

What Jews Believe

Lesson Five: Free Choice

Text 1

...The Lord said to Himself, "I will no longer curse the earth because of man, for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth..."

(Genesis 8:21)

Text 2

Behold, I have set before you today life and good, and death and evil... I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. You shall choose life, so that you and your children will live.

(Deuteronomy 30:15-19)

Text 3

Everything is in the hands of heaven except for a person's awe of heaven.

(Talmud, Berachot 33b)

Text 4

Then Joseph said to his brothers..."I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. But now do not be sad, and let it not trouble you that you sold me here, for it was to preserve life that God sent me before you.

(Genesis 45:4-5)

You did not send me here, God did, and made me an adviser to Pharaoh, a lord over all his household, and a ruler over the entire land of Egypt.

(Genesis 45:8)

Am I in G-d's place [to judge you?] Indeed, you intended evil against me, [but] G-d designed it for good...

(Genesis 50:29-20)

Text 5

...Observe the commandments of the Lord, your G-d, and go in His ways.

(Deuteronomy 28:9)

Text 6

We are commanded to emulate G-d, blessed be He, to the best of our ability. The source of this commandment is G-d's statement, "And you shall go in His ways."

(Maimonides, Book of Commandments)

Text 7

One should be similar to G-d; just as He is compassionate and merciful so should you be.

(Talmud, Shabbat 133b)

Questions for Discussion

1. What is the purpose for free choice? How is it part of G-d's plan?
2. To what extent do our choices really determine outcomes? Is there a difference between moral decisions and other decisions?
3. What if someone intends to do evil but their actions fail? Is this any more or less of a choice than if their plan succeeds? Explain.