

WINS AND SINS: DO GOD AND FREE WILL GO TOGETHER?

Note:

This lesson includes more texts than can be covered in a 90-minute session. We encourage you to explore the texts not covered in class on your own time.

DEFINITIONS AND ANCIENT JEWISH POSITIONS

Absolute determinism is the general view that all events, including human actions, are produced by prior conditions, which make those events and actions inevitable. The predetermined influences can be either internal biological and psychological drives, or scientific-environmental rules, or metaphysical-divine forces.

By contrast, the notion of **absolute freedom of the mind** assumes that the human being is able to reach decisions while completely independent of either natural or metaphysical controlling forces.

Among the ancient Jews, three sects were segregated on the basis of fundamental theological disagreements:

The Essenes were extreme proponents for an absolute fatalistic (determinism) theory.

The Sadduceans believed in absolute free will with no divine providence, thus ascribing every action to mere chance.

The Pharisees accepted a theory that combines human free choice together with divine providence... According to this theory, God determines the rules and actions in the universe and supervises human deeds, but there exists a definite and extensive range of human freedom of mind.

(From: A. Steinberg. 1991. "Free Will vs. Determinism in Bioethics: Comparative Philosophical and Jewish Perspectives." ASSIA – Jewish Medical Ethics 2(1): 17-20)

BACKGROUND TO INTRODUCTORY TEXT

Born in Vienna in 1905, Viktor Frankl studied psychology from an early age, while still a high school student. He corresponded with Freud throughout his teenage years. After graduating high school, he studied medicine and specialized in neurology and psychiatry. He was able to work in his field until 1942, when he was deported along with his parents and his wife. Having been in four concentration camps from 1942 to 1945, he was the only one in his family to survive. After the war, Frankl wrote *Man's Search for Meaning*, in which he proposed that the primary motivation of human beings was realizing meaning in life.



INTRODUCTORY TEXT

VIKTOR FRANKL, *MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING*

(1905–1997) Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist, he was the founder of logotherapy (lit., “healing through meaning”), a meaning-centered school of psychotherapy.

Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.

Frankl, V. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2006, 66.



TEXT 1

DEUTERONOMY (*DEVARIM*) 30:15–20

15 See, I set before you this day life and prosperity, death and adversity. **16** For I command you this day, to love the ETERNAL your God, to walk in God's ways, and to keep God's commandments, laws, and rules—that you may thrive and increase, and that the ETERNAL your God may bless you in the land that you are about to enter and possess. **17** But if your heart turns away and you give no heed, and are lured into the worship and service of other gods, **18** I declare to you this day that you shall certainly perish; you shall not long endure on the soil that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. **19** I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life—if you and your offspring would live— **20** by loving the ETERNAL your God, by heeding God's commands, and by holding fast to [God]. For thereby you shall have life and shall long endure upon the soil that GOD swore to your fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give to them.

דְּבָרִים ל, טו-כ

טו רָאָה נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַיּוֹם אֶת הַחַיִּים וְאֶת הַטּוֹב וְאֶת הַמָּוֶת וְאֶת הָרָע. טז אֲשֶׁר אֲנִכִּי מִצִּוְּךָ הַיּוֹם לְאַהֲבָה אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְלַכֵּת בְּדַרְכָּיו וּלְשָׁמֵר מִצְוֹתָיו וְחֻקֹּתָיו וּמִשְׁפָּטָיו וְחַיִּיתָ וּרְבִיתָ וּבִרְכָּה ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בָּאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אָתָּה בָּא שָׁמָּה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ. יז וְאִם יִפְּנֶה לְבָבְךָ וְלֹא תִשְׁמָע וְנִדְחָתָ וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוִיתָ לֵאלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים וְעַבַּדְתָּם. יח הִגַּדְתִּי לָכֶם הַיּוֹם כִּי אֶבֶד תֵּאבְדוּן לֹא תֵאָרִיכּוּ יָמִים עַל הָאָדָמָה אֲשֶׁר אָתָּה עֹבֵר אֶת הַיַּרְדֵּן לְבֹא שָׁמָּה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ. יט הִעַדְתִּי בָכֶם הַיּוֹם אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ הַחַיִּים וְהַמָּוֶת נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְּלָלָה וּבַחֲרָתָ בַּחַיִּים לְמַעַן תַּחֲיֶה אִתָּה וְזָרַעְךָ. כ לְאַהֲבָה אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשִׁמְעַת בְּקִלּוֹ וּלְדַבְּקָה בּוֹ כִּי הוּא חַיִּיהָ וְאָרְצָה יְמֶיהָ לְשִׁכּוֹת עַל הָאָדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁפַּע ה' לְאַבְתִּיךָ לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וּלְיַעֲקֹב לְתֵת לָהֶם.



TEXT 2

RABBI MOSHE CHAYYIM LUZZATTO, *DEREKH HASHEM (THE WAY OF GOD) 1:3:1*

(1707–1747) Known by the acronym Ramchal; kabbalist, poet, playwright, and author of ethical works in Italy and Amsterdam.

. . . 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,

5 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

10 either side, knowingly and willingly, as well as to possess whichever one he wishes.

Man was therefore created with both a Good Urge (Yetzer Tov) and an Evil Urge

(Yetzer Hara). He has the power to incline himself in whichever direction he desires.

