

Title: Purim: An Understanding of Free Will

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Age Group: 11-14, 14-16

Format: Lesson Plan

Categories/Topics: Purim

Description: The aim of this lesson is to analyze the text and see what question was troubling the Rabbis and how they solved it. What can we learn from this text and how does it alter our appreciation of the festival of Purim?

Trigger

Ask the students how they would judge the following scenario:

Barry and Dave are in business together. However, Barry wants to trick Dave into giving up some of his share of the company to Barry. Barry draws up a contract and tells Dave to sign it. Dave refuses to sign the document. Barry then takes out a knife and again asks Dave to sign the document. Dave, knowing Barry's history of dangerous physical behavior, signs the contract. A week later, Dave regrets his actions and wants to challenge the validity of the contract which he signed. Barry rejects this and says that the contract is legally binding.

What do you think?

Is the contract legally binding?

How would you judge this case?

Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 88a

(שמות יט יז) [ויוצא משה את העם לקראת האלהים מן המחנה] ויתיצבו בתחתית ההר; אמר רב אבדימי בר חמא בר חסא מלמד שכפה הקב"ה עליהם את ההר כגיגית, ואמר להם: אם אתם מקבלים התורה – מוטב, ואם לאו – שם תהא קבורתכם.

אמר רב אחא בר יעקב: מכאן מודעא רבה לאורייתא

אמר רבא: אף על פי כן הדור קבלוה בימי אחשורוש, דכתיב: **(אסתר ט כז)** קימו וקבלו היהודים [עליהם ועל זרעם ועל כל הנלוים עליהם ולא יעבור להיות עשים את שני הימים האלה ככתבם וכזמנם בכל שנה ושנה] – קיימו מה שקיבלו כבר.

They stood at the foot of the mountain (Exodus 19:17) -- Rav Avdimi bar Chama bar Chasa said: This teaches that the Holy One Blessed is He covered them with the mountain as though it were an upturned cask, and said to them: "If you accept the Torah, fine. But if not, your burial will be there!" Rav Acha bar Yakov said: This is a great refutation against the Torah." Rava said, "Nevertheless, they accepted the Torah again in the days of Achashverosh, as it says *The Jews established and accepted* (Esther 9:27). That is to say, they established [in the days of Achashverosh] that which they had already accepted [in the days of Moses]

Introduction: Clarifying the problem!

Structure of the text:

At first glance, this is seemingly a very problematic text.

According to the view of Rav Avdimi bar Chama bar Chasa, God *forced* the Children of Israel to accept the Torah.

However, Rava disagrees and points out that the children of Israel reaccepted the Torah at the time of the Purim story.

A few general questions to open with -

1. What is the "refutation against the Torah" as quoted by Rav Acha?
2. Why is it important that the Jews willingly accept the Torah?
3. What is the significance of the reacceptance occurring on Purim?

In order to understand this text, we need to understand the different stages and development of the Jewish people, from their early years at Mount Sinai to being in a state of exile, during the Purim story.

We can divide the text into two parts -

Part 1. Mount Sinai – what does it mean that the Jewish people were forced to accept the Torah on Mount Sinai, and what ramifications does it have.

Part 2. Purim – what occurred on Purim that led the people to accept the Torah again, this time free from any external pressure or force?

(It is interesting to note that the Talmud says, in the days of Achashverosh, and not, as we might have expected, in the days of Mordechai or Esther)

If we take this text at face value, we are left with the conclusion that God forced the children of Israel to accept His Torah, and therefore they are subsequently not obliged to keep the Torah and are not bound by the commandments contained within.

Rava, however, argues with that position and states, that we do still have an obligation to adhere to the Torah and its laws, as the Jewish people did in fact reaffirm at a later date their allegiance to the Torah – during the time of Achashverosh.

Rava bases his argument on a verse in Megilat Esther (9:27) which reads,

"the Jews upheld and accepted upon themselves to establish the custom that they and their descendants and all who join them should without fail observe these two days every year, in the way prescribed and at the time appointed."

The phrase, "upheld and accepted" should really be written the other way around. In order to uphold something it must first be accepted. The verse reverses the order and has the Jews first upholding and only afterwards accepting. This, Rava explains, does not refer to the Jewish People's acceptance of the laws and customs of the Purim festival, but rather it refers to another acceptance (or reacceptance) of the Torah.

A closer look at the text:

What does it mean that God held a mountain over their heads?

Is this to be taken literally?

According to some, yes, although such an event should have warranted an explicit mention in the Torah, as opposed to just alluding to it.

There is another way to understand this statement. The children of Israel were not physically forced to accept the Torah, but rather they had no choice in so far as they were overwhelmed into accepting it. They had just witnessed miracle after miracle, plague after plague, the suspension of nature time after time, that they were so 'bowled over' that they had no real choice but to accept whatever God was asking from them. The fact that God appeared and spoke to them left the children of Israel with little room to reject the Torah.

