



## FREE WILL, WITH GOD'S HELP

It is customary to conclude the reading of Eicha with a repetition of the second-to-last pasuk:

השיבנו ה' אליך ונשובה חדש ימינו כקדם.  
*Bring us back to you, Hashem, and we will return, renew our days as of old.*

**Eicha 5:21**

This is done in order not to finish the reading with harsh words such as the final pasuk of the megillah, but on a positive note of return to God.

We know this verse well, since it is recited, most notably, whenever we return the Torah to the Aron haKodesh. However, this familiarity should not blind us to the inherent problem contained within the pasuk: How could we ask God to return us to Him? Would that not be a violation of our free will? Shouldn't the initiative to return to God come from us? Why

is it considered praiseworthy to be returning to God if it is God who decided to bring us?

This pasuk in Eicha is not the only place where we encounter this problem. We say in the tefilla three times a day:

השיבנו אבינו לתורתך וקרבינו מלכנו  
לעבודתך והחזירנו בתשובה שלימה לפניך.  
*"Bring us back, our Father, to Your Torah, Draw us near, our King, to Your Service, and return us to You in complete repentance..."*

We ask Hashem to return us to the Torah and to His service. Isn't the decision to serve God in our hands? The rabbis teach us *hakol biydei Shamayim chutz miyiras Shamayim*. "All is in the Hands of heaven except for the fear of heaven." And Rambam (*Hilchos Teshuva* 5:3) calls the belief

in free will *ikar gadol hu v'amud HaTorah v'hamitzvah* — "a great principle and the pillar of the Torah and mitzvos." If that is the case, how do we ask God to return us? Does this not limit our free will?

Authorities of various times have faced this problem, and have suggested varying responses to the question.

Abudraham (in Seder Shacharis shel Chol) says that, indeed, we cannot ask God to initiate the teshuva process for us, since that is our responsibility alone. We can, however, ask to be assisted with arriving at *teshuva sheleima*, a full and complete repentance. This is because the Gemara promises *ba letaher mesayin oso*, "one who tries to be purified will be assisted [from heaven]" (*Yoma*

38b). Once we have begun the process, God will help us along. But repentance must start with the person who takes action and moves in the right direction. Without taking the first step of our own free will, God will not act to help. When we ask God to move us toward repentance, we mean to have Him help us toward a higher level than one we would have reached on our own.

Maharsha deals with this issue in three different places, two in *Berachos* and one in *Makkos*. In *Berachos* 10b, he famously comments on the story in the Gemara where Bruria corrects her husband Rabbi Meir when the latter prays for those troubling him to die. Instead, she suggests, *ba'i rachami aluyhu d'lehadru b'teshuva*, "Pray for them to repent." He did, the Gemara reports, and they repented.

Maharsha is not troubled by the fact that they would be assisted in deciding to repent. Indeed, he claims, one can ask for such assistance. Even though, "all is in the hands of heaven except for the fear of heaven," there is another principle, namely, *b'derech she'adam rotzeh leilech, bah molichin oso*, "a person is assisted to move in the direction that he chooses." Therefore, he has a right to request that help be forthcoming for repentance. The problem Maharsha has with the story of Bruria and Rabbi Meir is that someone *else* is requesting that help, and not the person himself. In this case, it is Rabbi Meir who is praying to God that the offenders repent.

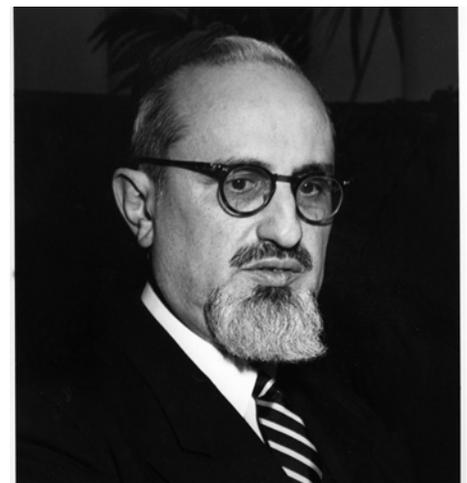
Interestingly, although Maharsha uses the principle of *b'derech she'adam rotzeh leilech, bah molichin oso* to solve the problem of asking assistance for repentance, in *Berachos* 10b, in *Makkos* 10b, where this statement originates, he explains it in a way that does seem

to indicate that this principle itself violates what we know about free will. How could man be guided in a certain direction? Is it not all supposed to be his will and decision? Maharsha answers, apparently picking up on the fact that the text does not say "God moves him in the direction that he chooses," but that "he is assisted," that what moves him in that direction are the angels that are created with every thought. When we consider doing something good or bad, an angel is created. It is the angel that helps us move in the direction we choose to go. In modern parlance we would say that our thoughts act as motivation to action in one direction or another. It is not God moving us because we have free will. We are deciding for ourselves what we wish to do, and our thoughts are pushing us forward.<sup>1</sup>

In *Berachos* 33b, Maharsha finds another solution to the problem of free will by explaining that when the Gemara says *hakol biydei Shamayim chutz miyiras Shamayim*, everything is in the hands of Heaven except for fear of Heaven, it refers only to what he calls *yirah hasichlis*, rational fear, to be distinguished from *yirah hativ'is*, natural fear. The latter is sometimes brought on by God who might choose to punish in such a way so as to motivate good behavior. Rational fear, which the Gemara is referring to, is completely man's choice, and it refers to deciding to live a God-fearing life.