Translated by A. Kaplan. Jerusalem, New York: Feldheim Publishers, 1983, 45.

רב משה חיים לוצאטו, דרך ה' א:ג:א

. . . היות האדם אותה הבריה הנבראת לדבק בו יתברך שמו, והיא המוטלת בין השלמות

והחסרונות, והיכולת בידו לקנות השלמות.

ואולם צריך שיהיה זה בבחירתו ורצונו, כי אלו היה מוכרח במעשיו להיות בוחר על כל פנים

בשלמות, לא היה נקרא באמת בעל שלמות, ולא היתה הפונה העליונה מתקיימת.

על כן הוכרח שיונח הדבר לבחירתו, שתהיה נטיתו שקולה לשני הצדדים ולא מוכרחת לאחד

מהם, ויהיה בו כוח הבחירה לבחור בדעת ובחפץ באיזה מהם שירצה, והיכולת גם כן בידו לקנות

איזה מהם שירצה.

על כן נברא האדם ביצור טוב וביצור רע, והבחירה בידו להטות עצמו לצד שהוא רוצה.



TEXT 3 MISHNAH, AVOT 3:15

Compilation of teachings of 3rd century BCE scholars–3rd century CE scholars in Israel (*tanna'im*): compiled and edited by Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi.

Everything is foreseen yet freedom of choice is granted . . .

מִלְשָׁנָה, מִסֵּכֶת אָבוֹת ג', טו
הַכֹּל צָפוּי, וְהָרְשׁוּת נְתוּנָה . . .



TEXT 4 MAIMONIDES (RAMBAM), MISHNEH TORAH, LAWS OF REPENTANCE 5:5

(1135–1204) (Moshe ben Maimon) Philosopher, codifier, communal leader, and doctor in Spain and Egypt.

Should you ask, does God know everything that will happen before it has happened, so God knows whether a particular person will be righteous or wicked, or does God not know? If [God] knows that such a person will be righteous, then it will be impossible for that person not to be righteous. And if [God] knows that the person
5 will be righteous but it is possible for them to be wicked, then [God] does not know everything clearly . . . God does not know with a knowledge that is external, like humans, whose knowledge and selves are two. Rather, [God], whose name should be praised, and [God's] knowledge are one. The human mind cannot comprehend this concept clearly, for just as it is beyond the potential of the human being to
10 comprehend and discover the essential nature of the Creator . . . so, too, is it beyond their potential to comprehend and discover the Creator's knowledge . . . And since this is so, we do not have the capability to know how God knows all creations and events, but we know without doubt that a person's actions are in their control and that God does not tug or decree upon them to do [anything] . . . It has been said
15 because of this . . . that a person is judged according to all their actions . . .

רב משה בן מימון (רמב"ם), משנה תורה, הלכות תשובה ה, ה
 שמא תאמר ויהיו הקדוש ברוך הוא יודע כל מה שיהיה וקדם שיהיה ידע שזה יהיה צדיק או רשע
 או לא ידע אם ידע שהוא יהיה צדיק אי אפשר שלא יהיה צדיק ואם תאמר שידע שיהיה צדיק ואפשר
 שיהיה רשע הרי לא ידע הדבר על בריו . . . שהקדוש ברוך הוא אינו יודע מדעה שהיא חוץ ממנו כבני
 אדם שהם ודעתם שנים אלא הוא יתעלה שמו ודעתו אחד ואין דעתו של אדם יכולה להשיג דבר זה על
 בריו וכשם שאין כוח באדם להשיג ולמצא אמתת הבורא . . . כך אין כוח באדם להשיג ולמצא דעתו
 של בורא . . . וכיון שכן הוא אין בנו כוח לידע היאך ידע הקדוש ברוך הוא כל הברואים והמעשים
 אבל נדע בלא ספק שמעשה האדם ביד האדם ואין הקדוש ברוך הוא מושכו ולא גוזר עליו לעשות כך . .
 . ומפני זה נאמר . . . שדנין את האדם על כל מעשיו כפי מעשיו.

BACKGROUND TEXT 5

When the Torah describes God's plan to create humankind, it reveals God's plan for humanity, "And God created humankind in the divine image, creating it in the image of God . . ." (Genesis 1:27). What does it mean to be created in the image of God? In the following text, Rabbi Meir Dvinsk explains his understanding of being created in the image of God.



TEXT 5

RABBI MEIR SIMCHA OF DVINSK (KNOWN BY THE NAME OF HIS BOOK, *MESHECH CHOCHMAH*), *MESHECH CHOCHMAH* ON GENESIS 1:27

(1843–1926) Rabbinic leader in Latvia known for his writings on Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* titled *Ohr Somayach*, as well as his commentary on the Torah, titled *Meshech Chochmah*.

To be created in the image of God (b'tzelem Elokim) is to be created with freedom of choice, unbound by compulsory instinct, with independent will and intellect. For the purpose of providing us with freedom of choice, God holds back His divine power.

The Holy One, Blessed be, allows room for God's creations to do that which they so choose, and keeps what would be God's decree or decision out of their personal

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choice. [God allows] humankind the freedom to choose to do good or bad as his soul desires, the ability to do things against his own natural disposition, and in opposition to that which is right in the eyes of God.

