
FREE WILL I

The Nature, Importance and Dynamics of Free Will

Some psychologists would have us believe that human behavior is on the same plane as animals and that our freedom of will is but an illusion. They claim that our consciousness of what we are doing causes us to think that we are choosing but that this is nothing more than an illusion. Our choices are being made for us by our internal drives.

*These psychologists may be in concert with those biologists who consider humans to be merely another variety of animal, and according to this concept, it is virtually meaningless to speak of spirituality. It is quite evident, however, that in practice we do not subscribe to this theory. Our entire concept of human responsibility, with our elaborate system of positive and negative sanctions, is based on the assumption that humans are not at the mercy of impulses and that we indeed have the freedom to choose and determine much of our behavior. Human beings are free creatures, and to take away our freedom is to rob us of our humanity. Humans are free when we have the capacity to make a free choice. (Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, MD, *The Spiritual Self*, Hazelden Publishers, pp. 6-7.)*

Two Morasha shiurim address free will. This first class discusses the nature, importance and dynamics of free will. The second class seeks to understand how man can have free will in light of God's omniscience, omnipotence and Divine Providence, as well as various qualifications to the principles of free will.

This class will address the following questions:

- ☞ Do we have free will, or are our actions pre-determined by scientific laws?
- ☞ How do we exercise free will?
- ☞ Why do we have free will?
- ☞ What is the extent of our free will?
- ☞ What is the "zone of personal growth"?
- ☞ What are the implications of the decisions that we make? How far-reaching are the consequences of our decisions?

Class outline

Introduction. Does it Matter What We Believe about Free Will?

Section I. Do We Have Free Will?

Section II. Why Did God Give Man Free Will?

Section III. The Extent of Free Will

Section IV. The Zone of Personal Growth

Section V. The Dynamics of Exercising Free Will

Section VI. The Implications of Our Decisions

INTRODUCTION. DOES IT MATTER WHAT WE BELIEVE ABOUT FREE WILL?

The scientific theory of determinism posits that everything that takes place in the universe, including the behavior of human beings, is predetermined by a set of rules – the laws of nature. According to this theory, no human being is in control of his or her actions; we operate like any other organism in the world, preprogrammed to react to every situation that arises.

Stephen Hawking, Physicist, University of Cambridge, England – Some prominent secular scientists and philosophers believe man does not have free will.

The initial configuration of the universe may have been chosen by God, or it may itself have been determined by the laws of science. In either case, it would seem that everything in the universe would then be determined by evolution according to the laws of science, so it is difficult to see how we can be masters of our fate.

What is the allure of the theory of determinism? It enables people to believe that they are not responsible for their actions. If every move we make is simply the result of a predetermined set of rules, we certainly cannot be faulted for any wrongdoing we may commit. The question of whether our actions are predetermined or not may seem purely theoretical, but it actually has major ramifications for the way we conduct our lives, as concluded in the scientific studies described below.

Now for questions from experimental philosophers:

- 1) *In this deterministic universe, is it possible for a person to be fully morally responsible for his actions?*
- 2) *This year, as he has often done in the past, Mark makes plans to cheat on his taxes. Is he fully morally responsible for his actions?*

To a classic philosopher, these are just two versions of the same question about free will. But to the new breed of philosophers, who test people's responses to concepts like determinism, there are crucial differences, as Shaun Nichols explains in the current issue of Science.

In one experiment, one group read a passage from Francis Crick, the molecular biologist, asserting that free will is a quaint old notion no longer taken seriously by intellectuals, especially not psychologists and neuroscientists. Afterward, when compared with a control group that read a different passage from Crick, not relating to free will, the first group expressed more skepticism about free will – and promptly cut themselves some moral slack while taking a math test ...

Asked to solve a series of arithmetic problems in a computerized quiz, they cheated by getting the answers through a glitch in the computer that they'd been instructed not to exploit. The supposed glitch, of course, had been put there as a temptation by the researchers, Kathleen Vohs of the University of Minnesota and Jonathan Schooler of the University of California, Santa Barbara.

In a follow-up experiment, the psychologists gave another test in which people were promised \$1 for every correct answer; then they compiled their own scores. Just as Dr. Vohs and Dr. Schooler had feared, people were more likely to cheat after exposure to arguments against free will. These people went home with more dishonestly-earned cash than did the others.

This behavior in the lab, the researchers noted, concurs with studies in recent decades showing an increase in the number of college students who admit to cheating. During this same period, other studies have shown a weakening in the popular belief in free will (although it is still widely held).

"Doubting one's free will may undermine the sense of self as agent," Dr. Vohs and Dr. Schooler concluded. "Or, perhaps, denying free will simply provides the ultimate excuse to behave as one likes."

"Free will guides people's choices toward being more moral and better performers," Dr. Vohs said. "It's adaptive for societies and individuals to hold a belief in free will, as it helps people adhere to cultural codes of conduct that portend healthy, wealthy and happy life outcomes." (Based on John Tierney, *Do You Have Free Will? Yes, It's the Only Choice*, *New York Times*, March 21, 2011)

Consequently, since the very belief or denial of free will greatly affects one's attitude and behavior in life, what is the Jewish position on free will?

SECTION I. DO WE HAVE FREE WILL?

The Torah clearly teaches that man does have free will, *bechirah chofshit*. In Judaism, the world operates both individually and collectively under the direct guidance of God (*hashgacha pratit* and *klalit*), and the Divine gift of free will is what empowers us with the opportunity to live proactively each day, enabling us to achieve greatness in life and to assume responsibility for our actions, as well. God informs us that He places choices before us, and it is up to us to make the correct decisions.

1. **Devarim (Deuteronomy) 30:15-19 – Judaism teaches that man is given free will in order to make thoughtful, consequential decisions.**

See, I set before you today life and goodness, death and evil. For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess...

This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live.

ראה נתתי לפניך היום את החיים ואת הטוב ואת המוות ואת הרע: אשר אנכי מצוך היום לאהבה את ה' אלהיך ללכת בדרךיו ולשמר מצותיו וחקותיו ומשפטיו וחיית ורביית וברכך ה' אלהיך בארץ אשר אתה בא שמה לרשתה...

העדתי בכם היום את השמים ואת הארץ החיים והמוות נתתי לפניך הברכה והקללה וברחת בחיים למען תחיה אתה וזרעך:

Although animals have the ability to make certain limited choices, this is a rudimentary form of free will that does not compare to the freedom of choice with which mankind was endowed.

2. **Ramban (Nachmanides), Bereishit 1:29 – Animals possess elementary free will to look for food and the like.**

For the living, mobile creatures have a certain quality that makes them similar to intelligent beings, since they can choose what will benefit them and nourish them, and they flee from pain and death.

והיה זה מפני שבעלי נפש התנועה יש להם קצת מעלה בנפשם, נדמו בה לבעלי הנפש המשכלת, ויש להם בחירה בטובתם ומזוניהם ויברחו מן הצער והמיתה.

The ability to make *moral* decisions is the uniquely human expression of free will.

3. **Rabbi Akiva Tatz, Free Will – The Real You, Targum Press, pp. 16-17 – Animals cannot make choices in the area of morality.**

Of course there are many things outside the realm of morality which you can choose, but those choices are purely technical: certainly you can choose a particular flavor of ice cream, for example, or which socks you will wear today; but those choices are not uniquely human. Animals also choose options like which food to eat and where to sleep; those areas have no inner meaning, they are mechanical issues. Here we are talking about the unique free will of human beings, that faculty which makes you unlike an animal. The area in which animals cannot make any choices is the area of morality. No animal chooses between right and wrong; no animal battles to overcome its lower self and achieve a more spiritual state by means of its moral ideals. That is exactly the area we mean when we talk of human free will; the battleground of human free will is precisely the area of moral ordeals, the striving for higher values against the pull of our lower selves.

When we hear news of a shark attack, we don't blame the shark. We know it's just doing what comes naturally. We don't suspect that the shark chose to attack out of evil intent and really could have called upon its nobler instincts and spared its victim. But when a human being attacks, he is held responsible for his actions. (Nechemia Coopersmith, Shmooze, Targum Press, p. 83.)

4. **Rambam, Hilchot Teshuvah (Laws of Repentance) 5:1 – Man is unique among the entire Creation in his ability to choose between good and evil.**

Permission is given to every individual to direct himself to follow a good path and become righteous or to follow a bad path and become evil. This is what is written in the Torah, "And now man is like one of us, knowing good and evil" (Bereishit 3:22).

