



by Rabbi Dr Raymond Apple z"l

R'EI

Free Choice

The gift of free will with which the sidra opens sounds so wonderful: "everything is up to you", it proclaims.

"You have two choices, life and death, blessing and curse - the choice is yours!"

If only it worked like that.

We do not ask to be born, nor do we generally have control over our death. These are not matters of choice at all. They are imposed upon us.

Other things are foisted upon us too - our genetic inheritance and often our cultural milieu too.

We almost feel like echoing Omar Khayyam: "The moving finger writes - and having writ moved on".

Is this free will concept some cruel joke?

Is it that we have free will in theory but no free will in actual fact?

That cannot be what the Torah has in mind.

The theologians offer countless answers. The most straightforward is probably that of Rambam in the Eight Chapters on Ethics.

He says that physical facts like when we are born and whether we will be tall or short are beyond our control.

What is, however, up to us is our moral life. God determines whether we will be tall; we decide whether we will be good.

The quantity of our life is up to God: its quality is up to us.

Clearing Out the Sanctuary

Chapter 12 of D'varim tells us to clear out the sites where idolaters worshipped their gods.

We also have to cut down the graven images of their gods and destroy their names... but the chapter adds, "You shall not do so to the Lord your God" (D'varim 12:1-4).

Rashi explains this proviso as a prohibition of destroying the Name of God or removing a stone from the altar or the forecourt.

The circumstances of modern Jewish life give this Rashi a special pertinence.

So often it happened that in the interests of appearing "with it" we

allow the name of God to be pushed into a back corner of the synagogue.

"Come to shule to meet your friends", we tell people - but what we prefer not to say too loudly is, "Come to shule to meet your God!"

We make it easier for people by downgrading the cornerstones of the Jewish sanctuary - "Don't worry too much about being kosher... in food, in deed, in business, in public life, in human relationships!"

We should be making more demands, setting some standards, insisting on criteria.

By cheapening, trivialising and vulgarising Jewish life we give away our dignity and sell our heritage for a mass of pottage. -OZ

Y'HI ZICHRO BARUCH