Rav M. S. Kohen. 1978. *Meshech Chochmah*. Jerusalem: Export Book Project.



TEXT 6

RABBANIT YEMIMA MIZRACHI, *DIVINE PROVIDENCE OR FREE WILL?*

(b. 1967) Israeli author, teacher, inspirational speaker, attorney by training, and a Rabbinical Court advocate.

How does this work? After all, God's providence is on every little thing we do, and still we have the ability to make choices!

So there are many answers offered by the greatest philosophers, [but] with God, this
5 duality is possible. In other words, [it is as if God said,] “I know what you will choose in the end, I know, and still I am giving you the chance to choose. The fact that I know does not mean that I am influencing your choice.”

There is one thing said in Judaism, and this is revolutionary: “All is in the hands of Heaven except for the fear of Heaven” (Berakhot 33b). “There is one matter wherein

10 I seemingly clear the path for you,” says God to you, “and now it is on you to choose left or right. I beg you, as a father begs his daughter, to ‘choose life’ (Deuteronomy 30:19) – please choose correctly. And I also know, because of my divinity, what you will choose in the end, and still this does not contradict your freedom to choose.”

15 This close [divine] providence – what does it mean? How do the Sages describe it? God shows you the good and the evil, and God puts your hand on the good. In other words, how does this Providence become manifest? In that always, always, will your heart lean toward God and toward the good more than to the not so good. In this way God interferes – by God putting your hand on that which is good.

20 You will always have the feeling that, “Oh, I am very conflicted because I would like to do either this or that...” That is a lie. For you will always feel in your heart what is the right thing to do. You will always say, “I know that I need this, but I really want that...”

In this way, we do not have true free will. We never, ever have two choices before our eyes where we can say, “it’s fifty-fifty” ([although] we lie to ourselves). At most it will be 51 percent or 50.5 percent [in favor of the good] because we were created to turn toward the good. “The inclination of a person is toward evil from his youth” (Genesis 8:21). He will always tell you, “no, no, [choose] this one, this one,” but you have this [sign] that always marks the way for you, like Waze telling you to turn right. If you want to reroute and to go another way, [God] will reroute for you, but you know the road, it’s been shown to you.

(Translation by Rabbi Abe Weschler)

רַבִּנִּית יְמִימָה מְזַרְחִי, הַשְׁגָּחָה פְּרִטִּית אוֹ בְּחִירָה חֲפְשִׁית?
 אִיךָ זֶה מְסַתֵּדֵר? הֲרֵי הוּא מְשַׁגֵּיחַ עַל כָּל פִּיפֶס שְׁאֵנָחֵנו עוֹשִׁים, וְעֵדִין יֵשׁ בָּנוּ הִיכּוּלֶת לְבָחֹר.
 אֲזַי, יֵשׁ הָמוֹן הָמוֹן תְּשׁוּבוֹת שֶׁל גְּדוּלֵי הַפִּילוֹסוֹפִים.
 אֲצֵל רַבּוֹנוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם הַשְּׁנִיּוֹת הַזֶּה מִתְאַפְּשֶׁת.
 זֹאת אוֹמֶרֶת, אֲנִי יוֹדֵעַ מַה תִּבְחָרִי בַסּוּף, אֲנִי יוֹדֵעַ, וְעֵדִין אֲנִי מֵאֲפָשֶׁר לָךְ לְבָחֹר. זֹאת אוֹמֶרֶת, זֶה שְׁאֲנִי יוֹדֵעַ, זֶה לֹא אוֹמֵר שְׁאֲנִי מְשַׁפִּיעַ עַל בְּחִירָתָךְ.
 לֵשׁ דְּבָר אֶחָד, וְזֶה מִהֶפְכְּנִי בִּיחָדוֹת, שְׁאוֹמֵר: “הַכֹּל בְּיַד שָׁמַיִם, חוּץ מִיִּרְאֵת שָׁמַיִם.”
 לֵשׁ מִשְׁהוֹ אֶחָד שָׁבוּ, כְּבִיכּוֹל, אֲנִי מִפְּנֵה אֶת הַדֶּרֶךְ, רַבּוֹנוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם, וְאוֹמֵר לָךְ: “שְׁלֹךְ. עֲמָשׁוּ אֶת מַחְלִיטָה יְמִינָה אוֹ שְׁמֵאלָהּ. אֲנִי עוֹמֵד וּמִתְחַנֵּן אֵלֶיךָ, כְּאֶפֶס אֶל בֵּית, וּבְחִירָתָ בְּחַיִּים. בְּבִקְשָׁה, תִּבְחָרִי נָכוֹן. אֲנִי גַם יוֹדֵעַ מִכַּח אֱלוֹהוּתִי שִׁיּוֹדֵעַ הַכֹּל בְּמַה תִּבְחָרִי בַסּוּף, וְעֵדִין זֶה לֹא סוֹתֵר אֶת הַחֲפְשִׁיּוֹת שֶׁבְּבְחִירָה שְׁלֹךְ.”
 הַהֲשָׁגָה הַצְּמוּדָה הַזֶּה – מַה הַמְשַׁמְעוֹת שְׁלָהּ? אִיךָ זֶה מְכַנֶּה בְּמִדְרָשׁ בְּחַיִּיל: הוּא מֵרָאֵה לָךְ אֶת הַטּוֹב וְאֶת הָרַע, וְהוּא שֵׁם אֶת יְדֶךָ עַל הַחֲלָק הַטּוֹב. זֹאת אוֹמֶרֶת, בְּמַה מִתְבַּטָּאת הַהֲשָׁגָה? בְּזֶה שֶׁתָּמִיד תָּמִיד – לְצַד הַנָּכוֹן וְהַטּוֹב – תִּהְיֶה לָךְ בְּלֵב נְטִיָּה אֵלָיו יוֹתֵר מֵאֲשֶׁר לְדְבָר הַלֹּא טוֹב. תָּמִיד.
 בְּזֶה הוּא מִתְעַרֵּב, שֵׁם אֶת יְדֶךָ עַל הַחֲלָק הַטּוֹב, זֹאת אוֹמֶרֶת, אֶת תָּמִיד תָּמִיד תְּרַגְּשִׁי: “וְוַאֲנִי, אֲנִי מִמְּלַחְמָת, לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת זֶה אוֹ אֶת זֶה..?” זֶה תָּמִיד שֶׁקָּרָא בְּנִפְשָׁהּ, כִּי הַדְּבָר הַטּוֹב לְעוֹלָם יִרְגֵּשׁ בְּלֵב.
 אֶת תָּמִיד תְּגִידִי: “אֲנִי יוֹדֵעַת שֶׁזֶה מַה שְׁאֲנִי צְרִיכָה, אֲכַל אֶת זֶה אֲנִי כָּךְ רוֹצָה.”
 בְּזֶה – הַבְּחִירָה שֶׁלָּנוּ הִיא לֹא לְהוֹטִין חֲפְשִׁית, מִפְּנֵי שְׁאֵפֶעַס, אֶפֶס (וְאֵנָחֵנו מְשַׁקְרִים לַעֲצָמָנוּ), אֲבָל אֶפֶס לֹא יִהְיֶה מוֹלֵךְ שְׁתֵּי בְּחִירוֹת וְאֶת תְּגִידִי: “זֶה חֲמִשִּׁים חֲמִשִּׁים” – זֶה לֹא נָכוֹן!
 לְטוֹבָה יוֹתֵר – תִּהְיֶה אֲצִלָּה מְשַׁגֵּל שֶׁל חֲמִשִּׁים וְאַחַת אַחוֹז, חֲמִשִּׁים וְחִצִּי, כִּי נִבְרָאנוּ לְנִטּוֹת לְטוֹב.
 “יִצְחָר לֵב הָאָדָם רַע מִנְעָרָיו”. תָּמִיד יִגִּיד לָךְ, “לֹא, לֹא, הִנֵּה, הִנֵּה”. אֲבָל יֵשׁ בְּךָ אֶת הַמְשַׁקּוּלֶת הַזֶּה, שֶׁתָּמִיד תִּסְמֵן לָךְ, בְּסִמּוֹן כְּזֶה שֶׁל הַוִּיז, “פְּנֵה יְמִינָה.”

