

Does G-d Have a Plan for the World?

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We tend to think and hope that what we plan for our lives, whether day to day, or over the long haul, will come to fruition exactly how we envision it. But somehow it never turns out that way. No matter how much time we spend in planning or how detailed our plans are, the outcome is never exactly according to our vision. Why? Some say, "Life happens" or "Circumstances beyond our control prevented certain details from occurring." Does Judaism believe that G-d steps in and has His own agenda that "interferes" with ours? Do Jews believe G-d has His own plan for them, irrespective of what "we" want? Does G-d plan world events? If Judaism also believes in free will, then how can G-d have a plan that interferes with our individual free will desires, our futures? This chapter will try to answer these questions and try to explore the normative view of Judaism on these issues.

G-D HAS A PLAN FOR US

Judaism believes G-d indeed has a plan for the world and for us. King Solomon already told us that man devises many plans, but only the plan of G-d will come to fruition.¹ There is a Yiddish expression that "Man plans but G-d laughs," implying that Jews think they are in control of their lives, but in reality that is not correct. Especially in the 21st century, when it seems that humans can control their environment more and better than ever before, the danger exists that man believes he is in total control of what will happen to him in the future. It is true that the Covid-19 virus helped many people realize that they are not in total control and that their lives can be changed in an instant. But as people adjusted to their situations and as time passed, many people forgot this crucial lesson of life. A simple reading of the Torah narrative shows that G-d plans events many years or even centuries in advance.

The Almighty already informs the very first Jew, Abraham, of G-d's plan to enslave his descendants for 400 years, punish their Egyptian oppressors, and then have them emerge as a free nation of G-d returning to the Land of Israel.² This is a careful design that occurred precisely as G-d had informed Abraham. G-d repeats this specific plan to the Jewish people themselves while they were enslaved.³ G-d even reminds the Jewish people about that plan after it occurred, when He spoke to them directly on Mount Sinai, and gave them the Ten Commandments. G-d repeated to the Jewish people that it was He and His plan all along Who freed them from Egypt, so they should not forget this.⁴ In His first encounter with Moses at the burning bush, G-d informs him that He will bring the Jews to this very place, Mt. Sinai, to give them the Torah there.⁵ The Torah is full of G-d's design of events and predictions for the future of the Jewish people and for the world. Later, through the prophets, G-d maps out future developments, and His plans to punish the people for their sins, and eventually destroy the Temple because of their iniquities. Every aspect of G-d's predicted course of events became a reality.

Even after the written Torah and Jewish Scripture was completed, events that later occurred which are ostensibly devoid of G-d's direct involvement, such as the war between the Syrian Greeks and the Maccabees or the story of Purim, which on the surface seem like a series of coincidences (with G-d's name not even mentioned in the Book of Esther). And yet, the Rabbis understood the Maccabean war and the entire story in Persia (with Haman) as part of G-d's plan all along. This is evident in reading the words

¹ Proverbs 19:21

² Genesis 15:13-16

³ Exodus 6:6-7

⁴ Exodus 20:2

⁵ Exodus 3:12 and Rashi commentary

they composed to thank G-d for the miracles of Chanukah and Purim, recited on those holidays in Jewish prayer.⁶ King David reminds us that, unlike some nations that believe G-d created the world and then retreated from it, the Jewish people believe in a G-d that is totally involved in the world and in people's lives "down here," and that He plans events that will take place.⁷ Thus, occurrences in Jewish history are clearly orchestrated by G-d and arranged down to the last detail. All these plans show the "big picture," involving nations and the Jewish people as a whole. But what about individuals? Does G-d make a specific plan for each of us?" Does He determine what will happen to us, and how our lives will turn out?

G-D INDEED HAS A PLAN FOR EACH OF US

Numerous Talmudic statements make it clear that G-d not only cares about each of us and knows what is in our hearts, but He has a plan for each person. Before we are born, the person we will marry is already set up for us.⁸ The amount we will earn each year (with a few notable exceptions) is already pre-determined and planned by G-d each Rosh Hashana.⁹ If this is the case, then do we have any say in any aspect of our lives? How can there be free will? Don't we control our moral decisions? If not, then are not we mere robots doing G-d's will? How does it work?