This means that a human being is unique in creation in the respect that through his intelligence he can distinguish between good and evil, and can choose to do either; and there is no one who will prevent him from doing so.

רשות לכל אדם נתונה אם רצה להטות עצמו לדרך טובה ולהיות צדיק הרשות בידו ואם רצה להטות עצמו לדרך רעה ולהיות רשע הרשות בידו הוא שכתוב בתורה הן האדם היה כאחד ממנו לדעת טוב ורע.

כלומר הן מין זה של אדם היה יחיד בעולם ואין מין שני דומה לו בזה העניין שיהא הוא מעצמו בדעתו ובמחשבתו יודע הטוב והרע ועושה כל מה שהוא חפץ ואין מי שיעכב בידו מלעשות הטוב או הרע...

Thus, the view that man's choices in life are not in his own hands, but rather are the inevitable result of a confluence of circumstances and laws of nature – and that man is therefore not responsible for his behavior – is incorrect.

5. **Ibid. 5:2 – Each person is free to decide his path in life.**

Do not believe the thought expressed by foolish nations and many unwise Jews that when God creates a person He decrees whether he will be righteous or evil. This is not the case. Rather, each person has the capability to choose to become righteous like Moshe Rabbeinu (Moses our Teacher) or evil like Yeravam, wise or foolish, merciful or cruel... and similarly regarding any other attribute.

אל יעבור במחשבתך דבר זה שאומרים טפשי אומה"ע ורוב גולמי בני ישראל שהקב"ה גוזר על האדם מתחלת ברייתו להיות צדיק או רשע, אין הדבר כן אלא כל אדם ראוי לו להיות צדיק כמושה רבינו או רשע כירבעם או חכם או סכל או רחמן או אכזרי... וכן שאר כל הדעות.

There is no one who will force him, nor has it been decreed upon him, nor is anyone pulling him to one of these paths. Rather the person himself uses his own intelligence to choose the path which he desires.

ואין לו מי שיכפהו ולא גוזר עליו ולא מי שמושכו לאחד משני הדרכים אלא הוא מעצמו ומדעתו נוטה לאיזו דרך שירצה...

Only the choices of human beings are not dictated by the laws of nature – and that is because those choices emanate from man's Divine soul.

6. Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, Siftei Chaim, Emunah & Bechirah, Vol. II, p. 17 – Our Divine soul is the source of our ability to make free will decisions.

Each person has a spiritual soul that is connected to God above. In this world, God places the spiritual soul into the body of the physical person. It is true that the powers of nature were created by rules of cause and effect, but the soul of the spiritual person, which is connected to God above, is beyond the rules of reason.

The soul is not enslaved to any natural laws, but only to doing the will of God. Although a person has unique capabilities and characteristics which challenge or facilitate his freedom to choose, yet the choice between good or bad is through the spiritual soul, which is not compelled by the person's constitution.

בכל אדם יש בו הנשמה הרוחנית שהיא חלק אלוך ממעל... והקב"ה הכניס בעוה"ז את הנשמה הרוחנית לגוף האדם הגשמי, ואם כי אמנם נכון הוא שכוחות הטבע נבראו לפי חוקי סיבה ומסובב, אולם נשמת האדם הרוחנית שהיא חלק אלוך ממעל חורגת מסיבתיות.

ואיננה משועבדת לשום חוקי טבע שבעולם – אלא לעשיית רצונו ית'. ועל אף שיש באדם כוחות נפש שונים ותכונות שונות המקשים או מקילים על הבחירה, אבל הבחירה – בין טוב ובין למוטב – היא ע"י הנשמה הרוחנית שאיננה מוכרחת מכוחות נפש האדם.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION I.

- ∞ The concept of free will is not universally embraced. Some scientists and philosophers have asserted that man does not have free will and that all of his actions are predetermined by a set of natural laws.
- ∞ The Torah, however, teaches us that man does have free will. It is only natural phenomena that follow the rules of cause and effect. Every human being is endowed with the ability to choose between good and evil, because the human soul is not subject to the laws of nature. God does not decide who will be righteous, nor who will be wicked.

SECTION II. WHY DID GOD GIVE MAN FREE WILL?

PART A. TO ESTABLISH AND ASSERT OUR UNIQUENESS AS HUMAN BEINGS

As we have mentioned, free will, *bechirah*, is a uniquely human attribute. No other life form possesses this ability; the behavior of every species in the animal kingdom is a function of their physical impulses. Whereas it is true, as the Ramban writes above, that animals do make elementary free-will decisions to enable them to survive, only man has the ability to make moral or ethical decisions.

1. **Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, MD, Twerski on Spirituality, Shaar Press, p. 267 – Free will sets man apart from animals.**

In general, animals are not free to make decisions, because they are at the mercy of their bodily impulses. If an animal is hungry, it is driven to look for food and must do so. An animal cannot decide not to eat when it is hungry. It is inconceivable that an animal will decide, “I am going to fast today.” This is equally true of all other physical impulses which totally dominate an animal’s behavior. Man is alone in being able to resist a bodily urge, and deny himself gratification of a strong desire if he considers it to be inappropriate.

Some philosophers deny that man has freedom of choice, and contend that a person has a number of impulses and ideas, some of which are in conflict, and that his behavior is determined by whichever impulse or idea happens to be the strongest. They say that because man is aware of the struggle within himself he has an illusion that he is making a choice, whereas the choice is really being made for him. Judaism categorically rejects this concept which, by denying free will, essentially reduces man to an animal level, with the only distinguishing feature being that man is conscious of the struggle between the opposing forces within him. Freedom of choice is a fundamental axiom of Judaism. In fact, Judaism teaches that although God is in control of everything in the universe, He has divested himself of control over man’s decisions, and does not intervene in man’s moral or ethical choices.

PART B. TO ACTUALIZE OUR POTENTIAL

By exercising free will and choosing correctly, man brings the potential within him into practice. After all, God doesn’t need us to “pass the test” and make the correct decision; He knows what is in our hearts and whether we truly desire to do what is right. Yet, we know that God tests us throughout our lives. Why does he do so? Because the very act of choosing causes a human being to achieve his potential.

1. **Ramban, Bereishit 22:1 – God tests the righteous to turn their potential into action.**

The concept of a test is as follows. Since a man’s actions are completely subject to his own will, so that he can act if he wishes or desist if he wishes, it is called a “test” from the vantage point of the one being tested. The One Who tests, however, is commanding him in order to actualize his potential so that he can receive reward for proper actions, not merely for proper intentions. Know that God tests the righteous (*Tehillim* 11:5) when He knows that the righteous man will do His will and He desires to give the man merits – that is when He commands him to undergo a test. However, He does not test the wicked, who will not listen. All the tests in the Torah are for the benefit of the one being tested.

ענין הנסיון הוא לדעתי בעבור היות מעשה האדם רשות מוחלטת בידו אם ירצה יעשה ואם לא ירצה לא יעשה יקרא “נסיון” מצד המנוסה אבל המנסה יתברך יצוה בו להוציא הדבר מן הכח אל הפועל להיות לו שכר מעשה טוב לא שכר לב טוב בלבד דע כי השם צדיק יבחן (תהלים יא ה) כשהוא יודע בצדיק שיעשה רצונו וחפץ להצדיקו יצוה אותו בנסיון ולא יבחן את הרשעים אשר לא ישמעו והנה כל הנסיונות שבתורה לטובת המנוסה.

PART C. TO EARN REWARD WITHOUT EMBARRASSMENT

Free will is a function of the struggle between the *yetzer hara*, the evil inclination, and the *yetzer hatov*, the good inclination. This is a struggle that is unique to man. But why did God create man in a situation in which his life is a constant struggle between good and evil?

1. **Ramchal, (Rabbi Chaim Moshe Luzzatto), Da'at Tevunot (The Understanding Heart), pp. 4-5 – To be able to accept goodness from God without embarrassment.**

The intellect knows that God is the ultimate good. By nature, anyone who is good desires to do good for others. And God, may His Name be blessed, wanted to create creatures in order to bestow upon them good, because there is no opportunity to bestow goodness if there is no one to accept it.

However, in order for this bestowing of goodness to be complete, God knew that those accepting it would need to earn it through their own effort, because then they become its rightful owners, and they will not be embarrassed by accepting this goodness, like one who accepts charity from another. About this it is said, "One who eats something that is not his own is embarrassed to look directly at the face of his patron" (Yerushalmi/Jerusalem Talmud, Orlah 1:3).

