

Date: 12 Elul 5786 (August 25, 2026)

Torah Portion: Ki Tavo

Topic: Divine Assistance and Free Will, Part 1

It is written (Deut. 29:3–4), “But YHWH did not give you a heart to know, or eyes to see, or ears to hear until this day. I led you for forty years in the Wilderness; your garments did not wear out from on you, and your shoe did not wear out from on your foot.” Many assume that knowing Torah is the same as knowing YHWH. Yet after forty years of receiving Torah, witnessing miracles, and experiencing YHWH’s constant provision, Moshe tells Yisrael that YHWH had not given them “a heart to know.” What, then, was still lacking?

The answer may lie in the distinction between possessing knowledge of Torah and possessing a heart that truly perceives what that knowledge means. A person may know the commandments, understand their requirements, and even observe them, yet still fail to recognize the hand of YHWH working within his life. The Torah can instruct the mind, but “a heart to know” describes something deeper: the ability to perceive YHWH, to recognize His providence, and to respond to Him with enduring faithfulness. This helps explain why Moshe immediately reminds Yisrael of the forty years in the Wilderness. Their garments had not worn out, their sandals had endured, and their needs had continually been supplied. They had experienced these things for decades, but only “until this day” had they begun to understand what those experiences were meant to teach them.

A Midrashic teaching concerning Yisrael at Mount Sinai sheds further light on this matter. When Yisrael declared, “Everything that YHWH has said we will do and we will obey” (Exo. 24:7), they reached an extraordinary level of devotion. Later YHWH said concerning them, “Who can assure that this heart should remain theirs, to fear Me and observe all My commandments all the days?” (Deut. 5:26). The people heard these words but remained silent.

The Sages illustrate their silence with an analogy. A snake charmer once saw a particularly dangerous snake and exclaimed, “Who is able to charm this one?” Those who heard him responded, “Are you not the snake charmer? It all depends upon you!” Likewise, when YHWH said, “Who can assure that this heart should remain theirs?” Yisrael should have responded, “Master of the Universe, You assure that our hearts remain this way!” They had expressed their willingness to obey YHWH, but they failed to ask Him to preserve within them the heart that desired obedience.

This teaching, however, raises an obvious difficulty. The Sages teach that “everything is in the hands of Heaven except the fear of Heaven” (Berachos 33b). Fear of Heaven belongs to the realm of human choice. If YHWH were to guarantee that a person would always remain righteous, would this not interfere with free will? The same question could be raised concerning the prayers we regularly offer for repentance, wisdom, obedience, and spiritual strength. If moral choices belong to us, why should we ask YHWH to help us make them?

Maharsha, commenting on Avodah Zarah 5a and Berachos 10a, resolves this difficulty by distinguishing between choosing a path and receiving assistance in walking upon it. When a person stands at a spiritual crossroads, he must choose the direction for himself. YHWH does not make that fundamental choice in his place. Once the person chooses the right path and begins walking upon it, however, YHWH may assist him in continuing along that path. Thus the Sages teach, “He who strives for purity receives help from Above” (Yoma 38b), and similarly, “Heaven leads a person in whatever path he sets out to follow” (Makkos 10b).

Prayer for spiritual assistance therefore does not contradict free will. Prayer is itself an exercise of free will. When a person asks YHWH to help him repent, overcome temptation, or remain faithful, he has already revealed the direction he desires to follow. He has freely chosen righteousness and is now asking Heaven for assistance in carrying out that choice. Had Yisrael at Sinai asked YHWH to preserve the heart expressed in their declaration, “We will do and we will obey,” their request would not have eliminated their free will. Rather, it would have demonstrated their free choice to remain faithful and would have opened the way for Divine assistance.

Shalom.