It is true that G-d plans many things for us. But unlike G-d's design for the events of a nation, when it comes to the individual, there is one important and crucial distinction, as demonstrated by a passage in the Talmud Nidah.¹⁰ There it states that before we are born G-d decides how strong or weak we will be, how intelligent or dull we will be, how rich or poor we will be. But at the same time, it also states that it is we who make all decisions about right and wrong, good, and evil in our lives. Thus, G-d sets up all the circumstances in our lives, but we decide how to react to those circumstances. G-d never plans how kind or how cruel we will be, how angry or gentle we will act, even if our genes may naturally tend to lead us in one direction or another. The philosopher Voltaire may have summed up this Jewish attitude best when he wrote "Each player must accept the cards life deals him or her. But once they are in hand, he or she alone must decide how to play the cards to win the game." Although there is a general plan by G-d for events in the world, each person decides how he or she will act in any given moral situation. Modern science has actually proved this to be the case. There have been several studies of identical twins who were separated at birth, with identical DNA and genes. In analyzing the life of each twin, there are many uncanny similarities between these two individuals who grew up separately and who never met until much later in life -- e.g., their likes and dislikes in food, movies and women, their hobbies, the way they dress, etc. But there is no correlation whatsoever between how they behave morally and how they turn out as individuals. Their moral characters are usually very distinct.¹¹

Thus, G-d sets up situations in life for us to react to and decide how to act. How we decide to behave in each moral situation is up to us. Therefore, we do have a say in what happens to us. That is how free will is maintained. But how does this mechanism work, exactly?

HOW G-D'S PLAN CAN BE MAINTAINED ALONG WITH OUR FREE WILL

G-d wants certain specific events to take place, with a clear goal. But how that goal is achieved and becomes a reality can come through numerous avenues. This idea is expressed in one crucial verse in Scripture. G-d desires to save the Jews in Persia from the evil decree of Haman. Through natural events, G-d sets it up that Esther was appointed queen and, therefore, had the potential to be a person who could change Jewish history. This came about when Mordechai asked her to go to King Achashverosh (not her regular time to do so) and plead for the Jewish people. At this point, she would risk possible

⁶ Al Hanisim prayer recited on Purim in the Amidah and Grace After Meals

⁷ Psalms 113:4-6 and Malbim commentary

⁸ Sotah 2a

⁹ Beitza 16a

¹⁰ Nidah 16a

¹¹ Nancy Segal, "Entwined Lives: Twins and What They Tell Us About Human Behavior" (NY: Dutton, 1999), "Born Together-Reared Apart: The Landmark Minnesota Twin Study," (Harvard University Press, June 2012)

punishment and even death for approaching the king, and she initially refuses for this very reason. It is then that Mordechai reveals how G-d works in the world. He says¹² that you, Esther, have free will to decide to risk your life and save the Jewish people or not. If you refuse, G-d will find another way for the Jewish people to be saved. But you and your family will bear responsibility (for not using this once in a lifetime opportunity) and will be lost. Then Mordechai postulates that the entire reason Esther was chosen queen was for this one moment in history. Therefore, we can surmise from Mordechai's analysis, that G-d has a plan for the Jewish people and for each of us. G-d also sets up many moral situations for us to decide whether to implement His plan. If we decide to act immorally, we will receive punishment for that decision, and G-d will achieve His plan through someone else. If we decide to do the moral thing, then we will be rewarded, and G-d's plan -- whether on the macro or micro level -- will be implemented.

