
FREE WILL II

Is There Free Will in Light of God's Omnipotence, Omniscience & Divine Providence?

This is the second Morasha shiur addressing how Judaism understands the nature of free will. The first Morasha class analyzed the importance, dynamics and consequences of man exercising free will. This class addresses the feasibility of human free will in light of God's omniscience, omnipotence and Divine Providence. The shiur also seeks to understand how people have free will when so many of their attributes and life circumstances (such as intelligence, health and income) seem to be pre-determined. Finally, the shiur discusses various qualifications to the principles of free will.

This class addresses the following questions:

- How can we have free will if God is omnipotent and decrees everything that occurs in the world?
- How can we have free will if God is omniscient and is aware of our future choices before we make them?
- If everything is a result of Divine decree, why do our efforts sometimes seem to pay off?
- What kinds of individuals are excluded from the normal principles of free will?
- How is it possible for a person to lose his free will?
- Will we still possess free will in the Messianic era?

Class outline

- Section I. Free Will, God's Omnipotence and His Omniscience
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SECTION I. FREE WILL, GOD'S OMNIPOTENCE AND HIS OMNISCIENCE

PART A. FREE WILL AND GOD'S CONTROL

A fundamental tenet of Judaism is that everything that occurs in the world, from the most major event to the minutest detail, is a result of God's direct decree.

1. Talmud Bavli (Babylonian Talmud), Chullin 7b – Heavenly decrees and human action.

Rabbi Chaninah said: A person does not even bang his finger below (in this world) without it being decreed above, as is written: "From God are the steps of man ..." (Tehillim/Psalms 37:23).

אמר ר' חנינא אין אדם נוקף אצבעו מלמטה אלא אם כן מכריזין עליו מלמעלה, "מיקוק מצעדי גבר" (תהילים 37:23).

Since everything that takes place is a result of God's decree, it stands to reason that even when a person is affected by the actions of others, either positively or negatively, he must look at their actions as Heaven-sent. Thus, even after being sold by his brothers into slavery in Egypt, Yosef (Joseph) reassured them that he harbored no ill will, for their actions were not their own doing.

2. Bereishit (Genesis) 45:4-8 – God directs and controls history.

Then Yosef said to his brothers, "Come close to me." When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Yosef, whom you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed, and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will not be plowing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to insure your survival in the land and to save your lives for a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt."

ויאמר יוסף אל אחיו גשו נא אלי ויגשו ויאמר אני יוסף אחיכם אשר מכרתם אתי מצרימה: ועתה אל תעצבו ואל יחר בעיניכם כי מכרתם אתי הנה כי למחייה שלחני אלהים לפניכם: כי זה שנתים הרעב בקרב הארץ ועוד חמש שנים אשר אין חריש וקציר: וישלחני אלהים לפניכם לשום לכם שארית בארץ ולהחיות לכם לפליטה גדלה: ועתה לא אתם שלחתם אתי הנה כי האלהים וישימני לאב לפרעה ולאדון לכל ביתו ומושל בכל ארץ מצרים:

Similarly, we are enjoined not to take revenge or harbor a grudge when other people wrong us – again, because their actions were Heaven-sent.

3. Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 241 (The Prohibition Against Exacting Revenge) – God prohibits us from taking revenge, because we must recognize that any ill that befalls us is really His doing.

Among the roots of this mitzvah are that a person should know and internalize the awareness that anything that happens to him, whether good or bad, is a decree from God. No person can do anything to another person without the will of

משרשי המצוה שידע האדם ויתן אל לבו כי כל אשר יקרהו משוב עד רע הוא סיבה שתבוא עליו מאת השם ברוך הוא. ומיד האדם מיד איש אחיו (בראשית ט', ה') לא יהיה דבר בלתי רצון השם ברוך הוא. על כן

God. Therefore, when a person causes him anguish or pain, one must realize that his sins have caused it and that God has decreed it upon him. He should not occupy his thoughts with seeking revenge, for the other person is not the cause of his misfortune; rather, his sins are the cause.

כשיצעררהו או יכאיבהו אדם ידע בנפשו כי עוונותיו גרמו והשם יתברך גזר עליו בכך. ולא ישית מחשבותיו לנקום ממנו, כי הוא אינו סיבת רעתו, כי העוון הוא המסבב.

While this principle may serve as some consolation for the victim of another's misdeed, does it excuse the perpetrator from taking responsibility for his actions? Clearly it cannot, for the Torah dictates that sinners are to be held accountable for their actions and punished appropriately. In fact, the Torah relates that God Himself exacts justice from a sinner whose guilt cannot be established in court.

4. **Shemot (Exodus) 21:12-13 – The Torah mandates a system of Divine accountability.**

Anyone who strikes a man and kills him shall surely be put to death. However, if he did not do it intentionally, but God brought it to his hand, he is to flee to a place that I will designate.