אם תרצי לחשב מסלול מחדש, לפנות למקום אחר, הוא יחשב לך מסלול מחדש, אבל את ידעת
בהתחלה את הכביש, הראו לך אותו!

Available at ashira.co.il. Viewed April 2025.



TEXT 7

RABBI NOACH WEINBERG, *FREE WILL – OUR GREATEST POWER*

(1930–2009) Founder and dean of Aish HaTorah.

What does it mean to be created in the image of God?

Unlike other creations, the human being has free will. Within this divine spark lies our potential to shape and change the world.

5

Proper use of free will beautifies and perfects. Misuse of free will plunders and destroys.

It is a uniquely human endeavor to learn how to use free will properly. . . .

- 10 Is picking chocolate over the vast array of other flavors a “free will choice?” No. It is simply the exercise of a preference, just as a cow chooses to eat hay instead of grass.

“Free will” refers to the type of decision which is uniquely human: a moral choice.

- 15 But don’t mistakenly think that morality is the choice between “good and evil.” *Everyone* chooses to be “good” – even the most evil, immoral people. Hitler rationalized that the Jews were the enemies of the world, so in his mind he justified that as doing “good.”
- 20 Rather, free will is the choice between life and death. As the Torah says: “I have put before you, life and death... Choose life so that you may live.” (Deut. 30:19)

Available online at Aish.com. Viewed September 2020.



TEXT 8 GENESIS (*BERESHIT*) 4:3-13

3 In the course of time, Cain brought an offering to GOD from the fruit of the soil;
4 and Abel, for his part, brought the choicest of the firstlings of his flock. GOD paid heed to Abel and his offering, **5** but paid no heed to Cain and his offering. Cain was much distressed and his face fell.

6 And GOD said to Cain,
“Why are you distressed,
And why is your face fallen?”

7 Surely, if you do right,
There is uplift.
But if you do not do right
Sin couches at the door;
Its urge is toward you,
Yet you can be its master.”

8 Cain said to his brother Abel ... and when they were in the field, Cain set upon his brother Abel and killed him. **9** GOD said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” And he said, “I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?” **10** “What have you done? Hark, your brother’s blood cries out to Me from the ground! **11** Therefore, you shall be more cursed than the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. **12** If you till the soil, it shall no longer yield its strength to you. You shall become a ceaseless wanderer on earth.” **13** Cain said to GOD, “My punishment is too great to bear!

