

CHABAD LUBAVITCH OF CHAUTAUQUA

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Maimonides on Ethics – Week 8 – 2021

1. **CHAPTER VIII:** IT is impossible for man to be born endowed by nature from his very birth with either virtue or vice, just as it is impossible that he should be born skilled by nature in any particular art. It is possible, however, that through natural causes he may from birth be so constituted as to be equipped for a particular virtue or vice, so that he will more easily practice it than any other...
2. I have entered into this subject so thou mayest not believe the absurd ideas of astrologers, who falsely assert that the constellation at the time of one's birth determines whether one is to be virtuous or vicious, the individual being thus necessarily compelled to follow out a certain line of conduct.
3. We, on the contrary, are convinced that our Torah agrees ...that man's conduct is entirely in his own hands, that no -compulsion is exerted, and that no external influence is brought to bear upon him that constrains him to be either virtuous or vicious, except inasmuch as, according to what we have said above, he may be by nature so constituted as to find it easy or hard, as the case may be, to do a certain thing; but that he must necessarily do or refrain from doing a certain thing is absolutely untrue.
4. Were a man compelled to act according to the dictates of predestination, then the commands and prohibitions of the Torah would become null and void, and the Torah would be completely false, since man would have no freedom of choice in what he does. Moreover, it would be useless, in fact absolutely in vain, for man to study, to instruct, or attempt to learn an art, as it would be entirely impossible for him, on account of the external force compelling him, according to the opinion of those who hold this view, to keep from doing a certain act, from gaining certain knowledge, or from acquiring a certain characteristic. Reward and punishment, too, would be pure injustice, both as regards man towards man, and as between G-d and man.
5. Suppose, under such conditions, that Simeon should kill Reuben. Why should the former be punished, seeing that he was constrained to do the killing, and Reuben was predestined to be slain? How could the Almighty, who is just and righteous, chastise Simeon for a deed which it was impossible for him to leave undone, and which, though he strove with all his might, he would be unable to avoid? If such were the true state of affairs, all precautionary measures, such as building houses, providing means of subsistence, fleeing when one fears danger, and so forth, would be absolutely useless, for that which is decreed beforehand must necessarily happen. This theory is, therefore, positively unsound, contrary to reason and common sense, subversive of the fundamental principles of religion, and attributes injustice to G-d (G-d forbid!)
6. The statement found in the sayings of the Rabbis, (Berachot 33b, Niddah 16b, Megillah 25a) "All is in the power of G-d except the fear of G-d" is, ...only natural phenomena which are not influenced by the will of man, as whether a person is tall or short, whether it is rainy or dry, whether the air is pure or impure, and all other such things that happen in the world, and which have no connection with man's conduct.
7. ...Since this is so, it behooves man to mourn and weep over the sins and the transgressions he has committed, as he has sinned of his own free will ...the remedy for this disease is in our own hands, for, as our misdeeds were the result of our own free will, we have, likewise, the power to repent of our evil deeds...
8. It now remains for us to explain another phase of this problem, which arises from the fact that there are several Scriptural passages in which some think they find proof that G-d preordains and forces man to disobedience... One of these is that in which G-d said to Abraham, (Genesis 15:13) "*and they (the Egyptians) will enslave them (the Israelites), and they will afflict them*". "Is it not evident", it is claimed, "that G-d decreed that the Egyptians should oppress the seed of Abraham? Then, why did He punish them, since, owing to divine predestination, it was unavoidably decreed that they should enslave the Israelites?"
9. The answer to this is as follows. Suppose G-d had said that of those who were to be born in the future, some were to be transgressors and others observers of the Torah, some pious and some wicked. Such would take place,

but it would by no means follow from this divine decree that a certain individual would necessarily have to do evil, or that another pious individual would be forced to do good. On the contrary, every evil-doer would become such of his own free will; if he preferred to be a righteous man, it would be in his power, and nothing could prevent him from becoming such. Likewise, if every righteous man preferred to do evil, nothing would hinder him, for G-d's decree was not pronounced against any certain individual, so that he might say, "It has already been decreed that I do this or that", but [these words] applied to the general [community], at the same time allowing every individual to retain his own free will, according to the very makeup of his nature. Consequently, every Egyptian who maltreated or oppressed the Israelites had it in his own power not to do them any injury unless he wanted to, for it was not ordained that any certain individual should harm them...

