

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Toldot
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Parashat Toldot – Was Eisav destined to be wicked? Where was Eisav’s free will?

In this week’s Parasha of Toldot we read about Rivka’s pregnancy. Hashem blessed Yitzchak and Rivka with twins after twenty years of being barren. Yaakov would be righteous, he would carry on the tradition started by his grandfather Avraham and start the Jewish nation. Eisav would be wicked, and he would be excluded from the Jewish people. But if Eisav was destined to be wicked from the womb, where was his free will?

When we look at the story of Rivka’s pregnancy, it seems that Eisav was destined to be wicked.

Rashi¹ quotes the Midrash will tells us that when Rivka would pass by the entrance to a Torah academy of Shem and Ever, Yaakov would struggle to come out. And when she passed by the entrance of a temple of idolatry, Eisav would struggle to come out.

Rivka went to a prophet to find out what was going on, and Hashem told her through the prophet “Two nations are in your womb and two kingdoms will separate from within you, and one kingdom will become mightier than the other kingdom, and the elder will serve the younger”.

So it certainly seems as though their destinies were already sealed before birth! It sounds like Eisav had no chance and he was destined to be wicked. If he was destined to be wicked, then is it fair for him to be punished?

Free will is a fundamental principle of Judaism. If we perform good deeds we are rewarded, and the opposite applies if we perform bad deeds. This is the 11th of the Rambam’s principles of faith.² But how can that mesh with the fact that Hashem already knows what is going to happen? And if it is true that we are destined to behave in a certain way, then how is the concept of reward and punishment fair? This is very big question that has troubled mankind for many years. The Rambam describes the resolution to this question as follows: “Its measure is longer than the earth and broader than the sea”.³

We obviously cannot answer this question in a single sheet of A4 paper. But we can provide a few analogies which may help us to achieve some level of understanding as to how free will can co-exist with Hashem’s foreknowledge of the future. Each of these analogies have weaknesses, and they do not provide us with a perfect answer, but they will hopefully give us some insight into this conundrum can be resolved.⁴

Approach 1: The Baby and the power point

Imagine a baby crawling along the floor towards a power point. The mother is watching. The mother knows, beyond a shadow of doubt, that the baby will crawl towards the power point and try to stick his finger into the socket. Of course, the mother jumps into action and distracts the baby before he can get into trouble. Now, the baby had free will to continue towards the power point. But the mother also knows her baby very well and knows what decision he will make. Similarly, Hashem has granted us with free will, but He knows us better than we know ourselves, and He knows exactly what decisions we will make. But that knowledge does not detract from our free will.

Approach 2: The chess grandmaster

Imagine a game of chess between novice chess player and the chess grandmaster. The novice and the grandmaster start the game on equal footing. They have the same pieces on the board and for each move they

¹ Breishit 25:22 based on the Midrash Breishit Rabbah 63:6.

² See page 180 of the standard Ashkenaz Artscroll siddur.

³ Rambam, Hilchot Teshuva, Chapter 5, Halacha 5.

⁴ I heard this idea from various sources, most notably from R’ Dovid Tsap.

are free to choose whatever they like. But the novice doesn't stand a chance. The grandmaster thinks many moves into the future, and he understands all of the possible permutations of moves. No matter what the novice does, the chess grandmaster has it covered. Similarly, Hashem allows us to have free will to make whatever choices we like, but He sees and knows everything, and he can control the outcome to ensure that events fit in with His ultimate plan. Of course, Hashem might decide that someone deserves a different outcome based on a free-will choice that they made, but the decision is His alone, and He has ultimate control.

Approach 3: The recorded sports match

Imagine a sports fan who has to miss a match of his favourite team. He records the match to watch later that night and he makes sure not to find out the result so that he can enjoy the game as if it was live. But when the fan is watching the game, the result has already been determined. He could easily call a friend and ask for the final score. But did the players have free will while they played the game? Of course they did. Was the result pre-determined? Of course not. Similarly, from Hashem's perspective there is no past, present or future. Hashem already knows what choices we will make before we even made them. But that doesn't mean that we don't have free will at the time that we made the decision.

Though these analogies are far from perfect, hopefully they provided some insight into how we can reconcile free will with Divine foreknowledge.

But what does all of this mean for Eisav? Did he have free will to be righteous?⁵

The Rambam, in Chapter 1 of Hilchot De'ot explains that people are born with various character traits. Some are naturally angry, others are calm. Some are naturally prideful, others are humble. However, in Hilchot Teshuva, the Rambam states explicitly that Hashem has granted free will to all men. We can all choose to follow the path of good and be righteous, or the path of evil and be wicked. How can we reconcile this apparent contradiction?

Rav Zev Leff explains that we all have in-born character traits, but each of them are not inherently good or bad. It rather depends how we use those traits. All traits can be directed in a positive or negative direction. For example, a tendency towards bloodshed can be directed towards violence and murder, or towards being a shochet, mohel or surgeon. Even anger has its place, for example one may need to display anger if a child does something dangerous, or they can channel their anger towards righteous indignation against chillul Hashem.

It is true that some character traits are more conducive to righteous conduct, and some are more conducive to negative conduct. If someone is naturally calm, for example, there are more instances where this behaviour will be positive. However, Hashem judges each individual in relation to his nature. If a person naturally has a temper, then he will be judged less harshly if he loses his temper. Conversely, he will receive a greater reward if he is able to control his temper than a person who is calmer by nature.

Rav Leff explains that Yaakov had a *tendency* towards spirituality, which manifested itself when Rivka would pass a place of Torah study. Eisav had a *tendency* towards physicality which drew him after idol worship. However, Eisav had the ability to channel his drive towards physicality for the good. For instance, he could have devoted his physical abilities towards defeating idol worship. And conversely, Yaakov had the free will to abuse his traits and distort spiritual values.

However, that still leaves us with the question of the prophecy itself. If we take a close look at the prophecy that Rivka received, we will see that it is deliberately vague.⁶ Even though Eisav's descendants were destined to serve Yaakov's descendants, this does not necessarily preclude Eisav from joining the Jewish people. He had the free will to devote his energies to the good. But he chose evil, and he chose not to repent.

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember that all your character traits can be used for the good or the bad. Try to be aware of your character traits and how you are using them.
2. If you are struggling with a particular trait, remember that you will receive an even greater reward if you are able to overcome your natural tendencies.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁵ The following discussion is based on an essay by Rav Zev Leff (<https://aish.com/free-will-or-predestination/>)

⁶ This is more pronounced if one looks at the pasuk in the original lashon hakodesh.