So, the Jewish people were, in a way, forced to accept the Torah. It was not under any physical duress, but rather out of any other realistic alternative.

Although this explanation helps us to understand the manner in which the people were 'forced' to accept the Torah (i.e. not to be taken literally)— does it alter our original question of are we obligated to keep the Torah and its laws?

The answer is no – we are seemingly not under any obligation to keep the laws – as the Torah was accepted under duress. This theological problematic conclusion is what caused the Rabbis the need to find another time in history where the people accepted the Torah voluntarily, without any form of coercion.

By doing so, we can then connect the two time periods together (due to their common denominator) and then look back and say that the whole period, from the time of giving the Torah, through Purim, and onwards and into the future can all be grouped together as if the Torah had always been accepted free from coercion. Thus ensuring that our 'contract' with God remains valid, thus obligating us in the commandments.

Analysis:

Why was the Torah given in this two staged approach?

What was the need for the children of Israel to accept and then reaccept the Torah?

Why was there a need to accept the Torah under threat at the beginning, and then only later – accept it free from coercion?

The development of free will

Questions

1. What does free will mean?
2. How can one teach the concept of free will?
3. How can one internalize free will?

We need to remember that at the time of Mount Sinai and the giving of the Torah, the Jewish people were still very 'newborn', the nation was only a couple of weeks old.

To understand why the Torah had to have been given initially by force, we need to see the Jewish nation as an individual growing emotionally until he reaches full maturity. We need to examine the process of education and how it works.

The Jewish people were born at the exodus of Egypt. Their forty year wanderings in the wilderness can be compared to children being brought up by their parents. God 'fed' His children (manna) as a parent feeds their children. The children constantly complained during the 40 years, and each time they, literally, cried, God came and answered their every need. It was precisely during this stage in their development – childhood – that God gave them the Torah.

When children are developing, they need clear definitions and boundaries - what is appropriate behavior, what is acceptable, what is right and what is wrong, they need to be taught morals and ethics.

Children are not able to choose for themselves, at this early stage, what is right and good. Their choices will be based on superficial qualities – what looks good or feels good. We cannot rely on children to know what is best. They are unable to identify with things beyond themselves and their immediate world.

Only when one matures, and passes through the various stages of emotional development, can one make choices of free will – that are beyond themselves and their world.

Therefore, just as children need to be forced to accept a system of morals and beliefs based on their parents and teachers, so too the Jewish people had to be forced to accept the word of God and His Laws.

At a later stage, when one matures one then becomes responsible for one's own actions. The Jewish people reached this level of maturity, "in the days of Achashverosh".

A test of a great and successful teacher or parent – is not when the child is still at school, and under their direct influence, but whether, many years later and the child is now able to make up their own mind and choices, whether they still continue in the path of their teachers.

If they continue to act in the manner that we taught them, we know that our educational efforts have been successful, and we reap the rewards.

This is therefore true concerning the children of Israel. God took us out of Egypt and taught us the Torah and its underlying concepts. We needed to be forced to accept the Torah, otherwise, we would probably not have done so. But God did not want us to remain at that level of maturity, God wanted us to arrive at a state where we were capable of making our own decisions and arrive at an independent acceptance of the Torah.

How do we know that the Jewish People reached this maturity level during the time of Esther and Mordechai?

The book of Esther is the last book, historically, of the Tenach.

The book of Esther is the only book in the whole of the Tenach where God's name does not appear.

It was during the period leading up to the story of Esther that prophecy ceased.

It was during this time, that God ceased His open relationship with the Jewish People and hid His face from the world. There were to be no more open miracles. The Jewish people had to assume responsibility for themselves.

It would be very easy to suggest that God was absent from the story of Purim, and that the salvation was brought by the people themselves.

During the Purim story, God, stepped back and allowed the people independence for the first time since they became a nation at the foot of Mount Sinai (1000 years earlier).

The future of the Jewish people hung in the balance – do they decide to reject the new invisible God or do they reaffirm their commitment to the Torah and its laws.

This change in relationship does not mean that God is out of the picture altogether. Rather He is behind the scenes. The roles are reversed. It is now the Jewish people that need to take center stage and help to solve their own problems independently and with initiative.

The message of the Book of Esther is the combination of human effort coupled with faith in Gods support.

Conclusion:

- Free will is a fundamental principle of Judaism.
- Free will needs to be learnt and achieved through maturity and emotional development.
- Free will of a child – without proper education and inculcation will lead to selfish and disastrous results.
- Free will is achieved if one follows the stages of – acceptance of authority; education of values; responsibility and maturity.