מִקֵּחַ אִישׁ יָמוּת מוֹת יוֹמָת:
וְאִשֶּׁר לֹא צָדָה וְהָאֱלֹהִים אָנָּה לְיָדוֹ וְשִׁמְתִּי לָךְ מָקוֹם
אֲשֶׁר יָנוּס שָׁמָּה.

5. **Rashi, ibid. – God applies exact justice.**

What case is this verse referring to? There were two men, one had previously killed a person accidentally, and the second had murdered. Both incidents lacked witnesses [and therefore justice was not achieved] by capital punishment or exile.

God arranged that these two men would meet at an inn. The murderer was sitting at the bottom of a ladder. The man who had previously killed unintentionally climbed up the ladder and accidentally fell on the murderer and killed him. There were witnesses who testified [in court] that he killed unintentionally resulting in his exile. [We see that justice was achieved:] The man who initially had killed unintentionally was sentenced to exile and the murderer was killed.

במה הכתוב מדבר, בשני בני אדם, אחד הרג שוגג ואחד הרג מזיד, ולא היו עדים בדבר שיעידו, זה לא נהרג וזה לא גלה.

והקב"ה מזמנן לפונדק אחד, זה שהרג במזיד יושב תחת הסולם, וזה שהרג שוגג עולה בסולם ונופל על זה שהרג במזיד והורגו, ועדים מעידים עליו ומחייבים אותו לגלות, נמצא זה שהרג בשוגג גולה, וזה שהרג במזיד נהרג:

The resolution to this question of Divine Providence vs. responsibility for one's actions lies in the fact that God, with His infinite ability, allows every human being to act as he chooses *but only allows him to affect others when God decrees that it should be so*.

6. **Talmud Bavli (Babylonian Talmud), Shabbat 32a – God chooses human messengers based on their own merits.**

Goodness is brought about through worthy people, and evil through unworthy people.

מגלגלין זכות על ידי זכאי וחובה על ידי חייב.

7. **Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, “Let Us See the Hand of God,” (Hebrew pamphlet) p. 438 – Through our free will we become agents to carry out God’s decrees.**

Sometimes, through our free will, we become agents to carry out God’s decree upon other people. For instance, we choose to do a kindness for someone. It has been decreed upon that person, according to his deeds, to receive that benefit, and we were chosen by God – due to our proper choice of bringing good to another person – to carry out the beneficial decree that was issued upon that person. This is what the Talmud means when it says, “Goodness is brought about through worthy people.”

Sometimes a person wickedly chooses, Heaven forbid, to harm another person. When that happens, God appoints him as an agent to carry out the decree that a certain person must be harmed. This is the meaning of the statement that “evil is brought about through unworthy people.”

In each of these cases, the person who exercises free will receives reward or punishment for his choice, because after all, “Everything is dictated by Heaven besides the fear of Heaven.” A person has the choice to do the will of his Creator or to rebel against Him. But even then, God uses the person’s improper choices according to His own will; yet the person is punished for his incorrect choices.

ויש שאנו על ידי בחירתנו נעשים שליחים לגזירת השי"ת על בני אדם אחרים. כגון שאנו בוחרים לעשות חסד עם פלוני. על פלוני נגזר לקבל חסד זה לפי מעשיו, ואנו נבחרנו מאת השי"ת, על ידי בחירתנו הטובה, להטיב עם הזולת – להוציא לפועל את הטובה הנגזרת על חברנו. זהו ענין "מגלגלין זכות על ידי זכאי."

ויש ואדם בוחר ברע ח"ו – להרע לחברו. אם כן השי"ת בוחר בו כשליח להוציא לפועל את מה שנגזר להרע לפלוני. זהו ענין "מגלגלין חובה על ידי חייב."

בשני המקרים יקבל הבוחר שכר או עונש על בחירתו הטובה או הרעה, כי הרי "הכל בידי שמים חוץ מיראת שמים" – לאדם הבחירה לעשות רצון הבורא או להמרות את פיו. אבל גם אז משתמש השי"ת בבחירתו הרעה כרצונו, אולם האדם מקבל עונש על בחירתו הרעה.

Amazingly, with His infinite ability, God controls every event in the world while still allowing man to have free will. No human being can justify his actions by claiming that they are beyond his control. On the other hand, our faith requires us to view everything that befalls us as an act of God, even if He is operating through a human agent. With this understanding, these two seemingly contradictory concepts are astoundingly synthesized.

PART B. FREE WILL AND GOD'S OMNISCIENCE

A true understanding of God’s ways gives rise to another related question regarding the principle of free will. We know that God is omniscient – i.e., He knows everything that takes place in the universe. His knowledge encompasses not only the past and present, but the future as well. That means that all of our future choices are known to God.

1. **Yigdal Liturgy, Siddur – God has complete foreknowledge.**

He knows and anticipates all our hidden matters.
He sees the end of something at its beginning.