אמר השכל: מה שנוכל להשיג בענין זה הוא, כי הא-ל ית"ש הוא תכלית הטוב ודאי. ואמנם, מחק הטוב הוא להיטיב, וזה הוא מה שרצה הוא ית"ש – לברוא נבראים כדי שיוכל להיטיב להם, כי אם אין מקבל הטוב – אין הטבה.

ואמנם, כדי שתהיה ההטבה הטבה שלימה, ידע בחכמתו הנשגבה שראוי שיהיו המקבלים אותה – מקבלים אותה ביגיע כפם, כי אז יהיו הם בעלי הטוב ההוא, ולא ישאר להם בוש פנים בקבלם הטוב, כמי שמקבל צדקה מאחר. ועל זה אמרו (ירושלמי ערלה פרק א הלכה ג): "מאן דאכיל דלאו דיליה בהית לאסתכולי באפיה".

2. **Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, Siftei Chaim, Emunah & Bechirah, Vol. II, p. 57 – By exercising free will, we earn reward through our own efforts.**

We find, therefore, that one of the purposes of free will is that a person will accept goodness from God without any feeling of embarrassment. Surely God could have created His world without the necessity for man to exercise free choice or to work and toil, but then man would feel ashamed that he is receiving a reward as a handout and not because he deserved it. By choosing between good and evil, as well as toiling in Torah and mitzvot, he will not feel that he is receiving a free gift. Rather he is earning the goodness, just as a worker is not embarrassed to accept payment for his work, since he has earned [compensation] through his workmanship. Similarly, through exercising free will, a person will not be ashamed when accepting his reward.

נמצא אפוא, שאחד מטעמי הבחירה: כדי שהאדם יקבל את ההטבה מהקב"ה בשלימות ללא רגש של בוש. ודאי, הקב"ה היה יכול לברוא עולמו ללא עבודת הבחירה וללא עמל ויגיעה, אבל אז האדם היה מרגיש רגשי בוש שמקבל בחנם ולא בזכות, וע"י הבחירה בין הטוב והרע שיעבוד ויעמול בתורה ומצוות לא יחוש שמקבל מתנת חנם, אלא הרגשה שמגיעה לו ההטבה, כדוגמת בעל המלאכה שאיננו בוש לקבל שכר עבודתו, כיון שהוא טרח במלאכה א"כ מגיע לו, כך האדם ע"י הבחירה לא יהיו לו רגשי בוש בקבלת השכר...

One purpose of free will, then, is to create a situation in which man will be able to earn his eternal reward by making the correct choices. In essence, free will is a gift that God has given us so that we can fulfill our purpose in this world. Without the ability to choose evil, no amount of righteousness would have any meaning, and consequently, man would not be able to earn reward. (For a further discussion of this topic, see the Morasha class on Body and Soul.)

PART D. TO IMPACT SPIRITUAL WORLDS

The Nefesh HaChaim (along with other works) explains that our universe is not just physical; it is also home to vast spiritual worlds that are maintained or destroyed by our actions. When a human being acts correctly, observing the Torah and its mitzvot, he creates untold ripples of positive spiritual energy throughout the infinite array of spiritual worlds. Conversely, when he behaves incorrectly, he brings destruction upon these spiritual worlds.

1. Rabbi Chaim Volozhiner, *Nefesh HaChaim*, Gate 1, Chapter 7 – The actions of a human being affect infinite spiritual dimensions or “worlds.”

A person is called the spirit and living soul of myriads upon myriads of worlds. This does not mean that he is a spirit like the spirit that is actually contained within and attached to the human body, for that is impossible. Rather, just as all the movements of one's physical limbs are dictated by the living soul, according to its inclinations and desires, so too all the movements and behaviors of the spiritual forces, all the worlds, and the orders of the Chariot – their development and building or their destruction, Heaven forbid – are rooted in the actions of man in this world.

שהאדם נקרא הנפש ונשמת החיים של רבי רבוון
עולמות. לא נפש כנפש הנתון ודבוק ממש בתוך גוף
האדם. דזה לא יתכן. אמנם היינו שכמו שכל פרטי
תנועות ונטיית אברי הגוף, הם ע"י הנשמת חיים שבו
כפי תנועות חיותו ונטייתו כן הענין שכל נטיית הכחות
והעולמות וסדרי המרכבה. תקונום ובנינם והריסות
ח"ו. הוא רק כפי ענין ההתעוררות ממעשי האדם
למטה.

How can a human being affect all of these spheres? This capacity stems from the human ability to choose his actions. All other creatures which do not possess free choice cannot have an effect on the spiritual spheres, since their actions are no more than the effects of Divine decrees. Man, on the other hand, has the ability to choose, and his actions can become the *cause* of ripple effects, making him responsible for the building or destruction of countless spiritual spheres.

2. *Ibid.* – The purpose of free choice is to enable man to affect all the spiritual worlds.

It is for this reason that man alone was granted free will, so that he could bring himself and all the worlds to whichever side he chooses. Or even if he already transgressed and caused the worlds to be ruined and destroyed, Heaven forbid, he has the ability to rectify that which he ruined and rebuild that which was destroyed, since he is included in and in partnership with all of the worlds.

This is what King David meant when he said, “God is your shadow on your right side.” Just as the shadow of an object follows the motions of that object and goes in the same direction it goes, so too, God, so to speak, directs the worlds in accordance with the behavior of man below.

ולזאת לו לבדו נתנה משפט הבחירה להטות עצמו ואת
העולמות לאיזה צד אשר יחפוץ. או אף אם כבר גרם
וסיבב ח"ו בחטאיו הריסת העולמות וסדרי המרכבה
וחורבנם וירידתם ח"ו. יש כח וסיפק בידו לתקן את
אשר עיות ולבנות הנהרסות. מצד שהוא כלול ומשותף
מכולם:

ו"ש דוד המע"ה ה' צלך על יד ימינך. היינו שכמו
שנטיית הצל של איזה דבר הוא מכונן רק כפי תנועות
אותו הדבר לאן נוטה. כן בדמיון זה כביכול הוא ית"ש
מתחבר לנשות העולמות כפי תנועות ונטיית מעשי
האדם למטה.

In light of this principle, we can understand that free will is an incredibly potent force. It allows man to affect the universe in ways that no other living creature can.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION II.

- ⌘ Free will distinguishes man from the animal kingdom. No animal has the ability to make moral decisions.
- ⌘ Free will is a uniquely human attribute. Man has free will by virtue of the fact that he exists in the middle of a perpetual struggle between moral alternatives, and his task in life is to make the correct choices. God created man in this way so that he could earn eternal reward.
- ⌘ In addition, man's free will serves another important purpose. Because man has the ability to choose evil, when he does choose good, his actions create an untold impact on all the spiritual worlds. God made the existence and upkeep of all the worlds dependent on man's behavior. It is only through free will that he can have such an enormous influence on the universe.

SECTION III. THE EXTENT OF FREE WILL

We have seen that the behavior of all other beings is strictly controlled and dictated by a set of predetermined rules, whereas man's actions are up to him. But to what extent does man have free will? Are *all* of man's decisions left completely in his hands? This question can be answered with the resolution of an apparent contradiction between two Talmudic statements.

1. Talmud Bavli, Berachot 33b

Everything is in the Hands of Heaven except for the fear of God.

הכל בידי שמים חוץ מיראת שמים.

2. Talmud Bavli, Bava Batra 144b

Everything is in the Hands of Heaven except chills and fever.

הכל בידי שמים חוץ מצננים פחים.

The contradiction is self-evident. If everything is in the hands of Heaven except for one thing, which is it – chills and fever, or the fear of God?

3. Tosefot, *ibid.* – Some events are Heavenly decrees. However, a person must always make an effort to protect himself.

The source in Bava Batra is different than the concept of “Everything is in the Hands of Heaven except for the fear of Heaven,” because the latter refers to a person's attributes, whether he is strong or weak, poor or rich, tall or short, wise or dull, as is taught in Niddah 16b ... but here [Bava Batra 144b] is dealing with events which occur to a person.

ולא דמי להא דאמר הכל בידי שמים חוץ מיראת שמים דהתם מיירי במדות של אדם מה יהיה גבור או חלש עשיר או עני ארוך או קצר [חכם או טפש] כדאיתא בנדה בפרק כל היד (דף טז:ב) אבל הכא מיירי במאורעות הבאות על האדם:

Thus, the Talmud is actually discussing two distinct categories of Divine decrees. With regard to events that will befall a person, everything is decreed in Heaven, and the only area in which a person can exert some

control over his destiny is with regard to taking precautions to avoid chills and fevers. (For more information on this aspect of Divine Providence, see the Morasha class on Hashgacha Pratit and the second Morasha class on Free Will.)