This same idea can be seen through another prophet, Jonah. G-d wanted Jonah to rebuke the city-state of Ninveh to allow them the possibility to repent and avoid punishment for their sins. Jonah did not want to listen to G-d and help this non-Jewish enemy of the Jewish people. So, he ran away, exercising his free will and immoral choice. G-d caused the storm to come and threaten the lives of all the passengers who were on the boat with Jonah, who understood that this was a punishment for his actions. He asked the sailors to throw him off the boat so that only he would die, but, instead, a large fish swallowed him. After that incident, G-d again gave Jonah another opportunity to speak to the sinners of Ninveh. After realizing all that had happened to him because of his decisions and their implications, this time Jonah chose to go to Ninveh. The people of Ninveh repented (out of their own free will) and were not punished as a result.¹³ If Jonah had refused that second time, then G-d would have found another way and another prophet to speak to the sinners of Ninveh. That is how G-d implements His plan in the world without compromising our free will.

There is a story in the Talmud that demonstrates the same principle.¹⁴ The Gemara (with the explanation of Rashi) describes a case in Lod, where the daughter of the king Trajan was found murdered. Some people immediately (and falsely) accused the Jews of the crime, and the king believed them. He ordered all the Jews in the area to be killed. In order to save the rest of the Jews, two brothers named Pappus and Lulianus, who were innocent, came forward and said they had committed the crime. The king accepted their story, and then killed only them. Rashi says of these two (who certainly did not commit the crime but offered to die in order to save every other Jew in the area) that there is no one else in the Garden of Eden who could compare to their high level.

When the evil Trajan wanted to kill Pappus and his brother Lulianus, he said to them, "Your Jewish G-d should save you as He has saved others miraculously in the past." When the brothers said they were not worthy of being saved by miracle, Lulianus informed King Trajan that if he killed them, Trajan would be punished for his immoral act and must answer to G-d for his evil free will actions. However, he added, if Trajan chose not to kill them -- and yet he and his brother were supposed to be killed for something they may have done in the past -- then G-d would find another way for them to be killed, since G-d has many agents, including lions and tigers.

Thus, we again see that each of our free will actions may or may not be part of G-d's plan, but, nevertheless, we must answer for each of our moral decisions. And if G-d's plan will not be carried out in one manner, it will ultimately be fulfilled through another's choice or in a different manner. Thus, the evil Nebuchadnezzar, who destroyed the First Temple, made a free will decision to do so, and was punished for his actions, even though G-d had predicted the Temple's destruction many years before and it was part of His plan. If Nebuchadnezzar had decided not to destroy the Temple, it would have been destroyed in another manner. So, too, in 1989, when Mikhail Gorbachev decided to break up the Soviet Union and

¹² Esther 4:13-14

¹³ Jonah 1:1-4, 2:1-2, 3:1-5

¹⁴ Taanit 18b

allow Soviet Jews to emigrate and all those who stayed to practice their Judaism freely, he will be rewarded for his free will decision to do so. But if he had not decided to do so, G-d's plan to free the Soviet Jews would have happened through someone else.

CAN WE KNOW G-D'S PLAN FOR US AND FOR WORLD EVENTS?

Since the details of G-d's plan were often conveyed by the prophets in the past but there is no prophecy today, we should surmise that we cannot possibly know G-d's plan in the world, neither for large events nor events in our individual lives. And we do not have the prophets or Rabbis today to interpret G-d's plan before it happens or even as it is happening. Yet, the Torah alludes to a method by which we can see G-d's plan. When Moses asked to see G-d' honor,¹⁵ he was actually asking for an explanation how G-d works in the world, i.e., G-d's plan. G-d answered that a human being cannot see "My front, but I will pass by Moses while he is in the cleft of the rock, and you will see G-d from behind." Since G-d has no actual front and back and because He has no physical form, numerous commentaries¹⁶ have understood this verse to signify that a human being cannot understand G-d's plan while it is actually occurring. But if one looks back after an event has occurred -- i.e., in retrospect -- then it is sometimes possible to understand how G-d worked in the world and the design of how events unfolded and why, involving both world events and events in our individual lives.