צופה ויודע סתרינו, מביט לסוף דבר בקדמתו

This leads to a powerful question. If God knows what we will choose in the future, how can it be said that we have freedom of choice? Doesn't God's foreknowledge mean, of necessity, that our choices are predetermined?

2. **Maimonides (Rambam), Hilchot Teshuvah (Laws of Repentance) 5:5 – This question does not seem comprehensible.**

Know that the answer to this question is longer than the earth and wider than the seas ... A human being is not able to understand this issue completely, just as he is unable to perceive the true nature of God.

דע שתשובת שאלה זו ארוכה מארץ מדה ורחבה מני
ים... ואין דעתו של אדם יכולה להשיג דבר זה על בוריו
וכשם שאין כח באדם להשיג ולמצוא אמתת הבורא...

Why is this matter so difficult to comprehend? Simply because the very nature of God's knowledge itself is beyond our ability to fathom.

3. **Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, Siftei Chaim, Emunah and Hashgachah, Vol. I, p. 329 – We cannot comprehend God's omniscience.**

We cannot comprehend God's omniscience, since His knowledge is not like ours; it is on an entirely different level. Man knows the past and the present, but no man can know in advance something unforeseen which will happen in the future. God, however, knows the future as well: "All is foreseen," and His knowledge is on a completely different level, which we cannot understand or fathom – He and His knowledge are One.

שזאת אין אנו יכולים להבין איך הקב"ה יודע כיון שאין
ידיעתו כידיעתנו, אלא היא סוג ידיעה אחרת לגמרי.
האדם יודע את העבר ואת ההווה, אבל אין אדם יכול
לדעת – לפי מושגי ידיעתו – מראש דבר בלתי צפוי
שיקרה בעתיד. אולם השי"ת יודע גם את העתיד –
"הכל צפוי", וידיעתו היא סוג אחר של ידיעה, שאיננה
ניתנת להבנה והשגה מצידנו – הוא ודעתו אחד.

With that preface, we must nevertheless take it as a given that despite God's advance knowledge of all our choices, we do have the freedom to choose.

4. **Pirkei Avot 3:15 – Nevertheless, free will is viewed as an implicit ability.**

All is foreseen, yet free will is given ...

הכל צפוי, והרשות נתונה...

5. **Tosefot Yom Yov, ibid. – Even though God foresees the future, this does not undermine man's free will.**

The Tanna [of the Mishnah in Pirkei Avot above] and the Rambam both teach the following truths: that God foresees the future and that man has free will.

In retrospect the author [of the Mishnah] should have stated, "Free will is given and all is foreseen." This would have taught that man is entrusted with free will and yet nothing is hidden [from God] thus enabling the existence of a system of reward and punishment, which is the

דתנא דידן נמי כשאמר הכל צפוי והרשות נתונה כונתו
להודיע ששניהם אמתיים. וכדברי הרמב"ם בפירושו.

ולכאורה ה"ל להתנא לומר הרשות נתונה והכל צפוי
לומר הרשות בחירה ביד האדם ואין דבר נעלם אבל
צפוי ונודע לו יתברך להעניש ולהשכיר שזהו העיקר
אשר עליו יסוד כל התורה...

foundation of the entire Torah ...

But there is no purpose in stating first: "All is foreseen." The only reason to state first that [God] is omniscient is because we already know that free choice has been given.

Rather, certainly the intention of the Tanna is to underscore the fact that even though God foresees the future, this does not contradict the fact that man possesses free will, since [God] has entrusted man with this capability.

אבל להודיע תחלה שהכל צפוי אין טעם בדבר. כי מה לנו לדעת שיודע כל דבר אם לא שכבר נודע שהרשות נתונה.

אלא ודאי דעת התנא להעיר ולומר שאף שהכל צפוי אינו סותר את הבחירה. שעם כל זה הבחירה ביד האדם. כי הרשות נתונה.

6. **Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, Siftei Chaim, Emunah and Hashgachah, Vol. I, p. 321 – Despite God's prior awareness of man's decisions, man maintains the complete ability to exercise choice.**

At the moment a person chooses, God forbid, to do an evil act, God is already fully aware of that decision. And at the time that a person decides to perform a good deed, God also knows in advance that he has made that decision. However, the actual decision-making process of evaluating good and bad alternatives remains the free choice of man.

כשאדם בוחר ברע ח"ו, השי"ת אמנם יודע מראש את בחירת האדם ברע, ואם האדם היה בוחר בטוב הרי היתה ידיעת הקב"ה מראש שהאדם יבחר בטוב, אבל עצם שיקולי הבחירה בין הטוב והרע נשארים הם ביד האדם.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION I.