However, with regard to the attributes of the person himself, there is a different rule. A person is powerless to alter or affect almost everything about himself – his level of intelligence, his physical strength, his degree of wealth, and so forth. The only thing that a person can change is his level of fear of Heaven. In practical terms, this means choosing between right and wrong, and good and evil.

4. **Rashi, Berachot, 33b – The range of man's free will is in fact limited, but choosing between good and evil is fully entrusted to man.**

Everything that is placed on a person is decreed by God. For instance, [whether the person is] tall, short, poor, rich, smart, dull, light, or dark is all decreed by Heaven. But [whether a person is] righteous or evil is not decreed by Heaven, but is entrusted to the individual's choice. He has two paths in front of him, and he needs to choose to fear Heaven.

כל הבא על האדם ביד הקדוש ברוך הוא כגון ארוך, קצר, עני, עשיר, חכם, שוטה, לבן, שחור, הכל בידי שמים הוא, אבל צדיק ורשע אינו בא על ידי שמים, את זו מסר בידו של אדם, ונתן לפניו שני דרכים, והוא יבחר לו יראת שמים:

5. **Talmud Bavli, Niddah 16b – Attributes such as intelligence, strength, height, and wealth are from Heaven. Righteousness is dependent upon the person alone.**

There is an angel called Lilah appointed [to supervise] each pregnancy. He takes the fertilized egg to God and says, "Master of the Universe, what will become of this child – [will he be] strong or weak, wise or foolish, wealthy or poor?"

However, whether the child will become evil or righteous was not mentioned. As Rabbi Chanina taught, "Everything is in the Hands of Heaven except for the fear of Heaven, as is written, 'And now Yisroel, what is it that the Lord your God asks from you? That you should fear the Lord your God' (Devarim 10:12)."

אותו מלאך הממונה על ההריון לילה שמו, ונוטל טפה ומעמידה לפני הקב"ה, ואומר לפניו: רבש"ע, טפה זו מה תהא עליה? גבור או חלש, חכם או טיפש, עשיר או עני?

ואילו רשע או צדיק - לא קאמר, כדר' חנינא; דא"ר חנינא: הכל בידי שמים - חוץ מיראת שמים, שנאמר (דברים י"ב) ועתה ישראל מה ה' אלהיך שואל מעמך כי אם ליראה את יקוק אלהיך...

How it is possible to assert that *all* human attributes are Divinely determined? Of course, a person's physical strength, height, and natural intelligence are inborn. But what about a person's wealth, health, and other such attributes? Simple observation clearly indicates that people who work hard and invest effort into becoming wealthy, preserving their physical health, and the like are often successful, while those who do not put effort into these goals often fail. How can it be said that a person's financial status is entirely a result of God's decree?

The truth is, however, that one's finances are decreed by God, with the important qualification that a person still must work to achieve financial success. This concept will be discussed further in the second Morasha class on Free Will.

There is another important issue to address. There are many human attributes; do some traits cause a person to exhibit specific types of behavior? For example, some people seem to anger more easily while others are more relaxed; some seem predisposed to indulge in particular vices. The Talmud indicates that *all* of

a person's traits are dictated from Above. Does this not mean that God causes certain people to be more naturally predisposed to positive or negative behavior – and, if so, is that not a contradiction to the principle of free will?

6. **Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, Alei Shur Vol. II p. 38 – We exercise our free will by choosing how to develop our attributes.**

Basic free will is regarding how a person uses his inborn traits. The Gemara (Shabbat 156A) describes the impact of astrological phenomena at the moment of birth on a person's nature, such as "A person who is born under *Maadim* will be one who spills blood. Rav Ashi says: He may be a doctor, a robber, a ritual slaughterer, or a *mohel* (one who performs circumcision)." It is impossible to uproot one's character traits. A person with a cold temperament cannot change and become one with a hot temperament. Similarly, it is impossible to uproot the tendency for "bloodshed," but it depends how one uses it.

Rav Ashi enumerates four possibilities how one can express a tendency for "bloodshed": as a doctor, as a robber who may murder, as a ritual slaughterer or as a *mohel*. All of them "shed blood," but the *mohel* does so for a great mitzvah; the ritual slaughterer does not perform a positive mitzvah, since there is no obligation to eat meat, but when one wishes to eat meat it is a mitzvah to slaughter; the doctor saves lives by "spilling blood"; and only the robber uses this tendency for evil.

These are the fateful choices with which a person establishes his path in life by using his traits for good or for evil. It is limited, since we do not have the ability to change or uproot any traits that are connected to our temperaments, but free will is still vast, because there are many ways for a person to use his inborn traits for good.

הבחירה הבסיסית היא: כיצד משתמש אדם בתכונותיו. הגמרא בשבת קנו ע"א מבארת השפעת הכוכבים והמזלות בשעת הלידה על תכונות האדם, כגון "האי מאן דבמאדים יהא גבר אשיד דמא (שופך דמים). אמר רב אשי אי אומנא אי גנבא אי טבחא אי מוהל". תכונות אי אפשר לעקור. קר המזג אינו יכול להשתנות להיות חם המזג. על דרך זו תכונה של שפיכת דמים אי אפשר לעקור אך תלוי הוא כיצד משתמשים בה.

ומונה רב אשי ארבע אפשרויות: רופא, גנב העלול לרצוח שוחט או מוהל, כולם "שופכים דם" אבל המוהל למצוה גדולה, השוחט אינו מקיים מצוה חיובית שהרי אין חיוב לאכול בשר אבל כשרוצים לאכול בשר מצוה היא לשחוט, הרופא מציל נפשות במה שהוא שופך דם, ורק הגנב משתמש בכח זה לרעה.

זוהי הבחירה הגורלית, אשר בה קובע האדם את דרכו בחיים על ידי שהוא מכריע את תכונותיו לצד זכות או לצד חובה. מוגבלת היא, כי אין בידינו לשנות או לעקור תכונות הקשורות במזג, אבל עשירה היא הבחירה כי הרבה דרכים לפני האדם בניצול תכונותיו לטובה.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION III.

- ∞ Free will is not a concept that applies to every aspect of a person's life. In fact, most of a person's characteristics and life circumstances are Divinely decreed before his birth. What is up to us is the choice between right and wrong, good and evil.
- ∞ Not all human beings are created with the same inclinations, and some may be born with more of a natural proclivity to certain forms of wrongdoing. However, no natural inclination is inherently "good" or "bad." Regardless of what type of actions or activities a person is predisposed to engage in, he or she can use those inborn tendencies for good or for evil.

SECTION IV. THE ZONE OF PERSONAL GROWTH

Is every step we take characterized by unlimited free choice? The truth is that there are many areas in which we do not really have an unrestrained ability to choose right or wrong. The choices that lie before us are a consequence of our parents, education, integration of societal values, and consequences of decisions that we have already made.

1. **Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, Michtav M'Eliyahu, Vol. I., p. 113 – Analogy of exercising free will compared to two armies fighting on a battlefield.**

When two nations are engaged in warfare, and the war is fought on the battlefield, all the territory conquered by one particular army is now under its control, and the enemy has no foothold there whatsoever. Similarly, the territory of the second army comes totally under its control. If one of the armies conquers further ground and advances and takes over some of the enemy's territory, then subsequent battles will resume with new battle lines. But territory which has already been conquered will not be fought over again, for it has already been occupied. There is only one battleground, and this can shift between the territories of the two warring nations.

כששני עמים נלחמים, הנה המלחמה היא במקום מערכתה, כל מה שאחורי צבא העם האחד הוא כולו תחת רשותו ואין לו שם שום ניגוד כלל, וכן מה שהוא מאחורי השני כולו ברשות השני. אם האחד ינצח פעם בקרב, וידחה את השני מרחק מה, אזי בהתחדש הקרב יהיה במקום שיעמדו שניהם אז, אבל במקום שרכש לו הראשון שם אין עוד מלחמה כי הוא ברשותו. הרי שבפעל יש רק חזית אחת, ובכח, כל שטח שתי המדינות הוא מקום הקרב.

2. **Ibid. – Consequential personal decisions are focused at zones of inner conflict.**

The same is true of the nature of free choice. Each person has a zone of free choice where his conception of truth encounters his imagined truth – which is really falsehood. However, the majority of one's actions occur where there is absolutely no conflict between truth and falsehood. Since a person has been educated to act in many areas in accordance with the truth, when he does so, he is not exercising his free will, since he has no option to do otherwise. Similarly, he might make incorrect decisions based on falsehood and not realize that these are improper actions. Since he is so accustomed to doing them, they are now beyond the range of his free will.

