

G-d and free will

by Rabbi Douglas Goldhamer

There is more than one way to look at it

Torah Portion: Bo Exodus 10:1-13:16

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak, affectionately known as the Berditchever, an *illuy* (genius) since childhood, studied *hasidut* under the Maggid of Mezritch and served as a leading rabbi in many cities culminating with his service as the rabbi of Berditchev. He was born in 1740 and entered the next life in 1810. He has inspired me and continues to inspire me as well as countless others by constantly defending the people Israel in front of G-d. He had the courage of Moses and the insight of Abraham and was constantly defending our people before G-d. His leading work, "Kedushat Levi," is an amazing compilation of Chasidic insights of the Scripture readings of the week.

Last week, in our Sunday afternoon Torah class, I was reminded again of Rabbi Levi's amazing insight into Scripture and his ability to inspire each of his readers to believe that the Scripture was written specifically for them. History teaches us that when the Baal Shem Tov preached, everyone who heard him thought that the Besht was speaking specifically to him; this was very similar to the Berditchever. When he wrote a commentary, you would think he was writing directly for you, clarifying a problem that has bothered you for some time.

In our Torah class, a student challenged me vigorously when I espoused the thinking that every person has free will, and it is this free will that G-d has bestowed upon us that distinguishes us from the angels. He said to me, "If, on the one hand, you teach us that every person has a sacred purpose, how can this thinking square off with the free will that G-d has given us? Aren't sacred free will and sacred purpose at loggerheads with one another? How can you claim that Judaism maintains free will when Judaism also boasts that each one of us has a purpose or several purposes to fulfill in our lifetime?"

I responded by saying that there is no monolithic Judaism; there are many Judaisms. The Judaism of Maimonides borrows the thinking of Aristotle, who teaches that G-d "is thought thinking itself." G-d does not get involved in the mundane affairs of the world or this would disallow for the perfection of G-d. If G-d responds to prayer, and changes His mind, then G-d is not perfect any more.

In order to keep the perfection of G-d consistent with his master's (Aristotle's) teaching, Maimonides resorts to his theory of angels, calling them *sichlaim nivdalim*, "separate intelligences." The angels are considered intelligences or thought forms, separate from one another. He probes this thinking to reconcile free will, prayer and purpose. Another student asked, "If G-d created a built-in mechanism within Pharaoh, which forced him to say 'no' to Moses, and led to the 10 plagues, how could Pharaoh's refusal to let the Israelites free be an expression of free will?"

Levi Yitzhak resolves the problem of free will when he articulates two points of view that G-d embraces to underline and emphasize G-d's free will and human free will in this week's Torah portion, Parshat Bo. Our text this week focuses on the plagues, particularly the plague of the death of the first-born, and how these miracles did not move the heart of Pharaoh.

In Parshat Bo, Levi Yitzhak offers an interpretation of the Scripture to teach that there are two ways from which we might come to our devotion to G-d. The text states, "And Moses said, 'thus says the Lord, around midnight, I will go out into the midst of the Egyptians'" (Exodus 11:4) Levi Yitzhak comments, "*Venireh ki yesh shenei bechinot ...* There are two perspectives from which we understand our devotion to the Creator. One comes from our seeing miracles and happenings where G-d changes the workings of nature constantly. When we see this power, we understand that G-d rules over all and all of G-d's creatures, and we have an obligation to serve Him in great awe.

"The second way is acceptance of what is true, "that G-d created everything by word of His mouth. Therefore G-d has the power to change everything as well. From this point of view, there is no significance to miracles, since it is no wonder that G-d can change nature at will. We understand clearly that the blessed Creator created all being and that 'whatever YHVH desires He does in heaven and on earth.' (Psalm 135:6) And with all that was created from them in every moment ... and so miracles are not wondrous at all since G-d created everything, it is within the strength of G-d to do with them as He will." This thinking is very much in line with the great medieval Islamic thinker Al-Ghazali, who teaches that G-d renews creation day and night, which is consistent with the liturgy in our traditional prayer book. G-d is not bound by determinism or *beshertism*. But He is moved by His own desire to recreate, working together with us. We are co-creators with G-d, and this wonderful commentary to our *parsha* this week by Levi Yitzhak

greatly inspired my class, who teaches whatever it is that G-d intends in any given time is what happens in our world right now.

Though our world, as Rabbi Abraham Heschel taught, is full of wonders, from moment to moment. Every instant teaches us and shows us the unfolding of G-d's love for us, as He constantly and consistently blesses us with free will. Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev was truly an *illuy*.

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