- ⌘ God is absolutely omnipotent, and everything in the world is under His direct control. Every event that takes place in the world, from the most major to the minutest, is Divinely decreed.
- ⌘ Even when people suffer as a result of other people's actions, that suffering is Divinely ordained. While a person's wrongdoing is a function of his or her own free choice, God permits people to make their own decisions within the framework of His Providence. Thus, even though all human beings are held accountable for their decisions to harm or wrong other people, they are only able to affect others when God decrees it to happen.
- ⌘ God is also omniscient. He is aware of everything that takes place in the world – in the past, present and future.
- ⌘ Included in God's omniscience is the fact that He knows every decision that man will make in the future. Nevertheless, this does not contradict the principle of free will. God's knowledge is not like our knowledge, and although we cannot fully understand why, the fact that He has foreknowledge of our choices does not render them predetermined.

SECTION II. FREE WILL, DIVINE DECREES, AND HISHTADLUT

We have learned that every event and phenomenon in the world is a product of Divine decree. We have also learned that while man enjoys autonomy in the sphere of moral decisions, every single one of his attributes and life circumstances is predetermined. If God has decreed that a person will be rich or healthy, does a person need to exercise free will to make an effort to earn money or eat sensibly?

1. Talmud Bavli, Berachot 33b – Where does free will play a role?

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

הכל בידי שמים חוץ מיראת שמים.

2. Rashi, *ibid.* – 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 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:

We can understand quite well that a person's physical stature and attributes are determined by Heaven. After all, a person is born with these traits, and we cannot seem to do anything to affect them. But what about the question of whether a person is poor or affluent? How can that be said to be predetermined? Don't we see that people who work hard at lucrative careers tend to become wealthy, while those who do not invest the same amount of effort do not accrue the same wealth?

We must understand that although these matters are also Divinely decreed, God structured the world in such a way that human beings must engage in physical effort, called *hishtadlut*, in order to obtain that that was decreed for them.

3. Chovot HaLevavot, Gate of Trust, Chapter 4:4 – Man must work for his living, to actualize God's decrees.

Even when you are fully aware that effort is worthless without the decree of the Creator, nevertheless, a land owner must plow his land, clear it of thorns, plant it and irrigate it if he has water, and trust that the Creator will make it fruitful, protect it from mishaps, increase its yield, and bless it.

But it is inappropriate to abandon the field and not work at cultivating it, but simply trust in God's decree to cause the earth to yield crops

עם בירור אמונתו כי הסבות אין מועילות אותו בזה כלום אלא בגזירת הבורא יתברך, כאשר יש לבעל האדמה לחרוש אותה ולנקותה מן הקוצים ולזרעה ולהשקותה, אם יזדמנו לו מים, ויבטח על הבורא יתברך להפרותה ולשמרה מן הפגעים, ותרבה תבואתה, ויברך אותה הבורא,

ואין ראוי לו להניח האדמה מבלי עבודה וזריעה בבטחונו על גזרת הבורא שתצמיח האדמה בלתי זרע שקדם לו. וכן בעלי המלאכה והסחורה והשכירות

without being planted. Similarly, craftsmen, merchants, and hired workers are commanded to seek their livelihoods while maintaining their trust in God, for man's sustenance is under His control, and He guarantees it to man and provides it through whatever means it may be. A person should not think that his means [of earning a living] can help him or harm him in any way.

מצווין לחזור על הטרף בהם עם במחון באלקים כי
הטרף בידו ורשותו, ושהוא ערב בו לאדם ומשלימו לו
באיזו סיבה שירצה, ואל יחשוב כי הסיבה תועילה או
תזיקהו מאומה.

Nevertheless, man must recognize that his hishtadlut is not the real cause of his success. In actuality, it is God Who provides us with all our needs.

4. **Devarim 8:11-18 – Man should not fall into the trap of thinking that his wealth is the product of his own efforts.**

Guard yourself lest you forget God, your Lord . . .

and (lest you) say in your heart, "My strength and the might of my hands have created all of this wealth for me."

You shall remember God, your Lord, for it is He who gives you the ability to produce wealth.

השמר לך פן תשכח את ה' אלקיך . . .

ואמרת בלבבך כחי ועצמי ידי עשה לי את החיל הזה

וזכרת את ה' אלקיך כי הוא הנתן לך כח לעשות חיל.

If a person's income is decreed, what is the point of the effort to earn that income?

5. **Rabbi Noson Weisz, The Need to Make the Effort, aish.com – Our efforts in this world are to enable us to perfect our characters.**

We were all sent to the world chiefly to perfect our characters. In certain matters we are all identical, and therefore we were all given the same commandments to follow, but in other ways we are quite different. Divine Providence arranges the circumstances of our individual lives so as to ensure that each of us is confronted by the situations we require to perfect our own particular character. The things that necessity compels us to do are the very things that we actually need to do anyway in order to work on our characters. (See Ramchal [Rabbi Moses Luzzatto] in Derech Hashem [The Way of God], Part II, Chapter 3, and the Gaon of Vilna in Even Shleima Chapter 1).