כן הוא גם בענין הבחירה. כל אדם יש לו בחירה, היינו בנקודת פגישת האמת שלו עם האמת המדומה, תולדות השקר. אבל רוב מעשיו הם במקום שאין האמת והשקר נפגשים שם כלל. כי יש הרבה מן האמת שהאדם מוחונק לעשותו, ולא יעלה על דעתו כלל לעשות ההיפך, וכן הרבה אשר יעשה מן הרע והשקר, שלא יבחין כלל שאין ראוי לעשותו.

Decisions of free choice are limited to the meeting ground between the positive and negative forces within an individual. For example, many people might be negligent in speaking derogatorily about others, only because they are accustomed to it and are oblivious to its severity. The very same

אין הבחירה שייכת אלא בנקודה שבין צבאו של היצה"ט לצבאו של היצה"ר. הרבה נכשלים תמיד בלשון הרע, מפני שהורגלו בו, ולא יעלה על דעתם כלל כי רע הוא. ואותם אנשים עצמם לא יבוא לפניהם יצר הרע לגנוב או לרצח והיינו משום שנתחננו והורגלו כל כך עד שאין כניסה שם ליצר הרע.

people however would never consider stealing or murder, because their education has ingrained in them not to do so, to the extent that they have no inclination to do such things.

There are many behaviors, good or bad, to which a person is predisposed to the extent that he cannot be considered to have actually “chosen” them. This does not necessarily mean, however, that anyone is immune to improper behavior. There are 613 mitzvot in the Torah, and every person must struggle in some way with all of them. Each mitzvah encompasses many details and aspects and can be observed on many levels. Thus, every mitzvah presents a challenge for every individual, regardless of his spiritual level.

3. Rabbi Reuven Leuchter, Ner Le’Elef – The zone of free will exists at different levels with regard to every precept in the Torah.

The “point of free will” does not mean that a person lacks the evil inclination to speak *lashon hara* (harmful speech) and the like. Every mitzvah and every transgression consists of countless levels, and a person always has free choice regarding all mitzvot and sins – just not always on the same level.

For instance: I certainly do not have the ability to desecrate the Shabbat by lighting a fire, Heaven forbid. But I “desecrate the Shabbat in a pure way,” because my speech on Shabbat is no different than my speech on a weekday, and so forth. In other words, I certainly have free will regarding Shabbat as well, and so too with regard to all mitzvot and transgressions.

The *Lev Dovid* relates that someone asked the Rambam how he could say *Viduy* [the confession for sins], when he had never performed any of the sins mentioned there. The Rambam replied that he violated everything that the *viduy* says every day, and much more than that, and he would even be punished for asking the question. Now, I would never have posed this question to the Rambam. Clearly, the person in this story must have truly believed that he had never committed these transgressions. The Rambam revealed to him that he has a “point of free choice” regarding every sin in the world, even if it does not appear that way on the surface.

נקודת הבחירה אינה אומרת, שכבר אין לי יצה"ר לדבר לשה"ר וכדו'. כי בכל מצוות ובכל עבירות יש דרגות דרגות עד אין מספר, ותמיד יש לי בחירה על כל המצוות והעבירות, רק לא תמיד באותה מדריגה.

למשל: בוודאי אין לי בחירה לחלל שבת על ידי הדלקת אש ח"ו. אבל אני 'מחלל שבת בטרהרה', כי הדיבור שלי בשבת לא שונה כלל מהדיבור ביום חול וכדו'. דהיינו בוודאי גם לי יש בחירה בנושא של שבת, וכן בכל המצוות והעבירות.

הלב דוד מביא, שמיישהו שאל הרמב"ם, איך הוא יגיד הוידוי, הרי הוא לא עשה אף-אחת מהעבירות שנוכרים שם. והרמב"ם ענה לו, שהוא עובר כל יום על כל מה שכתוב בוידוי, ויותר ויותר מזה, וגם על מה שהוא שאל את הרמב"ם הוא יקבל עונש. והנה: אני לא הייתי שואל את הרמב"ם את השאלה. אלא מדובר באדם שבאמת חשב, שהוא לא עושה את העבירות. והרמב"ם גילה לו, שיש לו 'נקודת הבחירה' בכל העבירות שבעולם, אפילו שעל פני השטח הדברים אינם נראים כך.

Each person has certain choices regarding which he is subject to conflicting impulses, and it is in those areas that the battle of free choice – the battle between good and evil – is truly waged. The area that is subject to these choices is dynamic and constantly shifting in response to one's previous choices.

4. **Michtav Me'Eliyahu ibid. – Momentum from positive and negative decisions.**

The zone of free choice is dynamic. As a result of a good decision, a person raises his moral level, so that those areas which were previously the battleground between his positive and negative inclinations are now incorporated into the zone of his good side and will no longer present a conflict. This is the principle that “One mitzvah leads to another mitzvah” (Pirkei Avot 4:2).

The converse is also true. Bad decisions push away the tendency to behave properly in that battle zone and subsequently lead one to act improperly without deliberation, since his good side is no longer in control there. This is the principle that “One bad deed leads to another.”

אמנם נקודה זו של הבחירה אינה עומדת תמיד על מצב אחד, כי בבחירות הטובות האדם עולה למעלה, היינו שהמקומות שהיו מערכת המלחמה מקודם, נכנסים לרשות היצה"ט, ואז המעשים הטובים שיוסיף לעשות בהם יהיה בלי שום מלחמה ובחירה כלל, וזהו "מצוה גוררת מצוה."

וכן להיפך, הבחירות הרעות מגרשות היצה"ט ממקומו, וכשיוסיף לעשות מן הרע ההוא יעשנו בלי בחירה, כי אין עוד אחיזה ליצה"ט במקום ההוא. וזהו אז"ל (אבות ד'ב) "עבירה גוררת עבירה"...

While each individual's struggle may be over a different decision, it is important to note that each person's struggle is qualitatively *the same*.

5. **Ibid. – Regardless of a person's level, his struggle to choose right over wrong, in his own unique circumstances, is the same.**

Sometimes a person becomes accustomed to doing so much good that he is protected from the evil inclination in that area, and his zone of free choice is in more sublime areas. For instance, for a person who was educated in the ways of Torah, among righteous people, his zone of free choice will not be with regard to committing an actual sin or refraining from an actual mitzvah, but rather with regard to a very subtle point in his inner service of God and pure intent.

Sometimes a person is brought up in the company of evildoers, rabble and thieves. He will not have a choice at all regarding whether to steal or desist. It is possible that his zone of free choice will exist only when he is caught in the act of stealing, and he has the opportunity to murder someone. That is where the battle between his inclinations will take place, for that is the truth that his good inclination can discern at his level, and he could ignore his evil inclination.

We see, then, that a person's upbringing does not change the actual struggle of free choice at all, but only the point at which it takes place. Everyone is created with the ability to discern the truth that he can access at his level, and to

יש אשר יתחנך האדם להרבה מן הטוב עד שהוא בטוח בו מן היצר הרע ונמצא שנקודת בחירתו היא בענינים יותר גבוהים. למשל, מי שנתחנך בחינוך התורה בין צדיקים ואנשי מעשה, יועיל לו החינוך אשר נקודת בחירתו לא תהיה בעשיית עבירה במעשה או במניעת מצוה מעשית, אלא בדקות עבודת הלב והכוונה.

ויש אשר יתחנך בין רשעים, פחותים, וגנבים. אצלו לא תהיה הבחירה כלל אם לגנוב או לחדול. ויתכן אשר נקודת בחירתו תהיה רק כשיזדמן לו לרצח נפש בעת שייפתס בגניבתו, ושם היא מלחמת יצרו, כי זוהי האמת אשר יבחין בה על פי יצר הטוב שלו במדרגתו, ובעצת יצרו הרע יתעלם ממנה.

נמצא שאין החינוך משנה כלל בעצם ענין הבחירה, אלא רק את מקום נקודתה, וכל אדם משעת יצירתו ניתן בו הכח אשר יוכל להכיר האמת שידע, לפי ערכו, ולדבק בה ולא להתעלם ממנה אפילו בפני הדמויות

cling to it and not ignore it, even in the face of the temptations of spurious justifications. Regardless of whether his upbringing raised or lowered his point of free choice, his ability to recognize the knowable truth is identical in every situation.