פִּרְאשִׁית ד', ג-יג

ג וַיְהִי מִקֵּץ יָמִים וַיָּבֵא קַיִן מִפְּרִי הָאֲדָמָה מִנְחָה לַה'. ד וְהָקֵל הִבִּיא גַם הוּא מִבְּכֹרוֹת צֹאנוֹ וּמִחֲלִבָּהוּ וַיִּשַׁע ה' אֶל הַקֵּל וְאֶל מִנְחָתוֹ. ה וְאֶל קַיִן וְאֶל מִנְחָתוֹ לֹא שָׁעָה וַיַּחַר לְקַיִן מְאֹד וַיִּפְּלוּ פָּנָיו. ו וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל קַיִן לָמָּה חָרָה לָךְ וְלָמָּה נָפְלוּ פָּנֶיךָ. ז הֲלוֹא אִם תֵּיטִיב שְׂאֵת וְאִם לֹא תֵיטִיב לִפְתָּח חַטָּאת רֹבֵץ וְאֵלֶיךָ תִּשְׁוֹקֶתוּ וְאַתָּה תִּמְשָׁל בּוֹ. ח וַיֹּאמֶר קַיִן אֶל הַקֵּל אָחִיו וַיְהִי בִּהְיוֹתָם בַּשָּׂדֶה וַיָּקָם קַיִן אֶל הַקֵּל אָחִיו וַיַּהַרְגֶהוּ. ט וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל קַיִן אֵי הַקֵּל אָחִיךָ וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יָדַעְתִּי הֲשֹׁמֵר אָחִי אָנֹכִי. י וַיֹּאמֶר מָה עָשִׂיתָ קוֹל דְּמֵי אָחִיךָ צֹעֲקִים אֵלַי מִן הָאֲדָמָה. יא וְעַתָּה אֲרֹר אֶתָּה מִן הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר פָּצְתָה אֶת פִּיהָ לְקַחַת אֶת דְּמֵי אָחִיךָ מִיָּדְךָ. יב כִּי תַעֲבֹד אֶת הָאֲדָמָה לֹא תִסֹּף תֵּת כֹּחָהּ לָךְ נָע וְנָד תַּחֲיֶיהָ בָּאָרֶץ. יג וַיֹּאמֶר קַיִן אֶל ה' גָּדוֹל עֲוֹנִי מִנְּשׂוֹא.



TEXT 9 ECCLESIASTES (*KOHELET*) 7:20

For there is not one good man on earth who does what is best and doesn't err.

קוֹהֵלֶת ז, כ

כִּי אָדָם אֵין צַדִּיק בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה טוֹב וְלֹא יִחַטָּא.



TEXT 10 MAIMONIDES (RAMBAM), *MISHNEH TORAH, LAWS OF REPENTANCE 5:1-2*

(1135–1204) (Moshe ben Maimon) Philosopher, codifier, communal leader, and doctor in Spain and Egypt.

(1) Free will is granted to all people: If one wanted to turn oneself to a good path and to be righteous, they have the free will [to do so], and if one wanted to turn oneself to an evil path and be wicked, they have the free will [to do so] . . .

- 5 (2) Do not let this thing that the simpletons of the nations of the world and that most of the Jewish fools say cross your mind, that God decrees for a person to be righteous or wicked from the moment of conception. The matter is not so; rather, every person is capable of being righteous like Moses our teacher or wicked like [King] Jeroboam, [to be] wise or foolish, compassionate or cruel, stingy or wasteful,
- 10 and so on for all of the character traits . . . And again he said, since the choice is in our hands, and we perpetrated all the evils, it is appropriate for us to repent and abandon our wickedness, since we now have free will, as is written afterward, "Let us search and try our ways, and return [to God]" (Lamentations 3:40).

רב משה בן מימון (רמב"ם), משנה תורה, הלכות תשובה ה, א-ב
א רשות לכל אדם נתונה אם רצה להטות עצמו לדרך טובה ולהיות צדיק הרשות בידו ואם רצה
להטות עצמו לדרך רעה ולהיות רשע הרשות בידו. . .

ב אל מעבר במחשבתך דבר זה שאומרים טפשי אמות העולם ורב גלמי בני ישראל שתקדוש ברוך הוא
גוזר על האדם מתחלת ברייתו להיות צדיק או רשע אין הדבר כן אלא כל אדם ראוי לו להיות צדיק
כמשה רבנו או רשע כירבעם או חכם או סכל או רחמן או אכזרי או כילי או שוע וכן שאר כל הידעות .
. . וחזור ואמר הואיל ורשותנו בידנו ומדעתנו עשינו כל הרעות ראוי לנו לחזור בתשובה ולעזב רשענו
שהרשות עתה בידנו הוא שכתוב אחריו נחפשה דרכינו ונחנה ונשובה וגו'.



TEXT 11

RABBI ELIZABETH DUNKER, *DREAM TO REALITY*

Ordained at Hebrew Union College, Rabbi at Congregation Kol Ami, Vancouver, Washington.

Very often, I find myself unexpectedly in conversations discussing God's omnipotence and omniscience in relation to our free will. While there are many wonderful and very deep works written on the subject, for the sake of time and energy, I generally boil it down to two sentences. "We have complete free will.

