

Date: 13 Elul 5786 (August 26, 2026)

Torah Portion: Ki Tavo

Topic: Divine Assistance and Free Will, Part 2

The Dubno Maggid develops this principle further. Even when a person receives help from Above and consequently achieves a level of spiritual growth that might otherwise have been beyond his strength, he still receives credit for what he accomplishes. Although Divine assistance contributed to his success, the person himself desired righteousness, recognized his weakness, and chose to seek YHWH's help. Since his own prayer brought about that assistance, the resulting good deeds may still be attributed to him. Dependence upon YHWH, therefore, is not the opposite of human effort; properly understood, it is part of human effort. Recognizing our weakness and asking YHWH for strength is itself a moral and spiritual choice.

R' Moshe Alshich understands the Midrash somewhat differently. In his view, the assurance Yisrael could have requested represented something greater than ordinary Divine assistance. It meant that YHWH could preserve the spiritual level they had already attained. To reconcile this with the principle that fear of Heaven remains within human choice, Alshich distinguishes between different stages of spiritual development. For those who are still striving toward their potential, YHWH assists but does not replace their effort. They must continue choosing, struggling, repenting, and growing. But for those who have already acquired a profound level of fear of Heaven through their own efforts, YHWH may guard what they have acquired and protect them from losing it.

This principle is reflected in the words, "The feet of His devout ones He will guard" (1 Shemuel 2:9). According to the Talmud (Yoma 38b), YHWH protects His faithful ones from losing the spiritual accomplishments they have attained. The point is not that YHWH removes the necessity of acquiring righteousness through human choice, but that after righteousness has been acquired, He may preserve what the person has labored to attain. Divine preservation does not replace human achievement; it protects human achievement.

This understanding is particularly significant in relation to Yisrael at Mount Sinai. Their declaration, "We will do and we will obey," demonstrated an extraordinary willingness to submit themselves to YHWH. They had reached a spiritual height at which they could have asked Him to preserve that heart within them. When YHWH said, "Who can assure that this heart should remain theirs?" He was, according to the Midrash, opening the door for such a request. Yet Yisrael remained silent. They had learned to declare their devotion, but they had not yet learned to ask YHWH to preserve it.

This brings us back to Moshe's words in Devarim 29:3: "YHWH did not give you a heart to know, or eyes to see, or ears to hear until this day." For forty years Yisrael possessed Torah. They witnessed miracles, ate manna, drank water supplied in the Wilderness, and lived under YHWH's continual protection. Their clothing did not wear out and their sandals remained upon their feet. Yet experiencing the works of YHWH is not necessarily the same as understanding them. A person may live within Divine blessing for years and eventually begin to regard it as ordinary. What was once recognized as a gift can gradually become something expected.

Perhaps this is why Moshe connects "a heart to know" with forty years of Wilderness experience. Only after looking back over the entire journey could Yisrael begin to recognize the pattern. The garments that had not worn out, the sandals that endured, the manna that appeared each morning, and the protection that accompanied them were not merely isolated miracles. Together they constituted forty years of instruction in dependence upon YHWH. The Wilderness had become their teacher.

Thus, "a heart to know" means more than knowing what YHWH has commanded. It means developing the spiritual perception to recognize what YHWH has been doing. Torah teaches a person how to walk, but a heart to know enables him to recognize the One who sustains him as he walks. Yisrael had received Torah at Sinai, but it took forty years of experience, failure, correction, provision, and mercy for them to begin to understand the depth of their dependence upon YHWH.

The apparent tension between free will and Divine assistance therefore disappears. Human beings must choose the direction in which they will walk. They must desire righteousness, take the first steps, and seek YHWH. Yet once that choice has been made, they may ask Him for strength to continue. YHWH's assistance does not necessarily diminish

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human freedom; rather, it responds to the direction that human freedom has chosen. The person chooses the path, while YHWH supplies strength to walk it.

The failure of Yisrael, then, was not that Divine help was unavailable. The help was available, but they did not recognize their need to ask for it. Their silence at Sinai reveals a lesson that forty years in the Wilderness would eventually teach them: spiritual maturity is not reaching the point where one no longer needs YHWH. Spiritual maturity is reaching the point where one finally understands how deeply one needs Him.

This may ultimately be what Moshe means by “a heart to know.” The mature heart understands both human responsibility and human dependence. It chooses obedience while recognizing that perseverance requires help from Above. It studies Torah diligently but does not confuse knowledge of Torah with complete knowledge of YHWH. It remembers that yesterday’s faithfulness does not guarantee tomorrow’s faithfulness and therefore continually seeks YHWH’s help to preserve what has been gained.

The lesson in our verse is therefore not simply that Yisrael needed greater knowledge, but that they needed greater perception. After forty years, they were finally able to look back and understand that YHWH had been sustaining them every step of the way. The heart that truly knows YHWH is not the heart that says, “I have become strong enough to remain faithful on my own.” Rather, it is the heart that freely chooses His ways and then has the wisdom to say, “YHWH, this is the path I desire; help me remain upon it.”

Shalom.