What were the beginnings of R. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus? At the age of twenty-two, he had not yet studied Torah. His father was very rich and had many plowmen working for him. One day R. Eliezer's brothers were plowing arable ground [in a valley] while he was plowing a stony plot [on a hill].

Presently he sat down and wept. His father asked, "Why are you weeping? Are you distressed because you have to plow a stony plot? From now on, you will plow arable land." But he sat down on the arable land and wept again. The father asked, "Why are you weeping? Are you distressed because you are plowing arable land [in the heat of the valley]?" R. Eliezer: "No." The father: "Then why are you weeping?" R. Eliezer: "Because I wish to study Torah." The father: "But you are already twenty-two, and you wish to study Torah? Take a wife. She will bear children for you, and you will take them to school."

Nevertheless, R. Eliezer resolved: I will go and study Torah in the presence of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakai. His father retorted, "You will not get a taste of food until you have plowed the entire furrow." R. Eliezer got up early and plowed a full furrow. But then his heifer fell and broke its leg. Saying, "My heifer's leg broke for my sake," he quickly took off and went to Rabban Yohanan ben Zakai in Jerusalem. It is said: That day was the eve of the Sabbath, and he had tasted nothing from six hours before Sabbath eve until six hours after the Sabbath's departure. As he was walking along the road, he saw a pebble in a cultivated field, picked it up, and put it in his mouth.
Eight days he kept at it, without eating a thing, until the foul odor from his mouth attracted the attention of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, who asked, "Eliezer, my son, did you eat anything at all today?" Silence. Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai repeated the question. Again silence. "By your life, today you will eat with me."

R. Eliezer: "But I already ate at the place where I stay." Rabban Yohanan said to his disciples, "As you live, look into the matter." So his disciples went around all the streets of Jerusalem, inquiring at the inns, "Do you have a guest who is a scholar? Do you have a visitor who is a woman who said yes. They asked, "Does he have anything here?" She: "He has a sack into which he puts his head and appears to suck from it as from a leather wine bottle." They: "Show it to us." She brought the sack. When they opened it, they found it full of meal. Then they asked her, "Has Eliezer eaten anything in your place today?" She replied, "No. We thought he was eating at his master's house." Thus they realized that he had not eaten for eight days. They went and reported to Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, who then turned to R. Eliezer and said, "Alas for you, Eliezer, so greatly neglected in our midst. But I say to you: Even as foul breath rose out of your mouth before me, so shall the fragrance of Torah issuing out of your mouth [travel from one end of the world to the other]."

Then Rabban Yohanan set up regular meals for R. Eliezer, and he was healed. For three years he occupied himself with study in the presence of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai.

The other sons of Hyrcanus said to their father, "See what our son Eliezer did to you--he left you in your old age and went off to Jerusalem. Go there and disinherit him." So Hyrcanus went up to Jerusalem to disinherit Eliezer. It is said: That day was a festal day for Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai. All the notables of the city were dining with him, including Ben Tzitzit ha-Keset, Nakdimon ben Gorion, and Ben Kalba Savua. When Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai heard that Hyrcanus had come, he said, "Make room for him." Thus finding himself [unexpectedly] placed among the notables of the city, he sat trembling in their midst.

Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai set his gaze upon R. Eliezer and said, "Begin your discourse." R. Eliezer pleaded, "I cannot begin, for I am like a well, which cannot bring forth more water than it draws [from the earth]--so, too, I cannot utter more words of Torah than those I have received from you." Rabban Yohanan said, "My son, you are rather like a spring, which wells up and brings forth water of itself. You are like such a spring." Rabban Yohanan pressed him, and the disciples pressed him. So he arose and delivered a discourse on things that no ear had ever heard before. R. Eliezer's face was as radiant as the light of the sun; rays came forth from him like the rays that came forth from Moses, so that no one could tell whether it was day or night.
Then Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai stood up, kissed him on his head, and said, "Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, happy are you that such a son has issued from your loins." Hyrcanus asked, "To whom is he saying this?" When told, "To your son, Eliezer," he said, "Rabban Yohanan should not have spoken thus. He should have told me to say, 'How happy am I that such a one has issued from my loins.'" Then Hyrcanus climbed up on a bench and declared in the presence of the people of Jerusalem, "Masters, I came here for no other purpose than to disinherit my son Eliezer. But now all my possessions will be given to my son Eliezer, while his brothers are to have no portion whatever in them." Eliezer said to Hyrcanus, "Had I sought landed properties, the Holy One would have given them to me, for 'the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof' [Ps. 24:1]. Had I sought silver or gold, He would have given them to me, for 'Mine is the silver, and Mine the gold, saith the Lord of hosts' [Hag. 2:8]. I sought from the Holy One nothing other than Torah." (Pirkei D'Rebbe Eliezer 1. See also ARN 6; Gen. R. 42:1; Tanhuma B, Lekh Lekha, # 10)

The Creator does not compel or decree that people should do either good or bad. Rather, everything is left to their own choice.

Rambam, Hilkhos Teshuvah 5:3

One must know that everything is done in accord with God’s will and, nevertheless, we are responsible for our deeds.

Rambam, Hilkhos Teshuvah 5:4

People have become the only being in the world who possesses a characteristic which no other being has in common. What is this characteristic? It is that independently, people can distinguish between good and evil and do that which we please with absolutely no restraint.

Rambam, Shemonah Perakim, Ch 8

Reflect, then, upon all that we have said; that we has control over our actions, that it is by our own determination that we do either right or wrong without, in either case, being controlled by fate and that, as a result of this divine commandment, teaching, preparation, reward, and punishment are proper.

Rambam, Shemonah Perakim, Ch 8