- 5 Also, God knows which choices we are going to make and maintains hope that we will make the better choices." The reasonable next question is always about punishment. There are plenty of moments in the Torah where one can point and show that the wrong decision brought punishment from God. And so, if God will punish us for our bad choices, is that actually free will? I maintain that the answer to
10 that is still "yes."

Free will does not mean an absence of consequences. We all make decisions all the time, knowing that some form of punishment might be the outcome, and we accept those risks. When I exceed the speed limit and receive a ticket, I am exercising my
15 free will and I accept the possible consequence as I put my foot down hard. The authorities punish me for my action and maintain the hope that I will have learned something before the next time I get behind the wheel. Some days I do and some

days I don't, and sometimes it seems that those radar guns are kind of omnipotent, but I accept my responsibility and I understand that all action (or inaction) has

20 consequences, and I always have choices.

Sometimes we actively bring those consequences onto ourselves. The people in the world who lived after the flood may have done just that. They said, "Come, let us build us a city with a tower that reaches the sky, so that we can make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over all the earth!" (Genesis 11:4). They were afraid that their inaction would cause them to be scattered, and so they made a choice to build the tower in order to maintain their unity. God responds to their act by saying, "Look—these are all one people with one language, and this is just the beginning . . . of their doings; now no scheme of theirs will be beyond their reach!" (Genesis 11:6).

25 30 God decides to "confuse" their speech, and without the ability to communicate with each other they are scattered throughout the earth. As it turned out, their action brought exactly the situation they feared. It was because of their tower that they were scattered. The people were so concerned about being spread out that it is as if they were compelled to do the one thing that would cause this event to occur. . . .

35

If God is omniscient and omnipresent in the ways we so often hope, wouldn't God then know what we want, and if God loved us, wouldn't God help bring those things to fruition? Of course the answer to that is "no." We have considerable power over our own lives. We are able to choose every day. Our choices are not just about good and evil—things would be much easier if that's all they were. We can choose between red and yellow, we can choose to buy a house this year or next, to take this job or that. We have so many choices, so much free will; sometimes it seems like too much. We make our best choices when we look up and envision the future we hope to have and when we act in a way that will lead us to that future. I believe those are the choices God waits and hopes for us to make.

45

Available online at reformjudaism.org. Viewed September 2020.



TEXT 12

RABBI JONATHAN SACKS, [FREE WILL](#)

(b. 1948) Former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth, philosopher, author, and thought leader.

(The video is hyperlinked to the title above.)

Isaac Bashevis Singer said it best: “Vee have to have freedom; we have no choice!” And of course, he was right, because Judaism is predicated on freedom. The truth is that in the ancient world, the polytheistic world, all the gods were part of nature and therefore they were subject to the laws of nature. Along comes Judaism and
5 for the first time discovers a transcendent God Who stands outside the universe, Who is free to create or not to create. And when He makes Humanity “in our image,” he bestows on us that gift of freedom. It cost God a great deal to give us freedom; because if we didn’t have it we could never rebel against Him, we could never sin, we could never threaten the future of the world He created. But so precious is
10 freedom, that God gave it to us.

How do we know that we have freedom? And the answer lies in a single concept called teshuva in Judaism – repentance. And here it is: you find yourself in a certain situation and, for some reason – temptation, weakness, fear, who knows what – you
15 do something wrong. Comes Yom Kippur, you feel bad about it, you do teshuva, you say “forgive me God, I recognize I made a mistake. Then some later time in your life, you find yourself in exactly the same situation and this time you don’t make that mistake. That proves that you have changed; that proves that it was not a combination of the environment and genetics that determined your action. Your
20 action was determined by your choice; the first time you chose one way, the second time you chose another way. That means we are free.

Many people have tried to deny freedom because it’s a scary thing. Some people held that our fate was in the stars; Marx said our fate is in the economic system;
25 Freud said our fate is in the hands of primal, repressed, unconscious drives. Darwin said it’s all in genetics. None of that explains the fact that actually we can change our way of life, whatever our economic status, whatever our unconscious drives, whatever our genetically coded instincts. The truth is we are free. Bashevis Singer was right – we have no choice but to be free.



TEXT 13

RABBI ADIN STEINSALTZ, *THE LONGER SHORT WAY: DISCOURSES ON CHASIDIC THOUGHT*

(1937–2020) Israeli Chasidic rabbi, teacher, philosopher, social critic, author, translator, and publisher.

What is most incredible about all this [the descent of holiness from the Godhead to our world] is the role of man. Placed at the end of the series of contractions, together with gross matter and the evil impulse, man is also the purpose of it all. Having been granted a Divine Soul in a material body, man stands between light and
5 darkness, between good and evil; and in choosing the light and the good, he raises himself to holiness. By doing so he justifies the emanation of all the worlds; he gives the creative process a meaning. Because in themselves, the higher worlds are, to a large degree, totally dependent on God; they are built and are made to function, according to set laws of Divine unfolding. Only man has the freedom to choose and
10 to change the otherwise fixed course of events...

Steinsaltz, A. *The Long Shorter Way: Discourses on Chasidic Thought*. Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2014, 329.