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, *zt"l*, deals with the issue of free will and the seeming contradiction with requests of God to bring us to Him in the context of the Havinenu prayer, the abridged form of the Amidah. In *Ha'adam V'Olam*, pp. 92-94, he analyzes the words in this prayer, *umol Hashem Elokeinu es levavenu*, "...and

circumcise our hearts, Hashem, our God ...," a phrase borrowed from the verse in Sefer Devarim 30:6. These words are used as a substitute for the bracha of *Hashivenu Avinu L'Sorasecha*. According to Rav Soloveitchik, this change actually answers the question of how we could ask God to determine matters of *yiras Shamayim*. The word *mol*, circumcise, means to uncover, which the act of circumcision accomplishes, and as Rashi states clearly in Vayikra 19:23. The request to God is not to make our decisions for us, but to uncover and expose to us what we need in order to make good decisions for ourselves. We ask for an uncovering of the heart, that is to say, an understanding of what inhibits us from making the correct choices. Exposure to our inner selves will help us to use our free will wisely. We also beseech God to remove whatever stops us from understanding the lofty messages of the Torah. Our earthly desires and



We ask for an uncovering of the heart; exposure to our inner selves will help us to use our free will wisely.

shortsighted aspirations inhibit us from spiritual accomplishments. If only we could see beyond immediate comforts and luxuries, we would be open to higher messages. For this reason, Rav Soloveitchik explains, the Havinenu prayer uses a phrase different from what is found in the Amidah, circumcision of the heart, which contains an explanation of how we could ask for such things. We are merely asking God to move the distractions out of the way, uncover our hearts, so that we can make good decisions.<sup>2</sup>

*Chazon Ish* (Moed, Hashmatos no. 156 and Taharos, Hosafos 299a) offers a completely different solution to our problem. He says that asking God for assistance is actually an exercise of free will. It was free will that brought us to request what is good and proper. Once a person has made such a request, the action taken by God to help in returning to Him is attributed to the person who showed his desire for repentance by asking. The first step is to want it, and once God sees this by having received the request, it can be said that the one who requested it, is the one who took the action.<sup>3</sup>

Chasam Sofer takes a similar approach. In a comment on *Berachos* 33b, on the words *hakol biydei Shamayim chutz miyiras Shamayim*, he explains that reaching fear of Heaven is something that very few can do on their own. It is clear that we need assistance to succeed in this lofty goal. This lesson of Rabbi Chanina (who espouses this principle) teaches that we must *desire* to have *yiras Shamayim*, and then God steps in to help us achieve the fear of Heaven. The aspiration for *yiras Shamayim* is what God asks of us. Chasam Sofer sees this in the verse *mi yiten v'haya*

*levavam ze l'yirah osi*, "Who can make it so that their heart should remain in fear of Me..." (Devarim 5:26). If they *want* their heart to fear God, they have done what is expected of them, and God will do the rest.<sup>4</sup> Free will expresses itself in the desire for what is good. Chasam Sofer and Chazon Ish both see the early stages of asking for something, or even merely wanting it, to be sufficient for free will to have been exercised. At that point, when God steps in and brings the person the rest of the way, the success is attributed to the individual, accomplished through his free will.

Megillat Eicha concludes with a fervent prayer to God to return us to Him. God doing this for us does not violate our fundamental belief in free will for any or all of the reasons presented above.

The Kotzker Rebbe turns the issue on its head by claiming that *God Himself* has no free will in this matter. The Kotzker has an original interpretation of the Talmudic phrase: *hakol biydei Shamayim*, everything is in the hands of heaven. It is God's decision to grant, or not to, everything which you ask. *Chutz miyiras Shamayim* — except for the fear of Heaven. If you request fear of heaven, God, *k'viyachol*, has no choice — he *must* grant it.

Take full advantage, says the Kotzker Rebbe, ask God to grant you *yiras Shamayim* — you are guaranteed to come out ahead.

## Endnotes

1. Arizal, in *Shaar HaKavanot, Kavanas Ha'Amidah* no. 6, also alludes to the creation of "angels, lights, and defenders" which come about through the performance of mitzvot, when he raises the issue of free will in the bracha of *Al HaTzadikim*. In that part of the Amida we ask *v'sim chelkenu imahem*, "place

our portion with them (the righteous)." How can it be that we ask such a thing if being among the righteous is a matter of free will? Arizal explains that when one sins those angels which were created through mitzvot are withheld from the person, and are held by someone else for safekeeping. However, there are some people who may be reluctant to relinquish these defenders when the person who created these mitzvah angels repents. Therefore, we pray to place our portion (i.e. the angels which we created) with them (the very righteous who do not wish to benefit from others' angels and will return them to us when we are deserving). Clearly, this explanation solves the problem of free will since we are not asking God to do anything which should be our choosing. I thank Rabbi David Holzer and Rabbi Zecharia Holzer for sharing with me this source, referenced in a footnote in *The Rav Thinking Aloud*, Sefer Shemos, p.68.

2. The Rav's explanation brings to mind the commentary of Seforno on the Torah (*Shemos* 7:3) which deals with the well-known question of how God could harden the heart of Pharaoh and thus take away his free will. Seforno suggests that the normal reaction of someone who had undergone the plagues would be to immediately release the slaves. Therefore, hardening his heart was necessary in order to *restore* his free will. Similarly, the Rav here is saying that our request to God is to give us the opportunity to access our free will by removing obstacles we have in the way.

3. Chazon Ish uses this explanation to answer the question of Maharsha in *Berachos* 10b. Once we understand that God helping us to repent is not a diminution of free will if we have asked for His assistance, it is also reasonable that one Jew can ask for the Almighty's help for another Jew since we are all *k'ish echad*.

4. See Ramban for a very different understanding of the pasuk.