Thus if I have a job where my boss is a difficult person who constantly puts me down, and I often need to swallow my pride and hold on to my temper in order to keep my job, the correct way to relate to my need to work from the point of view of Divine Providence is to assume that the character traits I was sent to the world to perfect are pride and patience, and doing my job necessitates the expenditure of constant effort in perfecting these traits.

By rising to the challenge presented by my job, I am fulfilling my spiritual task and God pays me for my work on my character by supplying me with disposable income. My income comes from God, not from my boss, and I need to work at my job in order to obtain it, because it is really God's job that I am working at. No matter how hard I work, I will never exceed the income written for me on Rosh Hashana, but I must work at my Divinely assigned task in order to attain what was prescribed. My food does not come from my work; rather it is my need to obtain food that guarantees that I will do the work that is necessary to complete myself spiritually.

Prayer, merits, and *teshuvah* (repentance) are the only factors that have the ability to alter the Divine decrees made on Rosh HaShanah.

6. **Rabbi Yaakov Yisrael Kanievski (the Steipler Gaon), Birchat Peretz, Parshat Shemot – Hishtadlut enables the person to actualize the decree made on Rosh HaShanah.**

The rule is that every one of a man's actions and deeds does not affect him in the slightest, whether to add or subtract from that which was decreed for him on Rosh Hashanah (except through prayer, merits and repentance, which can alter the decree). When a person succeeds through his own devices and efforts in achieving his aspiration, it is because it was already decreed from Heaven that it would be so, and even without his hishtadlut, the matter would have been concluded to his benefit, either in this way or in a different way. Sometimes, a particular thing was not decreed for him, and sometimes a person is permitted to succeed but suffers a corresponding loss in a different area in which he would have gained, for no man's efforts can change a single iota of that which was decreed upon him.

הכלל כי כל מעשה אנוש ותחבולותיו לא יועילו אפילו כל שהוא להוסיף או לגרוע ממה שנגזר עליו בראש השנה [זולת ע"י תפילה וע"י זכויות ותשובה יכול הגזר דין להשתנות] ומה שהאדם בתחבולותיו ובהשתדלותו מצליח כמה פעמים לפעול כרצונו זה יבוא בדבר שכבר נגזר משמים שיהיה כן שגם לולי השתדלותו היה נגמר הדבר בכי טוב לטובתו בצורה זו או כיוצא בה, ויש שלא נגזר עליו דבר זה וגם כן הרבה פעמים מניחים אותו להצליח רק שלעומתו יפסיד כמות הנאה זו ממש במקום אחר ממה שהיה ראוי לו, כי לא יועיל שום השתדלות לשנות משהו מכפי מה שנגזר עליו

KEY THEMES OF SECTION II.

- ≈ Even though everything besides man's moral decisions is Divinely decreed, this does not mean that he is exempt from investing effort in obtaining his due. God causes the world to function in a natural way, and man must perform the tasks that the laws of nature dictate in order to earn his livelihood and the like. This is called hishtadlut.
- ≈ This explains why it appears, in this material world, as if success and failure (or wealth and poverty) are contingent on the amount of effort and toil invested. Really, such phenomena are Divinely decreed; engaging in hishtadlut is simply a condition for a decree to take effect.
- ≈ Hishtadlut cannot bring about effects beyond God's will. Whatever God desires is what will happen, and man has no power to influence the course of events by toiling in the physical realm. Only factors such as prayer, merits and repentance can influence the Divine decree.

SECTION III. QUALIFICATIONS TO THE PRINCIPLES OF FREE WILL

PART A. THE DECISIONS OF RULERS

Free will is a God-given gift, not something to which we are inherently entitled. God can and does suspend the free will of certain people in situations that warrant it. For instance, God does not allow world leaders to

have free will in the decisions they make. The choices of these powerful individuals are entirely dictated by God.

1. **Mishlei (Proverbs) 21:1 – A national leader's decisions are directed by God.**

The heart of the king is controlled by God.

לב מלך ביד ה'.

2. **Malbim, ibid. – God controls a king's decisions, since they have far-reaching ramifications.**

Even though an individual has the ability to exercise free will, this is not true of a king, for his decisions affect the welfare of the country. If the king would make a decision with negative consequences, the impact could be destructive to many people. Therefore, his heart is in God's hand, and regarding national matters, his free will is annulled.

הגם שלב האדם הפרטי נתון ברשותו והבחירה בידו, לא כן לב המלך - אחר שבבחירתו תלוי אושר הכלל, ואם יבחר בדרך רע ישחית רבים ועצומים, לכן לבו זה הכללי הוא ביד ד' - והוא בעניני הכלל משולל הבחירה.

PART B. PEOPLE WHO LACK FREE WILL

The Torah recognizes that there are certain classes of people who lack the mental ability to exert control over their actions and behavior. As a result, these people are not held accountable for their misdeeds. In this sense, they can be considered *lacking free will*.