KEY TERMS

Chet, chattat. [חֵטָא, חַטָּאת]. “Sin.” The term *chattat* also refers to the sin offering, that offering brought to the Temple for particular violations under certain circumstances, the most essential circumstance being that the sin was not committed intentionally.

Foreknowledge. Having an awareness of events yet to transpire. God is usually thought of as having foreknowledge of all human and cosmic events.

Free will. [בְּחִירָה חֶפְזִית]. *bechirah chofshit*. The idea that one has control over the choices one makes in life. Free will may mean for some in the absolute sense, meaning total control, or it could be understood as being limited by one or more factors such as personality traits and the environment.

Omniscience. In the context of the divine, this term is usually taken to mean complete knowledge, although it does not need to mean that and it could mean maximal knowledge.

Teshuvah. [תְּשׁוּבָה]. “Repentance.” The root means “to return” or “to turn away from.” Both of these meanings are used in the context of repentance – to turn away from one’s wayward tendencies and to return the path of good and righteousness.

Yetzer haRa. [יֵצֶר הָרָע]. “Impulse for evil.” That inclination to engage in activity deemed by the Torah or by the Rabbis to be sinful or to avoid behaviors that are deemed virtuous.

Yetzer Tov. [יֵצֶר טוֹב]. “Impulse for good.” That inclination to engage in activity deemed by the Torah or by the Rabbis to be virtuous or to avoid behaviors that are deemed sinful.

KEY NAMES

Beruria. One of only several women of wisdom quoted in the Talmud. She was the wife of the *tanna* Rabbi Meir and the daughter of Rabbi Chananiah son of Teradion, who is listed as one of the “Ten Martyrs” killed by the Romans in Hadrianic persecutions in the aftermath of the failed Bar Kokhba revolt of 135 CE. She is greatly admired for her breadth of knowledge in matters pertaining to both *halakhah* and *aggadah*.

Dunsker, Rabbi Elizabeth. Reform rabbi who has served as the spiritual leader of Congregation Kol Ami in Vancouver, Washington. She served congregations in Austin, Texas, and Suffern, New York. She is known for her commitment to social justice, LGBTQ inclusion, and interfaith dialogue, and has contributed writings to ReformJudaism.org and the Central Conference of American Rabbis’ RavBlog.

Frankl, Viktor. (1905–1997). Prominent Austrian Jewish psychiatrist, psychotherapist, and neurologist in Vienna. Prior to his deportation to the concentration camps, he helped numerous patients avoid the Nazi euthanasia program that targeted the mentally disabled. He developed the psychological approach known as logotherapy, widely recognized as the “third school” of Viennese psychotherapy, after the “first school” of Sigmund Freud and the “second school” of Alfred Adler. He is the author of many books, most noted for his best-selling book *Man’s Search for Meaning* based on his experiences in various Nazi concentration camps.

Maimonides. (1135–1204). Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, also known as Rambam, was born in Spain, but he lived most of his life in Egypt, where he served as a physician and leader of the Jewish community. He is one of the pre-eminent Jewish philosophers and codifiers of all time. His *Mishneh Torah* became one of the central works of halakhic literature and his *Guide for the Perplexed* (*Moreh Nevukhim*) is one of the most important Jewish philosophical treatises ever written.

Meshech Chochmah [Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk]. (1843–1926). Prominent Lithuanian rabbi, halachic authority, and Torah scholar, best known for his influential works *Meshech Chochmah* on the Torah and *Ohr Sameach* on Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*. Born in Lithuania, he served for over 40 years as the rabbi of Dvinsk (now Daugavpils, Latvia), where he was deeply respected by both the traditional and more modern segments of the Jewish community. His writings display a rare combination of deep halachic analysis and philosophical insight. *Meshech Chochmah* is particularly noted for its broad conceptual approach and often prophetic commentary on Jewish history and exile.

Mizrachi, Rabbanit Yemima. (b. 1967). Renowned author, teacher, and inspirational speaker, since 2001, she has given weekly lectures in Jerusalem that are now attended by thousands of women of all ages and affiliations, and her classes are disseminated virtually throughout the world. An attorney and rabbinical court advocate by training, she speaks on a wide variety of topics: the weekly *parashah*, faith, prayer, marriage and relationships, family, holidays, and more. She also hosts a weekly program on Kan, Israel's public radio station.

Ramchal. Acronym for Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (1707–1746). Rabbi Luzzatto was an Italian kabbalist and the author of ethical works and poetry. Two of his major works are *Mesillat Yesharim* (Path of the Just) and *Derech Hashem* (Way of God).

Sacks, Rabbi Lord Jonathan. (1948–2020). An international religious leader, philosopher, award-winning author and respected moral voice, he was awarded the 2016 Templeton Prize in recognition of his “exceptional contributions to affirming life’s spiritual dimension.” He was a frequent and sought-after contributor to radio, television, and the press both in Britain and around the world. After stepping down as the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth – a position he served for twenty-two years between 1991 and 2013 – he held a number of professorships at several academic institutions including Yeshiva University, New York University, and King’s College London. He authored more 30 books. He received numerous awards for his contributions to presenting Judaism in a fresh and meaningful way.