Joseph taught this principle to his brothers.¹⁷ The brothers believed that they had freely decided to sell their brother Joseph to Egypt, an immoral act, which they indeed committed. And they were punished for this terrible act.¹⁸ However, after Joseph revealed himself to his brothers in Egypt, he explained to them that their selling him was all part of G-d's plan, in order to get the family to Egypt and make sure they would not starve during the famine. By letting Joseph rise to become viceroy to Pharaoh, Joseph would ensure that the entire Jewish family would be bereft of nourishment and would always be provided for.

Sometimes you do not have to be a Moses, a Joseph, a prophet or even a Rabbi to see G-d's plan in retrospect. Two stories in the Talmud demonstrate this. Rabbi Akiva was a person who always said and believed that everything that happened in life for the good¹⁹-- i.e., G-d had a plan and would always benefit people, even if people could not see it. One day Rabbi Akiva was travelling far from home and attempted to rent a room in an inn for the evening in a foreign city, but there was absolutely no room anywhere in the town. Despite this unexpected setback, he repeated his optimistic mantra of "Everything must be for the good," even though he was forced to sleep in the field far outside town, along with his donkey, chicken, and torch. A strong wind came and extinguished the torch, and Rabbi Akiva was forced to sleep in utter darkness. A wolf then ate his chicken, and a lion devoured his donkey. These terrible events -- no light, no food, and no transportation -- would depress almost anyone, and most people would be angry, questioning why G-d was "doing this to him." Despite these seemingly catastrophic events, Rabbi Akiva was sure everything that happened was for the good. The next day, Rabbi Akiva was able to see what had transpired the night before in the town. Soldiers had ransacked the entire city and killed all its townspeople. If the soldiers had seen Rabbi Akiva and his light, or had heard his chicken or donkey, he would have been a dead man. From this event, it is easy to see G-d's plan (Rabbi Akiva merited to realize it the very next day), and how everything that had happened to harm Rabbi Akiva indeed occurred for his good. Not all of us are as fortunate to understand how G-d benefits us.

¹⁵ Exodus 33:18-23

¹⁶ Sefer Yismach Moshe, Kedoshim 33a, Sefer Mai HaShilo-ach, Parshat Ki Tisa

¹⁷ Genesis 45:4-8

¹⁸ Midrash Mishlei 1:19

¹⁹ Berachot 60b

There is a similar Talmudic story that sometimes happens today, quite dramatically as well, concerning people who miss a plane or a train. Rabbi Yosef²⁰ spoke of an incident involving two men who were about to start off for an important business trip on a boat. One man stubbed his toe so badly that he could not make the trip and missed the boat. He was terribly upset and started cursing his plight asking, “Why did G-d do this to him.” Then he heard that this boat eventually sank and everyone on board drowned. He then started thanking and praising G-d, understanding G-d’s plan for him in retrospect, which saved his life. When we look back at events in our lives, it is not always so clear at the time how and why G-d was involved, but sometimes a year or two later, we can understand, like that businessman, who thought missing the boat at the time was a tragedy, was, indeed, G-d’s plan to help us.

SOMETIMES WE CANNOT UNDERSTAND THE PLAN EVEN LATER ON

When Jacob sent his son Joseph to find his brothers grazing in Shechem, the Torah tells us that Joseph met a man there who explained that the brothers had left the city and were now in Dotan.²¹ The Torah spends precious words, telling this story in three specific verses, when it could have simply written “Joseph found his brothers in Dotan.” Why the commentaries ask this question and answer that this event is meant to teach us something profound about how G-d sometimes works in the world. G-d wanted to make sure that Joseph found his brothers, so that they could decide to sell him (out of free will), bringing the Jewish people eventually down to Egypt as a result, and later they would become slaves, as G-d had promised Abraham. If Joseph had not met the man in Shechem, he would have simply returned to his father without meeting his brothers, and G-d would have had to get the Jewish people down to Egypt in a different manner. Thus, according to Rashi, the man who G-d sent to direct Joseph and connect him to his brothers was none other than the angel Gavriel. According to Rashi,²² then, G-d sometimes sends angels, posing as men, to effectuate His plan. Nachmanides²³ disagrees and says something even more profound. The man was just a man, flesh, and blood, like all human beings. G-d made sure that this man was there at the right moment to answer Joseph’s questions about where his brothers were. The man was G-d’s agent in making sure the plan of G-d would happen. But the man himself did not even know that he was part of G-d’s plan, says Nachmanides. Thus, Nachmanides is telling us that anyone in the world may act as G-d’s agent in fulfilling G-d’s wishes and actualizing G-d’s plan, but not even be aware of his or her role. All of us, then, in our daily lives, may be acting as G-d’s proxies in our everyday interactions, by helping G-d advance a particular situation that needs to be advanced, without us ever realizing it.

