or worse without free will?

Some Interactive Resources

Youtube: Rabbi Jonathan Sacks on Free will:

- Why did God give us free will? What does He gain from it? What do we gain from it?
- Does the idea of being fully free frighten you?

Youtube: Free will – Rabbi Simon Jacobson

- Would the existence of determinism mean that we are not responsible for our actions?
- Do animals have free will at all? Is it possible for an animal to transcend their nature? What differentiates us from animals?