1. **Rambam (Mishneh Torah), Laws of the Chagigah Offering 2:4 – A deaf-mute, a mentally incompetent person, and a minor are exempt from all of the Torah's commandments.**

Since a deaf-mute, a mentally incompetent person, and a minor are not categorized as being obligated in mitzvot, they are exempt from all of the mitzvot written in the Torah.

חרש שומה וקטן מפני שאינן בני חיוב הרי הן פטורים מכל מצוות האמורות בתורה.

As we discussed in the first Morasha class on Free Will, it is only due to the principle of free will that human beings can be held accountable for their actions. Thus, individuals who *lack* free will are not culpable for their misdeeds.

2. **Talmud Bavli, Bava Kamma 87a – Those who lack free will are not obligated to make restitution for any damage they have caused.**

Fighting with a deaf-mute, a mentally incompetent person, and a minor is immoral. Anyone who injures them is obligated to pay, whereas they are exempt from payment if they injure another person.

חרש שומה וקטן פגיעתן רעה החובל בהן חייב והם שחבלו באחרים פטורין.

3. **Pri Megadim, General Introduction to Shulchan Aruch, sec. II par. 1 – These individuals do not receive any punishment for their transgressions.**

They are capable of performing mitzvot, but

והם בני מצוות אלא דלאו בני דעה נינהו וגם כשעוברים

they do not have adequate mental faculties. Consequently, when they violate prohibitions, they are not punished in this world or the next, since God does not punish a person who sins without choice.

על לאו אין להם עונש בעולם הזה ובעולם הבא דאונס
רחמנא פטריה

If the purpose of man's existence is to earn reward by exercising his free will and choosing good over evil (see the Morasha classes on Body and Soul and Free Will I), why would God create human beings who lack free will? This is a profound question that is often a source of great pain to the families of such individuals. (We are not referring to minors, whose intellects will eventually mature. Rather, we are referring to people who are seemingly destined to live their lives as mentally incompetent.) It is said that the great sage, the Chazon Ish, used to stand up out of respect for any mentally disabled individual who entered the room. Why would he do so?

The Chazon Ish felt that the mentally disabled were actually the reincarnations of the souls of great people who had lived in previous generations, and whose souls had nearly reached perfection but needed to come back to this world in order to perfect themselves fully. God creates such people with limited or no free will, the Chazon Ish explained, to minimize the chances that they might make the wrong choices in their new lives, causing them to lose the spiritual reward that had accrued for them in the World to Come. In fact, it may very well be that their souls *asked* to be sent to the world in this form so that they would not lose their spiritual standing.

PART C. LOSING ONE'S FREE WILL

Although it is rare, it is possible for individuals, or even a nation, to lose their free will. An illustration of this concept is found in the Torah's account of the Exodus from Egypt. Pharaoh and the Egyptians were struck with a series of ten devastating plagues, but God promised Moshe at the outset that He would harden Pharaoh's heart so that the Egyptian sovereign would not give in and release the Jews.

1. **Shemot 7:3 – God took away Pharaoh's free will, thereby preventing him from giving in and allowing the Jews to leave Egypt.**

And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and I will increase My [miraculous] signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt.

ואני אקשה את לב פרעה והרביתי את אתתי ואת
מופתי בארץ מצרים.

Pharaoh's loss of free will is puzzling in light of what we have learned. Why would God suspend a person's free will and prevent him from repenting and improving his ways? The commentators offer various answers to this question.

2. **Rashi, *ibid.* – God knew that Pharaoh had no intention of improving. Therefore, God chose to use Pharaoh as an instrument to display His might.**

Since Pharaoh has acted wickedly and brazenly against Me and it is revealed before Me that the idol-worshipping nations have no intention to improve their behavior, it is better that his heart be hardened in order to increase My [miraculous] signs and have [Israel] recognize My strength ...

מאחר שהרשיע והתרים כנגדי וגלוי לפני שאין
נחת רוח באומות עו"א לתת לב שלם לשוב טוב לי
שיתקשה לבו למען הרבות בו אותותי ותכירו את
גבורותי.

Nevertheless, during the first five plagues [God did not harden Pharaoh's heart] for it is not stated, "And God hardened Pharaoh's heart," rather "Pharaoh's heart became hardened" [because of his own actions].

ואף על פי כן בחמש מכות הראשונות לא נאמר ויחזק ה' את לב פרעה, אלא ויחזק לב פרעה.

3. **Rambam, Hilchot Teshuvah 6:3 – Pharaoh lost his free will (and, consequently, the ability to repent) as a punishment for his sins.**

It is possible that a person may sin greatly or repeatedly, with full intention [and without remorse] to the point that he is prevented from repenting. He is not permitted to change his evil ways in order that he should die and be lost because of the actions he has done ... Therefore it is written in the Torah, "And I will strengthen Pharaoh's heart."

