

# Destiny or Free Will?

By Menachem Feldman

Does Judaism believe in destiny? Do we believe that G-d is in control of all that transpires in the universe, that every human being is playing a predetermined role in a vast Divine plan? Or, do we believe in the freedom of every human being to choose a path, and to experience the consequences of those decisions?

These two possibilities, destiny or free will, seem to be mutually exclusive. If we believe that everything is determined by G-d, seemingly we cannot also accept that a human being can be held accountable or rewarded for his or her actions. Yet Judaism teaches us that Divine destiny and free choice both exist, and are not mutually exclusive.

No biblical story expresses this lesson more powerfully than the story of Joseph and his brothers. Joseph dreamed that his brothers would bow to him. The brothers in turn viewed Joseph as a threat and planned to kill him. At the last moment, they decided to sell him as a slave. Many years later, Joseph became the viceroy of Egypt, and his brothers indeed bowed to him. Joseph was reunited with his brothers and sustained them during a terrible famine.

How should we view the actions of the brothers?

On the one hand, the brothers were certainly guilty of sin. After all, they conspired to kill Joseph, and they sold him as a slave. On the other hand, the selling of Joseph was part of the Divine plan for Joseph to achieve greatness and become the leader of the world's superpower. Were the brothers succumbing to sin, or were they pawns in the Divine plan that would ultimately save their entire family? Was this an act of sin or was it an act of redemption?

The Torah responds to the sale of Joseph by issuing two commandments. The first is the commandment to redeem the firstborn son,<sup>1</sup> and the second is the commandment to give a half shekel<sup>2</sup> once a year (every Jew would give a half shekel, which would go toward paying for the Temple's communal offerings). The Torah refers to the half shekel as an "atonement for the soul."

The Talmud explains the connection between these commandments and the sale of Joseph:

Rabbi Berechyah and Rabbi Levi say in the name of Rabbi Shimon Ben Lakish: "Because they sold the firstborn of Rachel for 20 pieces of silver, let each one redeem his firstborn with 20 pieces of silver."<sup>3</sup>

Rabbi Pinchas says in the name of Rabbi Levi: "Because they sold the firstborn of Rachel for 20 pieces of silver [20 *dinars*] and each one of the brothers received [a *tibbah*, which is] two *dinars* as his share of the proceeds, therefore let each one give for the shekel obligation [a *tibbah*, which is the value of] two *dinars*."<sup>4</sup>

The theme of each of these two commandments is completely different. The commandment to give a half shekel is about “atonement for the soul.” Atonement implies that there is a sin. The commandment of redeeming the firstborn—commemorating the saving of the Jewish firstborn children at the time of the exodus from Egypt—is a symbol of redemption. Despite the opposing themes, sin and redemption, both these commandments are associated with the sale of Joseph.

The Talmud is teaching us how to view the actions of Joseph’s brothers, as well as how to view the broader question of free choice versus Divine destiny. The Talmud is revealing how any given scenario has multiple layers of meaning, and can therefore be viewed from multiple perspectives. Free choice and Divine destiny operate simultaneously, and without negating the other.

If we look at the sale of Joseph from the perspective of the brothers, we see sin. We look at how much each brother profited from the sale—a half shekel—and we understand that the Torah’s commandment to give an annual gift of a half shekel is a reminder to correct and avoid the terrible mistake of the brothers.

If, however, we choose to look at the story from the Divine perspective, we understand that no human action can interfere with the Divine plan. While the brothers used their free choice to choose sin, G-d used the sale of Joseph as the conduit for Joseph’s eventual greatness. If we look at the big picture, if we don’t look at the sum that each brother profited by, but rather we look at the general story, at the “combined profit” from the sale of Joseph, we see a totally different story. We see a story of salvation. We then focus on the totality of the profit earned by the sale, which symbolizes the totality of the story from G-d’s perspective.

The lesson we learn from the story of the sale of Joseph is profound. A fellow human being can choose to harm us. We can even use our own free choice to harm ourselves. We can make a choice that will lead to failure, pain and tragedy. Yet, like Joseph, we must understand it all can be a blessing. We must remember that despite human choice, G-d’s plan is always at work, leading us toward redemption and healing. Where the human being chooses evil, G-d is planting seeds of redemption.<sup>5</sup>

#### FOOTNOTES

1. See [Redeeming the Firstborn](#).
2. See [Half Shekel](#).
3. Joseph was sold for 20 *dinars*, there are four *dinars* in a *sela*. The firstborn is redeemed by the father giving the priest five *sela*, the equivalent of the 20 *dinars* the brothers earned through the sale of Joseph.
4. Jerusalem Talmud, Shekalim, ch. 2, halachah 3.
5. Based on the teachings of the Rebbe, Likutei Sichot, vol. 20, Vayeshev.

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