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JUST SAY NO!

הכל בידי שמים חוץ מיראת שמים – All is in the hands of Heaven, except for the fear of Heaven

This famous principle, articulated by R Chanina in the *gemara*, is based on the *passuk* in this week's *parsha*, where Moshe relays the plea from Hashem to the people – “All I ask from you is to fear me”

In 1982, the phrase “Just Say No” first emerged when Nancy Reagan was visiting Longfellow Elementary School in Oakland, California. When asked by a schoolgirl what to do if she was offered drugs, the First Lady responded: “Just say no.” Just Say No club organisations within schools and school-run anti-drug programmes soon became common, in which young people were making pacts not to experiment with drugs.

This may sound pretty banal and uncontroversial, but the idea of placing responsibility and accountability squarely upon the person making the moral decision, irrespective of other conditioning factors, such as poverty, peer-pressure, socio-economic deprivation, weak character, etc, continues to offend the liberal mindset. The idea that we are responsible for our own actions is increasingly being challenged on many fronts¹. *The Guardian*² published an article containing the following quotes;

“It (Nancy Reagan’s ‘Just Say No’ campaign) spread fear and ignorance instead of information, placing all responsibility on the individual while denying them the tools they need to make key decisions. Unless we radically change course and acknowledge the realities of American drug use and its underlying socioeconomic factors, millions of kids like me will continue to grow up and say yes.”

The idea that we act as autonomous moral agents, that of *bechira* – free will, is arguably the most fundamental idea in Judaism. Absent that facility, and we are no different to animals, driven irredeemably by instinct, inclination and environment. We become victims, rather than perpetrators, blaming everyone but ourselves, and the consequence is a blame-free culture.

The Rambam identifies *bechira* as that which sets us apart, the marker which defines what it means to be human. However, fascinatingly, he builds the case in a two-step process.

¹ Witness the challenges to free will from the very respectable discipline of neuroscience (B Libet, S Harris, et al) to craft a scientific narrative for determinism.

² Tuesday March 8th 2016

In the beginning of the fifth *perek* of *Hilchos Teshuva*³, the Rambam identifies the uniqueness of Man with his ability to **discern** Good and Evil, **and** act freely upon (despite?) that realisation.

His prooftext, is a surprising one.

הן האדם היה כאחד ממנו לדעת טוב ורע

‘Now man has become like one of us, knowing good and bad’

The Rambam then proceeds to elaborate and explain the *possuk* to us, though, arguably, it is a straightforward statement, not requiring elucidation.

כלומר: הן מין זה של אדם היה יחיד בעולם ואין מין שני דומה לו בזה הענין, שיהא הוא מעצמו בדעתו ובמחשבתו ידע הטוב והרע ועושה כל מה שהוא חפץ, ואין מי שיעכב בידו מלעשות הטוב או הרע

That is as if saying: “Behold, this species, man, stands alone in the world, and there is no other kind like him, as regards this subject of being able of his own accord, by his reason and thought, to **know** the good and the evil, **and** to do whatever his **inclination** dictates him, with none to stay his hand from either doing good or evil;

The first observation, surely, is that the Rambam is identifying this as elementally human, this is unconnected with being Jewish! To be human is to have a G-d given intelligence, capable of correctly identifying good and evil, as well as having the ability to act autonomously. Furthermore, he uses no less than three separate nouns to stress Man’s ability to utilise his brain **independently** to determine what is good and what is evil - **מעצמו** **בדעתו** **ובמחשבתו**

After arguing passionately and unapologetically in the subsequent *halacha* against the fools who argue for what is known today as Determinism, ie the denial of free will, he then does an astonishing thing.

ודבר זה עיקר גדול הוא, והוא עמוד התורה והמצוה, שנאמר: "ראה נתתי לפניך היום את החיים", וכתוב: "ראה אנכי נתון לפניכם היום", כלומר שהרשות בידכם, וכל שיחפוץ האדם לעשות ממעשה בני האדם עושה - בין טובים בין רעים

“And, this matter is a great fundamental, the very pillar of the Torah and its precepts, even as it is said: “See, I have set before you this day, life and good, and death and evil” (Deut. 30.15), and it is, moreover, written: “Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and curse”

³ Why it isn’t in the *halacha* where arguably it ought to belong, is beyond the scope of this article

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(Ibid. 11.26). This is as if saying, the power is in your hand, and whatever human activity man may be inclined to carry on he has a free will to elect either good or evil”

A seemingly redundant *halacha* – he has already established the axiom of free will, and evidenced it from the *passuk* in Bereshis. What purpose is served by repeating it, and offering another *passuk* as a source?

The answer, I suggest, is that there are two layers to Free Will. The first is universal, and integral to the uniqueness of the **צלם אלוקים**, and is entirely unconnected to being Jewish. To be Human is to have the basic ability to recognise Good and Evil (albeit in its most blatant forms), to give expression to that Divine component, the brain, and, ultimately, to bow to it, and heed its call.

Hence, the pagan societies of the generation of the *maful* were held accountable for theft (despite not being explicitly commanded)⁴, Sodom for their institutionalised indifference to *tzedoko* and social justice, and one after another, they failed to live up to being human, and were thus rejected and spurned, unworthy of the next stage in the development of Humanity, which was the revelation at Sinai and direct communication from Hashem in the form of the Torah.

This **process** is being emphasised by the Rambam – the crux of the idea being that it is utterly impossible to progress to stage two, if one has not first acknowledged and mastered the art of being human in its fullest and truest sense⁵.

The depth of Hashem’s plea to us, is now clear. I run the world, I am in charge of absolutely everything, except for one tiny, but crucial dimension, where you are like Me – I endowed you with a *tzelem Elokim*, the ability to think, and understand what is right and wrong. Additionally, you have a *neshama*, capable of connecting to My Torah.

The only area that I have relinquished to you, is the arena of moral choices. To express humility⁶ and Fear of Me, to choose *autonomously* to submit and yield to My wishes.

Paradoxically, choosing not to do, is the most exalted and majestic form of self-expression.

⁴ עיין רמב"ן בראשית ו' י"ג, ו' ב', ר' בחיי בראשית י"ח כ', חזקוני בראשית ז' כ"א, הקדמת ר' נסים גאון לתלמוד בבלי, שערי תשובה ג' ס"ו (נע"ע משך חכמה ויקרא ו' כ"ג)

⁵ עיין בהרחבה בדעת חכמה ומוסר ח"א מאמרים ה' - י' בדברים נפלאים עקב ענוה יראת השם 6

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