ואפשר שיחטא אדם חטא גדול או חטאים רבים עד שיתן הדין לפני דיין האמת שיהא הפרעון מזה החוטא על חטאים אלו שעשה ברצונו ומדעתו שמונעין ממנו התשובה ואין מניחין לו רשות לשוב מרשעו כדי שימות ויאבד בחטאו שיעשה... לפיכך כתוב בתורה ואני אחזק את לב פרעה.

Another question, which is a corollary to the first, is: If, in fact, Pharaoh was deprived of his free will, why was he then punished for his refusal to release the Jews?

4. **Ramban (Nachmanides), Shemot 7:3 – Why should Pharaoh be punished after losing his free will?**

There is a question many ask: If God hardened Pharaoh's heart, what then was his transgression [since he had no choice]? There are two answers, which both hold true: First, Pharaoh, in his wickedness, had unjustifiably treated the Jews terribly, so he was punished with the withdrawal of the path of repentance ...

Secondly, only the second half of the [ten] plagues were brought upon Egypt due to Pharaoh's transgressions, as the Torah states, "And Pharaoh's heart was strengthened," (Shemot 7:13, 26; 8:15), and "Pharaoh hardened his heart" (ibid. 8:28, 9:7). He did not want to send the Jews out of Egypt for the glory of God; rather, when the plagues increased and he was becoming too worn out to withstand them, his heart softened and he decided to send them out because of the severity of the plagues themselves, but not in order to do the will of God. Therefore, God hardened his heart in order to strengthen Pharaoh's resolve [not to send out the Jews] so that His Name would be declared [throughout the world]...

והנה פירשו בשאלה אשר ישאלו הכל, אם השם הקשה את לבו מה פשעו, ויש בו שני טעמים ושניהם אמת - האחד, כי פרעה ברשעו אשר עשה לישראל רעות גדולות חנם, נתחייב למנוע ממנו דרכי תשובה...

והטעם השני, כי היו חצי המכות עליו בפשעו, כי לא נאמר בהן רק ויחזק לב פרעה (להלן פסוק יג, כב, ח טו), וכבד פרעה את לבו (להלן ח כח, ט ז) הנה לא רצה לשלחם לכבוד השם, אבל כאשר גברו המכות עליו ונלאה לסבול אותם, רך לבו והיה נמלך לשלחם מכובד המכות, לא לעשות רצון בוראו ואז הקשה השם את רוחו ואמץ את לבבו למען ספר שמו...

The Ramban thus presents two distinct reasons for Pharaoh's loss of free will. The first is that, as the Rambam says, Pharaoh was deprived of his free will as a *punishment* for his misdeeds. Thus, his subsequent transgressions were *results* of his initial misdeeds, and therefore deserving of punishment. The second is that if Pharaoh had released the Jews as a result of the plagues, that act itself could not have been considered as emerging from his own free will. The suffering brought about by the plagues was so intense that Pharaoh could not possibly have chosen otherwise. God increased his obstinacy so that he could endure the plagues and still exercise freedom of choice.

PART D. IN MESSIANIC TIMES WE WILL LOSE OUR FREE WILL

Despite the crucial importance of free will vis-à-vis man's fulfillment of his mission in the world, we are not destined to retain our free will forever. In the Messianic era, our freedom of choice will come to an end. We will then serve God out of the clear understanding that we must follow His will.

1. **Ramban, Devarim 30:6 – In the Messianic era, we will no longer be confronted with the temptation to choose evil.**

In the days of the Messiah, choosing good will come naturally to them ... Man will not suffer from temptation; rather, he will do the correct thing by nature.

בימות המשיח תהיה הבחירה בטוב להם טבע... לא יהיה באדם חפץ אבל יעשה בטבעו המעשה הראוי

This does not, in any way, negate the significance of free will. On the contrary, it means that man will have achieved the desired end by utilizing his free will, and it is no longer necessary for him to have it.

2. **Ramchal, Daat Tevunot (The Knowing Heart), Siman 44 – The fact that *bechirah* will one day cease to exist proves that the world ultimately has a greater purpose: demonstrating the Oneness of God.**

But reality proves that the Oneness of God is destined to be revealed. For we see in the prophets' promises, which we have already quoted, that God will redeem Israel under any circumstances, even if they have no merits; he will remove the *yetzer hara* (evil inclination) from people, thereby "compelling" them to serve Him; yet all these things are opposed to reward and punishment and negate free will.

If God's intent was truly to uphold the concept of free will, and of reward and punishment – i.e., that the world should always consist of people who have freedom to choose to be righteous or wicked, and life will always be good for the righteous and bad for the wicked – it would have to be that way always, and it would never end. If that were true, it would mean that God wants to hold onto the attribute of judgment and apply it to His creations forever. But we know that this is not true, as we have proven from the Scriptures and from our Sages' teachings that ultimately

אבל המעשה מוכיח שהיחוד הוא העומד להתגלות. כי אנחנו רואים הבטחות הנביאים שהבאנום למעלה כבר, אשר הם מבטיחים שהקב"ה יגאל את ישראל על כל פנים, אפילו בלא זכות, ושיסיר יצה"ר מבני האדם ויכריחם לעבדו; והנה כל אלה הם נגד השכר ועונש ונגד הבחירה.