של חשבונות שקר. ואין הפרש בזה בין אם חינוכו הגביה את מקום נקודת בחירתו או השפילו, כי כח הכרת האמת אשר ידע, שוה הוא בכל המצבים.

In fact, although a person who is accustomed to righteousness may not have to struggle with the same base impulses that afflict an individual on a lower level, the righteous person's struggle may be even *more* difficult.

6. **Rabbi Reuven Leuchter, Ner Le'Elef – Because a righteous person has reached a higher spiritual level, the choices he must make are all the more difficult.**

Perhaps we can add: A wicked person has a coarse type of free choice, such as whether or not to murder. But a righteous person has free choice on an inner level, in a very fine way.

Therefore, since the Creator wants us to choose, the task of a righteous person is more difficult. In other words, the perception that he lacks free choice is superficial and incorrect. Rather, his choice becomes even more difficult, because he has elevated himself.

אולי אפילו אפשר להוסיף: הרשע יש לו בחירה בגסות, דהיינו לרצוח או לא. אבל הצדיק יש לו בחירה בפנימיות, בדקות.

וא"כ, אחרי שהבו"ע רוצה שאנחנו נבחר, העבודה של הצדיק היא יותר קשה, והיינו כל השאלה שאין לו בחירה היא שטחית ולא נכון, אלא הבחירה נהיתה יותר קשה על ידי העלייה של האדם!!

Ultimately, this means that every person's struggle to choose right over wrong, regardless of his spiritual level, is equally precious to God.

7. **Rabbi Yisroel Miller, What's Wrong with Being Happy, ArtScroll Publications, pp. 147- 148 – Every person faces ongoing challenges; the goal is to persevere.**

It is well known to historians that the American Revolution succeeded not because George Washington knew how to win a battle – he didn't – but because he knew how to lose. He was defeated again and again, and the American Revolution is a story of one Colonial retreat after another. But Washington did know how to retreat, how to hold his army together and keep his ragtag forces from disintegrating, so that if an opportunity for victory ever arose he would be ready. He kept on failing and retreating for five years, but he never gave up; and when his big chance finally came at the siege of Yorktown he was prepared, and he won.

Anyone interested in his or her own life, anyone who has seriously tried to become a better person and who has done battle with the *yetzer hara*, the inclination to do evil, knows that that the analogy is apt. If we can only keep up the fight, even if it is only small-scale guerrilla warfare, then we are showing God we are still here for Him...

The frustrated idealist thinks, "Okay, you tell me not to give up on my dreams, and I should not abandon holy ideals even if I am completely divorced from them in practice. But what is all that dreaming worth, when I compare it to the deeds of a *tzaddik*, a righteous Jew who truly lives the Torah every day?"

The Baal Shem Tov's answer (taking the liberty of paraphrasing it in contemporary terms) is that if you note the winning times in a marathon race, you will find that they are measured in hours: 3 hours and 10 minutes, 2 hours 50 minutes and so on. How can a marathon runner be proud of winning a race in a couple of hours, when some Olympic races are over in a matter of minutes? The answer, of course, is that a runner's accomplishment is not judged only by his finish time; it is judged by his finish time compared to the distance he has to cover, and any run over a longer track takes more time and is judged accordingly.

In the same way, each person on earth has his own race to run. Some of us are given a short track, others have a marathon, still others have strategically placed stones and potholes along the way. Each person's place in the Divine Plan is different from that of everyone else, and each of us has a unique way of sanctifying God's Name. You may feel far from Torah, with endless miles to run, but since the greatest *tzaddik* does not have your exact situation, even he cannot create the same holiness that only you can.

If you are "at the ends of the heavens," [D'varim 30:4] very far away but still trying to grab on, then the Torah says, "*misham*, from there," from your unique vantage point and hardship God will help you; because no one else can demonstrate sanctity the way you do, when, with your uniquely individual difficulties, you refuse to drop out of the race and you keep on going, no matter how far away the finish line may be.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION IV.

- ∞ Even within the realm of choosing between good and good and evil, there is a limit to the extent of free will. There is a "zone of free will," like the battleground where two armies wage war, and then there are zones of good and bad behaviors, like the territory each side has already conquered or vanquished, in which the person does not have free will but rather acts automatically, either as a result of his upbringing or his past experiences.
- ∞ Every mitzvah or transgression exists on many levels, and each person can choose between good and evil on only one of those levels. He may automatically desist from more blatant forms of evil, and may automatically stumble when the wrong choice is more subtle.
- ∞ The more "good" choices a person makes, the higher on the spectrum of good behavior his zone of free will moves. The converse is also true; bad decisions create negative momentum. Each individual's struggle to choose between good and bad is qualitatively the same as every other person's struggle; it just exists in a different area. In a sense, though, the struggle of the righteous is even more difficult, because they must contend with a far more subtle degree of enticement.

SECTION V. THE DYNAMICS OF EXERCISING FREE WILL

What distinguishes our free-will decisions from the behaviors we choose out of ingrained habit? What is the nature of the struggle in the zone of personal growth? It is the place where two drives – one to choose good and the other to choose evil – meet and come in conflict.

1. **Ramchal, Derech Hashem (The Way of God), 1:3:1, p. 45, Translation by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, Feldheim Publishers – We are here with the challenge of earning perfection.**

As we have discussed, man is the creature created for the purpose of being drawn close to God. He is placed between perfection and deficiency, with the power to earn perfection.

Man must earn this perfection, however, through his own free will and desire. If he were compelled to choose perfection, then he would not actually be its master, and God's purpose would not be fulfilled. It was therefore necessary that man be created with free will.

Man's inclinations are therefore balanced between good and evil, and he is not compelled toward either of them. He has the power of choice, and is able to choose either side, knowingly and willingly, as well as to possess whichever one he wishes. Man was therefore created with both a *yetzer tov* and a *yetzer hara*. He has the power to incline himself in whichever direction he desires.

כבר זכרנו היות האדם אותה הבריה הנבראת לידבק בו ית', והיא המוטלת בין השלימות והחסרונות, והיכולת בידו לקנות השלימות. ואולם צריך שיהיה זה בבחירתו ורצונו, כי אילו היה מוכרח במעשיו להיות בוחר על כל פנים בשלימות, לא היה נקרא באמת בעל שלימותו, כי איננו בעליו, כיון שהוכרח מאחר לקנותו, והמקנהו הוא בעל שלימותו, ולא היתה הכונה העליונה מתקיימת.

על כן הוכרח שיונח הדבר לבחירתו, שתהיה נטיות שקולה לשני הצדדין ולא מוכרחת לאחד מהם, ויהיה בו כח הבחירה לבחור בדעת ובחפץ באיזה מהם שירצה, והיכולת גם כן בידו לקנות איזה מהם שירצה. על כן נברא האדם ביצ"ט ויצ"ר, והבחירה בידו להטות עצמו לצד שהוא רוצה:

For a human being to have free choice, he must be in a position where he is not inexorably drawn after either the *yetzer hara* or *yetzer tov*. However, as the following two sources indicate, this does not necessarily mean that the influence of each *yetzer* is equal.

2. **Pirkei Avot (Ethics of Our Fathers) 4:2 – How should we respond to the opportunity to fulfill a mitzvah or to the temptation to do a transgression?**

Ben Azai taught: One should run to perform a mitzvah and run away from a transgression.

בן עזאי אומר הוי רץ למצוה קלה ובורח מן העבירה.

3. **Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, Alei Shur, Vol. II, p. 43 – Why should we run to perform a mitzvah and run away from a transgression?**

The Mishnah teaches that a transgression pursues a person and therefore he needs to run away from it, and a mitzvah runs away from the person and he needs to run after it. Why is this so?

Rav Chaim from Volozhin explains: Man was created on the basis of free will. Free will requires that the relative power of man's positive and negative inclinations be equal. If a mitzvah would pursue an individual like a transgression, everyone would prefer to do mitzvot, since a person's soul is closer to mitzvot. Consequently, free will would be nullified.

If neither mitzvot nor transgressions would

מהמשנה נראה, שהעבירה רודפת אחרי האדם אשר על כן הוא צריך לברוח ממנה, והמצוה בורחת ממנו, לכן הוא צריך לרוץ אחריה. למה הוא כך?

הגר"ח מבאר: האדם מיוסד על כח הבחירה. הבחירה מחייבת שהיצה"ט והיצה"ר יהיה כחם שווה. אם גם המצוה תרדוף אחרי האדם כמו העבירה - כולם יעדיפו לעשות המצוות, כי נשמת האדם הרי היא קרובה למצוות - ובטלה הבחירה.