In a similar concept, Rabbeinu Bechaye²⁴ writes that G-d performs for each and every one of us many hidden miracles daily. We are not aware of them because if we were to become cognizant of these actions by G-d, then they would become open miracles and few people are worthy of such miracles. Nevertheless, G-d helps us and orchestrates these hidden miracles. Another example that the commentaries point out occurs in the Torah, when G-d effectuated a plan without anyone being aware of it. This was the event of Abraham’s death. When the Torah tells us that Abraham died at the ripe old age of 175, Rashi says that G-d advanced the day of Abraham’s death, because on that very day G-d knew that Abraham’s grandson, Eisav, would begin to sin, and G-d wanted to spare Abraham the pain of seeing his grandson Eisav commit serious iniquities day after day, during Abraham’s lifetime. Thus, G-d caused Abraham to die earlier than he should have. (This answers the questions why Isaac, Abraham’s son, lived five years longer than Abraham until the age of 180, even though both were equally righteous).

Although G-d sometimes gives a glimpse into His plans, it is important to realize that man cannot truly understand how G-d works in the world with everyone. That would make our lives and our decisions

²⁰ Nidah 31a

²¹ Genesis 37:14-17

²² Rashi commentary on Genesis 37:14

²³ Nachmanides commentary on Genesis 37:14

²⁴ Rebbeinu Bechaye Commentary on Exodus 30:12

too easy. That is why we are often stumped, says the Talmud,²⁵ why evil people often prosper and succeed, while the truly righteous often suffer unfairly in our eyes. Without this mystery of life, we would not retain the free will to make truly free moral decisions for ourselves. But despite how things look, Jewish should believe that, like Rabbi Akiva constantly professed, G-d has a plan for each of us, and it is always for our good if we are good people.

All people make thousands of little decisions each week, some moral, some amoral. They do not often think much about these choices, but each small decision can cause a chain reaction that impacts the lives of many other people, like the man who told Joseph that the brothers were in Dotan. When the grandparents or great-grandparents of today's Jews decided to leave Europe, which factor influenced them to decide to leave while many others decided to stay? Which small reason determined in which country and which city they would then settle? At the time, these decisions might have seemed inconsequential. But the decisions to leave and where to live may have spared the lives of many Jewish lives from the Holocaust. If they had chosen to live in a different country or a different town, the parents of Jews today might not have met, and each Jewish child born after would be a very different person with a very different life today.

G-d has a plan for each of us. But with each small choice, we can choose to set it in motion, and, at the same time, help others activate whatever G-d has chosen for them. If we think about our daily decisions a little more carefully and contemplate their implications, we might begin to realize that the ramifications of each choice are a lot greater than we might currently believe.

Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel currently works with Rabbi Berel Wein and the Destiny Foundation as the Director of Education, whose mission is "to bring Jewish history to life in an exciting, entertaining and interactive way." Rabbi Amsel has also served as a teacher, a school principal, and an adjunct professor. He has also taught over 2000 educators how to teach more effectively. Rabbi Amsel has worked in all areas of formal and informal Jewish education and has developed numerous curricula including a methodology how to teach Jewish Values using mass media. Recently, he founded the STARS Program (Student Torah Alliance for Russian Speakers), where more than 3000 students in 12 Russian speaking countries learn about their Jewish heritage for five hours weekly. Rabbi Amsel previously served as the Educational Director of Hillel in the Former Soviet Union. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and has four children and four grandchildren.

²⁵ Mishne Avot 4:15