ואם היתה הכונה באמת להעמיד ענין הבחירה והשכר ועונש, דהיינו שיהיה העולם תמיד בנוי מבני בחירה, להיות צדיקים או רשעים כרצונם, ותמיד יהיה טוב לצדיקים או רע לרשעים, היה צריך שזה יהיה תמיד, ולא יהיה לו הפסק; וזה היה – שהקב"ה היה רוצה להחזיק במדת המשפט, להעמיד כל בריותיו בה כל הימים. אבל זה ידענו שאינו כך, כמו שהוכחנו מן המקראות, וכמבואר לנו בדברי חז"ל, שסוף כל סוף תסור הבחירה מן האדם, ולא יהיה עוד רעות בעולם, וכבר אמרו (ברכות י"א), "יתמו חטאים מן הארץ

mankind will lose its free choice and evil will no longer exist, as the Talmud (Berachot 10a) states, "The verse says that transgression will disappear from the land." If so, the ultimate goal does not refer to [man using free will and receiving] reward and punishment [for his actions], but rather to the world's general perfection. But [until that future time] God combined the two issues (i.e., that God runs the world now with man possessing free will and that God desires to reveal His Divine Presence), in His profound wisdom, in order to bring about the world's ultimate perfection.

כתיב. אם כן, אין סוף הכונה על השכר והעונש, אלא על התיקון הכללי. אלא שהרכיב הקב"ה שני הדברים כאחד, והיה זה מעומק עצתו לסבב הכל אל התיקון השלם.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION III.

- ⌘ Free will is not an absolute given. There are some individuals and situations that are not subject to it.
- ⌘ National leaders, such as monarchs, do not have free will in the political decisions they make. Because of the far-reaching impact of leaders' decisions, God directly controls their choices.
- ⌘ Certain individuals lack the mental faculties necessary for free will. These include deaf-mutes, the mentally incompetent, and minors.
- ⌘ Some commentators maintain that a person's free will may be removed as punishment for his sins, making it difficult or impossible for him to repent.
- ⌘ In the Messianic era, free will no longer will exist. The fact that *bechirah* will one day cease to exist proves that the world ultimately exists for a greater purpose: to demonstrate the Oneness of God.

CLASS SUMMARY:

HOW CAN WE HAVE FREE WILL IF GOD IS OMNIPOTENT AND DECREES EVERYTHING THAT OCCURS IN THE WORLD?

It is true that everything that occurs in the world is a result of God's decree. Nothing can take place in the world without God's directive. Nevertheless, this does not contradict the principle of free choice. Every human being has the ability to choose between right and wrong. God makes use of each individual's choices to bring about the events that He decrees.

HOW CAN WE HAVE FREE WILL IF GOD IS OMNISCIENT AND IS AWARE OF OUR FUTURE CHOICES BEFORE WE MAKE THEM?

God's awareness of all of our future choices does not contradict our ability to exercise free choice. The Rambam writes that it is impossible for us to fully understand this concept. Nevertheless, we must recognize that God's Divine knowledge is vastly different from human understanding. Therefore, whereas if a human being knew the future, it would preclude the possibility of free choice, God's knowledge does not preclude that possibility.

IF EVERYTHING IS A RESULT OF DIVINE DECREE, WHY DO OUR EFFORTS SOMETIMES SEEM TO PAY OFF?

Even though God decrees everything that takes place in the world, it is still necessary to engage in normal, natural activities to bring about that which He decreed. God created the world in such a way that everything that takes place must be the result of a natural process. On the other hand, it is important to be cognizant of the fact that our efforts are not the true cause of any success (or failure) we experience. Everything that takes place is really the result of God's will; our *hishtadlut*, or physical effort, is merely the condition that God stipulated must exist for Him to carry out His decree.

WHAT KINDS OF INDIVIDUALS ARE EXCLUDED FROM THE NORMAL PRINCIPLES OF FREE WILL?

The decisions of government leaders and world rulers are dictated by God and not placed in their own hands, since these decisions have far-reaching ramifications. In addition, individuals who lack ordinary mental competence do not possess free will.

HOW IS IT POSSIBLE FOR A PERSON TO LOSE HIS FREE WILL?

A person who sins gravely may be stripped of his free will as a punishment for his sins. As a result, he will lose the ability to repent.

WILL WE STILL POSSESS FREE WILL IN THE MESSIANIC ERA?

In the Messianic era, mankind will no longer operate under the principle of free will. Doing good – i.e., carrying out God's will – will come naturally to all people. This does not indicate that free will is not important. This simply means that free will is no longer necessary, since at that point mankind will have perfected themselves.

SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL READING

Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, Siftei Chaim, Emunah and Hashgachah

Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, Siftei Chaim, Emunah and Bechira