אם שתיהן, המצווה והעבירה, לא תרדופנה אחרי

pursue a person, the evil inclination would also have less power, since everyone would naturally choose to do mitzvot. Therefore, God made it that transgressions pursue a person and mitzvot run away from him, to enable him to make equally weighted decisions.

האדם, שוב יהיה יד היצה"ר על התחנתו, כי כולם יבחרו לעשות המצות. לכן עשה הקב"ה כך שהעבירה תרדוף והמצוה תברח, ובזה הבחירה שקולה בידי האדם.

As strong as the drive for wrongdoing may be, the principle of *bechirah chofshit*, free will, reveals that a human being is always capable of making the right decision and resisting temptation. People often have the tendency to attribute their behavior – or their failure to change – to external factors. But as the following Talmudic incident indicates, it is a fundamental principle of the Torah that the key to change always lies with the person himself.

4. Talmud Bavli, Avodah Zarah 17a – In trying to overcome personal challenges, our first inclination may be to rationalize or blame others for our situation.

There was not one prostitute that Elazar the son of Durdaya had not visited. He once heard that there was a prostitute overseas who demanded an entire bag of silver coins as payment. He took a bag of silver and traveled over seven seas. When they were together, she told him, "Elazar ben Durdaya's repentance will never be accepted."

He went and sat between two high mountains and hills and said, "Mountains and hills, pray for me." They said, "Before we pray for you, let us pray for ourselves ..."

He called to heaven and earth, "Pray for me." They said, "Before we pray for you, let us pray for ourselves ..."

He called out to stars and constellations and cried, "Pray for me." They said, "Before we pray for you, let us pray for ourselves ..."

He said, "My teshuvah (repentance) depends only upon me ... " He put his head between his knees and cried until his soul departed. A voice called out from heaven and proclaimed, "Rabbi Elazar the son of Durdaya is worthy of the World to Come." Rabbi (Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi) cried [when he heard this story] and said, "Some people achieve their reward after a long time, and some achieve it in an instant."

אמרו עליו על ר"א בן דורדיא שלא הניח זונה אחת בעולם שלא בא עליה. פעם אחת שמע שיש זונה אחת בכרכי הים והיתה נוטלת כיס דינרין בשכרה, נטל כיס דינרין והלך ועבר עליה שבעה נהרות. בשעת הרגל דבר אמרה, אלעזר בן דורדיא אין מקבלין אותנו בתשובה.

הלך וישב בין שני הרים וגבעות אמר הרים וגבעות בקשו עלי רחמים אמרו לו עד שאנו מבקשים עליך נבקש על עצמנו ... אמר שמים וארץ בקשו עלי רחמים אמרו עד שאנו מבקשים עליך נבקש על עצמנו ... אמר חמה ולבנה בקשו עלי רחמים אמרו לו עד שאנו מבקשים עליך נבקש על עצמנו ... אמר כוכבים ומזלות בקשו עלי רחמים. אמרו לו עד שאנו מבקשים עליך נבקש על עצמנו ...

אמר אין הדבר תלוי אלא בי הניח ראשו בין ברכיו וגעה בבכיה עד שיצתה נשמתו יצתה בת קול ואמרה ר"א בן דורדיא מזומן לחיי העולם הבא... בכה רבי ואמר יש קונה עולמו בכמה שנים ויש קונה עולמו בשעה אחת.

5. Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, Siftei Chaim, Vol. I, p. 9 – In the end, my success is wholly dependent upon my decisions and initiatives.

When a person is dissatisfied with his spiritual condition, it is the nature of a person to silence

טבעו של האדם, כשאנו שבע רצון ממצבו הרוחני נוהג הוא להשקיט את מצפוננו ולתלות את הדבר בסיבות

his conscience and to blame the situation on various circumstances. “If I only had a good friend, a good study partner or a good neighbor, I would study better,” but truthfully these are only excuses.

This is a very dangerous situation, since one loses the impetus to change himself. For he thinks that his spiritual condition is dependent upon external circumstances which are beyond his control. It is only self-delusive to think that his aspirations can be achieved through external sources. This is the way of the yetzer hara – to soothe an individual into thinking that his situation is not dependent upon himself, and that he is personally incapable of changing the situation.

However, the true solution is for the person to recognize that, “The situation depends only upon me [taking action],” and then all the excuses will be proven to be false, and he will understand that one cannot make such claims before God.

שוונת. “אילו היה לי חבר טוב, חברותא טובה, שכן טוב וכו’, הייתי לומד טוב יותר, ובאמת אין אלו אלא “תירוצים.”

מצב זה מסוכן הוא עד מאוד - כיון שבכך נאבדת כל הדחיפה לשינוי עצמי, שהרי לדעתו מצבו הרוחני תלוי בסיבות שאינן בשליטתו. אין בכך אלא אשליה עצמית שישועתו תצמח ממקום אחר, והרי זה מדרכי היצר להרגיע את האדם בסברו שאין הדבר תלוי בו, והוא עצמו אינו יכול לפעול מאומה בנידון.

אכן, הישועה האמיתית של האדם היא כאשר מגיע להכרה “שאין הדבר תלוי אלא בי, אז ייווכח שכל התירוצים תירוצי שוא הם, ולפני הקב”ה לא יוכל לטעון כל זה.

From where does a person obtain the strength of character to make the right choices? The key to exercising one’s free will constructively lies in Torah study.

6. Pirkei Avot 6:2 – Freedom is through Torah study.

The only free person is one who is involved in the study of Torah.

שׂאִין לְךָ בֶּן חוֹרִין אֶלָּא מִי שֶׁעוֹסֵק בְּתַלְמוּד תּוֹרָה.

This freedom refers to sovereignty over the yetzer hara and the baser human drives – the freedom to use one’s free will in the proper way.

7. Talmud Bavli, Kiddushin 30b – Torah study brings the clarity and strength to overcome the yetzer hara.

I have created the negative inclination, and I have created the Torah as its antidote.

בראתי יצר הרע ובראתי לו תורה תבלין.

Torah is the only means with which we can really overcome the yetzer hara.

8. Ramchal, Mesillat Yesharim, Ch. 5 – If God told us that the Torah is the antidote for the yetzer hara, that means there is no other cure.

It is obvious that if the Creator made only this cure for this ailment, there is no other possible way for a person to be healed from it. Anyone who thinks that he can heal himself in another

והנה פשוט הוא, שאם הבורא לא ברא למכה זו אלא רפואה זו, אי אפשר בשום פנים שירפא האדם מזאת המכה בלתי זאת הרפואה, ומי שיחשוב להנצל זולתה,

way is simply mistaken, and he will ultimately perceive his mistake when he dies while still mired in transgression. For the evil inclination is truly very strong within a person, and without one's knowledge it continually gains strength and controls him. If a person attempts every ruse in the world and does not take the medicine that was made for it – which is the Torah, as I have written – he will never know or perceive that his sickness is strengthening until he dies sinning, and his soul is lost.

To what can this be compared? To a sick person who went to doctors, who diagnosed his illness and told him to take a certain drug. But he, ignorant of the medical field, ignored that drug and instead took whatever medication he saw fit to use. That sick person will certainly die, and so it is in this matter.

There is no one who knows the sickness of the yetzer hara and its latent power more than the Creator, Who fashioned it, and He has told us that its cure is the Torah. Who, then, can neglect it and take something else and live? Certainly the darkness of the material world will steadily gain strength within that person, without his realization, until he finds himself entrenched in evil and so far removed from the truth that it will not even occur to him to seek it. But if he engages in Torah study and learns its ways and commandments and counsel, he will ultimately have a renewed desire to follow the correct path. This is what our Sages have said: “[God says:] ‘If only they would leave Me but still observe My Torah, for the light within it would bring them back to the good.’”

אינו אלא טועה, ויראה טעותו לבסוף כשימות בחטאו. כי הנה היצר הרע באמת חזק הוא באדם מאד, ומבלי ידיעתו של האדם הולך הוא ומתגבר בו ושולט עליו. ואם יעשה כל התחבולות שבעולם ולא יקח הרפואה שנבראת לו שהיא התורה, כמו שכתבתי, לא ידע ולא ירגיש בתגבורת חליו אלא כשימות בחטאו ותאבד נשמתו.