10. As regards, however, the words of G-d, (Exodus 14:4) "*and I will harden the heart of Pharaoh*", afterwards punishing him with death, there is much to be said... If Pharaoh and his counsellors had committed no other sin than that of not permitting Israel to depart, I admit that the matter would be open to great doubt, for G-d had prevented them from releasing Israel according to the words, (Exodus 10:1) "*For I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his servants*". After that, to demand of Pharaoh that he send them forth while he was forced to do the contrary, and then to punish him because he did not dismiss them, finally putting him and all his followers to death, would undoubtedly be unjust, and would completely contradict all that we have previously said. Such, however, was not the real state of affairs, for Pharaoh and his followers, *already* of their own free will, without any constraint whatever, had rebelled by oppressing the strangers who were in their midst, having tyrannized over them with great injustice, as Scripture plainly states, (Exodus 1:9-10) "*And he said unto his people, Behold, the people of the children of Israel is more numerous and mightier than we, come let us deal wisely with it*". This they did through the dictates of their own free will and the evil passions of their hearts, without any external constraint forcing them thereto.
11. The punishment which G-d then inflicted upon them was that He withheld from them the power of repentance, so that there should fall upon them that punishment which justice declared should be meted out to them. The fact that they were prevented from repenting manifested itself by Pharaoh's not dismissing them... G-d wished to punish him because of his previous oppression of Israel... It would have been impossible to have punished them, if they had repented; therefore repentance was withheld from them, and they continued to keep the children of Israel in bondage, as it says, (Exodus 9:15-16) "*For even now I have stretched out my hand, etc. . . . but for this cause have I allowed thee to remain*".
12. No one can find fault with us when we say that G-d at times punishes man by withholding repentance from him, thus not allowing him free will as regards repentance, for G-d (blessed be He) knows the sinners, and His wisdom and equity mete out their punishment. Sometimes, He punishes only in this world, sometimes only in the world to come, sometimes in both. Furthermore, His punishment in this world is varied, sometimes being bodily, sometimes financial, and sometimes both at once. Just as some of man's actions are diminished as a punishment for his own free will, as for instance a man's hand being prevented from working so that he can do nothing with it, as was the case of Jereboam, the son of Nebat (I Kings 13:4), or a man's eyes from seeing, as happened to the Sodomites who had assembled about Lot (Genesis 19:11), likewise does G-d withhold man's ability to use his free will in regard to repentance, so that it never at all occurs to him to repent, and he thus finally perishes in his wickedness. It is not necessary for us to know about G-d's wisdom so as to be able to ascertain why He inflicts precisely such punishment as He does and no other, just as little as we know why one species has a certain particular form and not another. It is sufficient for us to know the general principle, that (Deuteronomy 32:4) "*G-d is righteous in all His ways*," that He punishes the sinner according to his sin, and rewards the pious according to his righteousness.
13. If you should inquire why G-d repeatedly asked Pharaoh to release Israel which he was unable to do while he, in spite of the plagues which befell him, persisted in his rebellion and stubbornness, which very rebelliousness and stubbornness was his punishment and yet G-d would not in vain have asked him to do a thing which he could not do, then know that, this, too, was a part of G-d's wisdom, to teach Pharaoh that G-d can suspend man's freedom of will when it pleases Him to do so... Thus, a great wonder was revealed to the people, as it is said, (Exodus 9:16) "*In order that they may proclaim my name throughout the earth*", namely, that it is possible for G-d to punish man by depriving him of his free will respecting a certain deed, while he, though realizing it, is, however, unable to influence his soul, and return to his former state of freedom of the will...

14. There is, however, one thing more relating to this problem about which we must say a few words, in order to treat in a comprehensive manner, the subject-matter of this chapter. Although I had not intended at all to speak of it, necessity forces me to do so. This topic is the precognition of G-d, because it is with an argument based on this that our views are opposed by those who believe that man is predestined by G-d to do good or evil, and that man has no choice as to his conduct, since his choice is dependent upon G-d. The reason for their belief they base on the following statement. "Does G-d know or does He not know that a certain individual will be good or bad? If thou sayest 'He knows', then it necessarily follows that man is compelled to act as G-d knew beforehand he would act, otherwise G-d's knowledge would be imperfect. If thou sayest that G-d does not know in advance, then great absurdities and destructive religious theories will result."
15. Listen, therefore, to what I shall tell thee... that G-d (may He be blessed!) does not know by means of knowledge, and does not live by means of life, so that He and His knowledge may be considered two different things in the sense that this is true of man; for man is distinct from knowledge, and knowledge from man, in consequence of which they are two different things. If G-d knew by means of knowledge, He would necessarily be a plurality, and the primal essence would be composite, that is, consisting of G-d Himself, the knowledge by which He knows, the life by which He lives, the power by which He has strength, and similarly of all His attributes. I have only mentioned one argument, simple and easily understood by all, though there are strong and convincing arguments and proofs that solve this difficulty.
16. It is explained that G-d is identical with His attributes and His attributes with Him, so that it may be said that He is the knowledge, the knower, and the known, and that He is the life, the living, and the source of His own life, the same being true of His other attributes. This conception is very hard to grasp, and thou should not hope to thoroughly understand it by two or three lines in this treatise. You will only gain a several points of it.
17. Another accepted axiom of metaphysics is that human reason cannot fully conceive G-d in His true essence, because of the perfection of G-d's essence and the imperfection of our own reason, and because His essence is not due to causes through which it may be known. Furthermore, the inability of our reason to comprehend Him may be compared to the inability of our eyes to gaze at the sun, not because of the weakness of the sun's light, but because that light is more powerful than that which seeks to gaze into it. Much that has been said on this subject is self-evident truth. From what we have said, it has been demonstrated also that we cannot comprehend G-d's knowledge, that our minds cannot grasp it all, for He is His knowledge, and His knowledge is He. This is an especially striking idea, but those (who raise the question of G-d's knowledge of the future) fail to grasp it to their dying day. They are, it is true, aware that the divine essence, as it is, is incomprehensible, yet they strive to comprehend G-d's knowledge, so that they may know it, but this is, of course, impossible. If the human reason could grasp His knowledge, it would be able also to define His essence, since both are one and the same, as the perfect knowledge of G-d is the comprehension of Him as He is in His essence, which consists of His knowledge, His will, His life, and all His other majestic attributes. Thus, we have shown how utterly futile is the pretension to define His knowledge.
18. All that we can comprehend is that just as we know that G-d exists so are we cognizant of the fact that He knows. If we are asked, "What is the nature of G-d's knowledge?", we answer that we do not know any more than we know the nature of His true existence...
19. Reflect, then, upon all that we have said, namely, that man has control over his actions, that it is by his own determination that he does either the right or the wrong, without, in either case, being controlled by fate, and that, as a result of this divine commandment, teaching, preparation, reward, and punishment are proper. Of this there is absolutely no doubt. As regards, however, the character of G-d's knowledge, how He knows everything, this is, as we have explained, beyond the reach of human ken. This is all that we purposed saying in this chapter, and it is now time for us to bring our words to an end, and begin the interpretation of this treatise to which these eight chapters are an introduction.

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