הא, למה זה דומה. לחולה שדרש ברופאים והכירו חליו ואמרו לו שיקח סם מה. והוא, מבילתי שתקדם לו ידיעה במלאכת הרפואה, ניח הסם ההוא ויקח מה שיעלה במחשבתו מן הסמים, הלא ימות החולה ההוא ודאי, כן הדבר הזה.

כי אין מי שמכיר בחלי היצר הרע ובכחו המוטבע בו אלא בוראו שבראו, והוא הזהירנו שהרפואה לו היא התורה. מי איפוא יניחה ויקח מה שיקח זולתה ויחיה, ודאי שחושך החומריות ילך ויגבר עליו מדרגה אחר מדרגה והוא לא יבין עד שימצא שקוע ברעה ורחוק מן האמת הרחק גדול שאפילו הרהורי דברים לא יעלו על לבו לבקש האמת. אך אם הוא עוסק בתורה בראותו דרכיה, ציוויה ואזהרותיה, הנה סוף סוף מאליו יתחדש בו התעוררות שיביאהו אל הדרך הטוב. והוא מה שאמרו ז"ל (פתיחתא דאיכה רבתי): הלואי, אותי עזבו ותורתני שמרו, שהמאור שבה מחזירן למוטב.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION V.

- ∞ Man was created to earn perfection by choosing between good and evil. In order to put the two in a proper balance, it was necessary for the pull of evil to be stronger than the pull of good. If they would be equal, every human being would always choose the good.
- ∞ It is important to recognize that we are the only ones who are responsible for our choices. Blaming external factors for our failures will only diminish our impetus to change and grow.
- ∞ The only means to defeat the yetzer hara is the Torah. By engaging in Torah study, a person can free himself from transgression.

SECTION VI. IMPLICATIONS OF OUR DECISIONS

The human ability to choose between right and wrong has massive consequences. Not only do our decisions shape our personal journey through life, but through our choices, we are capable of bringing tremendous good or evil to the world for all future generations!

1. **Rabbi Dr. J. David Bleich, Jewish Bioethics, Hebrew Publishing Co., pp. 268-269 – Watson and Crick were awarded the Nobel Prize for discovering DNA, yet advocated infanticide and murder, respectively.**

Let us redefine birth. Birth shall no longer be regarded as taking place at the moment of parturition but as occurring seventy-two hours after emergence of the infant from the birth canal. Since the baby is not yet “born,” in the event that it is found to be physically or mentally defective it could be destroyed with impunity up to the moment of “birth.” This proposal was made in all earnestness by Dr. James Watson, co-discoverer of the double-helix in DNA.

... England’s eminent biologist and Nobel prize laureate, Dr. Francis Crick has already advanced beyond this point in advocating compulsory death for all at the age of eighty as part of a “new ethical system based on modern science.”

2. **Professor Peter Singer, Professor of Bioethics, University Center for Human Values, Princeton University – Professor Singer supports killing “defective” infants.**

Very often, it is not wrong at all to kill a child once it has left the womb ... Simply killing an infant is never equivalent to killing a person ... Killing a defective infant is not morally equivalent to killing a person ... Sometimes it is not wrong at all.

3. **The Mensch of Malden Mills, www.cbsnews.com, February 11, 2009 – Extraordinary business ethics.**

The fire that broke out at Malden Mills in the winter of 1995 was the largest fire Massachusetts had seen for a century. Malden Mills was one of the few large employers in a town that was already in desperate straits. “The only thing that went through my mind was, how can I possibly recreate it,” says owner Aaron Feuerstein, the third generation of his family to run the mill. “I was proud of the family business and I wanted to keep that alive, and I wanted that to survive. But I also felt the responsibility for all my employees, to take care of them, to give them jobs.”

Feuerstein decided to rebuild right there in Lawrence – not to move down South or overseas as much of the industry had done in search of cheap labor. He also made another shocking decision. For the next 60 days, all employees would be paid their full salaries.

“I think it was a wise business decision, but that isn’t why I did it. I did it because it was the right thing to do,” says Feuerstein. Some might have said the proper business decision was to take the \$300 million in insurance and retire. “And what would I do with it? Eat more? Buy another suit? Retire and die?” asks Feuerstein. “No, that did not enter my mind.”

He kept his promises. Workers picked up their checks for months. In all, he paid out \$25 million and became known as the Mensch of Malden Mills – a businessman who seemed to care more about his workers than about his net worth. For guidance he turns to the Torah, the book of Jewish law ...

Before wielding the potent force known as choice, a person should be aware of the vast scope and magnitude of the effects of each of his choices, great or small.

4. **Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, Michtav M'Eliyahu, Vol. I, p. 115 – Our decisions impact the entire world and all future generations.**

Each decision that one makes impacts on all situations in every day of his life, whether to a small or great extent, whether beneficial or detrimental. And one's decisions affect not only oneself. For example, the decisions one makes regarding his children's education have repercussions for all future generations.

Each person influences his environment. Therefore, the impact of one's decisions affects his environment as well as his generation, even the entire world, for all future generations. In short, each decision makes an impact on the entire world. Each person is responsible for the consequences of his decisions. How astounding is the greatness of the reward for a good decision and the tremendous responsibility for a bad decision!

וכל בחירה שבוחר האדם, עושה רושם בכל מצבו לכל ימי חייו, אם מעט ואם הרבה, אם לטוב ואם למוטב. ולא רק בו, אלא באשר יעשה לחינוך בניו, וכל אשר יתפתח מזה עד סוף דורותיו.

וכל אדם פועל על סביביו. וע"כ רושם בחירתו יהיה גם על כל סביביו, וגם על כל סביבות דורותיו, וסביבות סביבותיהם, עד סוף כל הדורות. בקצרה, כל בחירה עושה רושם בכל העולם כולו, וכל אשר יסתבב מן הרושם הזה, על כולם אחראי הבוחר בבחירתו... יש להשתומם כמה יגדל שכר הבחירה הטובה, וכמה תרבה האחריות של הבחירה הרעה!

KEY THEMES OF SECTION VI.

- ∞ The human capacity for free will is an awesome power.
- ∞ Humans have the ability to reach the depths of wickedness or to display extraordinary righteousness. This potential stems from free will. Every decision that a person makes has the potential to affect himself, his children, and his surroundings – even for generations.

CLASS SUMMARY:

DO WE HAVE FREE WILL, OR ARE OUR ACTIONS PRE-DETERMINED BY SCIENTIFIC LAWS?

Contrary to the assertion of determinism, Judaism teaches that we do, indeed, have free will. Our choices are not predetermined by the rules of nature; rather, every time a human being chooses between right and wrong, he does so of his own accord.

WHY DO WE HAVE FREE WILL?

Free will is the feature that distinguishes human beings from animals. It is only through the exercise of our free will that we can achieve our potential.

Free will is the tool that God has given us to earn our eternal reward. God created us in order to bestow good upon us, and he placed us in a world that is full of tests and trials, so that we could earn that good. We earn reward by making the right choices, and obviously, we can earn reward only if our choices are not predetermined. Furthermore, free will enables us to be partners with God, as it were, in creation. Man's free will gives him the ability to exert untold influences on countless spiritual worlds.

WHAT IS THE EXTENT OF OUR FREE WILL?

We have free will only with regard to choosing between right and wrong. We cannot alter any other aspects of our lives – our intelligence, physical strength, financial wherewithal, and so forth. All of those things are Divinely ordained and controlled. But God gave us the power to affect our spiritual standing, to determine whether we will be righteous or wicked.

WHAT IS THE “ZONE OF PERSONAL GROWTH”?

Even in the context of choosing between good and evil, not all of a person's decisions can truly be considered free. Often, a person's upbringing or habits will dictate his choices, whether for right or wrong. The “zone of personal growth” refers to the areas in which a person's drives for good and evil are balanced so that the person is truly free to choose between the two. Where these two conflicting impulses come into play, that is where the battle between right and wrong is truly fought, and that is where the person makes the decisions that go on to define him in the future.

HOW DO WE EXERCISE FREE WILL?

In our situation, the pull of evil is stronger than the pull of good; we must exercise free will by running from the temptations that seek to overtake us while pursuing the virtuous deeds that appear to be running away from us. In order to properly exercise one's free will, one must keep in mind that it is his own power of choice, and not any external factors, that is the catalyst for his actions. Furthermore, we must remember that victory over the yetzer hara comes only through Torah study.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE CHOICES THAT WE MAKE? HOW FAR-REACHING ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF OUR DECISIONS?

The power of a human being's choices is vast. A person can choose to bring tremendous good or horrific evil into the world. A person's choices affect not only the person himself, but also everyone around him, as well as his future generations.