Steinsaltz, Rabbi Adin Even-Israel. (1937–2020). Educator, philosopher, social critic, and prolific author, his lifelong work in Jewish education earned him the Israel Prize, Israel's highest honor. Of his most significant works are the full translation and commentary of the entire Babylonian Talmud, and of the Tanakh, much of which he authored himself. In 1965, he began his monumental translation of the Talmud; its completion was commemorated in 2010 by the inaugural Global Day of Jewish Learning, which has since become an annual international event in over 40 countries.

Weinberg, Rabbi Yisrael Noach. (1930–2009). Pioneering Orthodox rabbi and visionary educator, best known as the founder and Rosh Yeshiva of Aish HaTorah, a global Jewish outreach organization. His approach emphasized empowering students to become outreach educators themselves, aiming to reconnect Jews worldwide with their heritage. Under his leadership, Aish HaTorah expanded to over 30 branches globally, offering programs like the Discovery Seminar, Jerusalem Fellowships, and Hasbara Fellowships. His teachings, including “The 48 Ways to Wisdom” and “The 5 Levels of Pleasure,” have inspired countless individuals.

Zeldman, Rabbi Moshe. Canadian-born Orthodox rabbi, educator, and speaker renowned for his dynamic approach to Jewish outreach and education. He has lectured extensively on Torah, Jewish philosophy, ethics, and personal development in over 25 countries. He has been a senior lecturer at Aish HaTorah and was the founder of Core18 Leaders Lab. Currently, he directs “Meet the Israelis,” a program fostering dialogue across Israel's diverse communities, and hosts the “Shmoozing” podcast. He is also the author of *Why Listen to the Rabbis?: The Authenticity of the Oral Law*, which explores the foundations of Jewish tradition.

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APPENDIX

A biblical text and its interpretation that suggest examining one's attitude toward sins and sinners.



[A1]

PSALMS (TEHILLIM) 104:35

May sinners disappear from the earth,
and the wicked be no more.

Bless GOD, O my soul.

Hallelujah.

תְּהִלִּים קֹד, לֵה

יִתְּמוּ חַטָּאִים מִן הָאָרֶץ וְרָשָׁעִים עוֹד אֵינָם בָּרָכִי נַפְשִׁי אֶת ה' הִלְלוּ יְהוָה.



[A2]

BABYLONIAN TALMUD, TRACTATE BERAKHOT 10A

Compilation of teachings of 3rd–6th century scholars in Babylonia (*amora'im*); final redaction in the 6th–7th centuries.

There were once some lawless people in the neighborhood of Rabbi Meir who caused him a great deal of trouble. Rabbi Meir accordingly prayed that they should die. His wife, Beruria, said to him, On what basis do you feel that such a prayer is permitted? Do you base yourself on the verse, “Let sins (*chatta'im*) cease from the land” (Psalms 104:35)? But is it written, “Let sinners (*chot'im*) cease”? Further, look at the end of the verse, “and they will no longer be wicked.” If the sinners will cease (i.e., die), does that mean they will no longer be considered wicked? Rather pray for them that they should repent, and then they will no longer be wicked. He prayed for them, and they repented.

תְּלִמּוּד בְּבִלְי, מִסֻּכַּת בְּרָכוֹת דָּף י עמוד א

הִנֵּהוּ בְּרִיּוֹנִי דְּהוּוּ בְּשִׁכְבוֹתֵיהֶּ דְּרַבִּי מֵאִיר וְהוּוּ קָא מַצְעָרוּ לֵיה טוֹבָא הָוָה קָא בְּעֵי רַבִּי מֵאִיר רַחֲמֵי
עֲלֵיהוּ כִּי הֵיכִי זְלִימוֹתוֹ אָמְרָה לֵיה בְּרוּרָא דְּבִיתָהּ מֵאִי דְּעֵתָהּ מְשׁוּם דְּכָתִיב יִתְּמוּ חַטָּאִים מִי כְּתִיב
חֹטְאִים חַטָּאִים כְּתִיב וְעוֹד שְׁפִיל לְסִיפֵיהּ דְּקָרָא וְרָשָׁעִים עוֹד אֵינָם כִּיּוֹן דִּיתְּמוּ חַטָּאִים וְרָשָׁעִים עוֹד
אֵינָם אֲלָא בְּעֵי רַחֲמֵי עֲלֵיהוּ וְלִהְדְּרוּ בְּתַשׁוּבָה וְרָשָׁעִים עוֹד אֵינָם בְּעָא רַחֲמֵי עֲלֵיהוּ וְהִדְרוּ בְּתַשׁוּבָה.



[B] RABBI MOSHE ZELDMAN,
[WHAT IS THE NATURE OF FREE WILL](#)

Philosopher and rabbi.

(The video is hyperlinked to the title above.)

One of the classic philosophical questions that people ask is that if we believe in a God who is all knowing, how do we have free will?

If God knows the future, which He **has to** because He is God, He knows everything,
5 He is omniscient. If God is omniscient and knows everything, He knows what I am
going to eat for breakfast tomorrow morning. He knows what I'm going to name my
child. He knows if I am going to rob the bank. He knows how successful I am going
to be in business. That seems to mean that we don't have any free will. If God knows
exactly what I am going to do, then I don't really have a choice whether I am going
10 to do it or not, it is basically inevitable.

How did Judaism deal with that question? Maimonides, the classical Jewish
philosopher, the 12th Century Jewish philosopher asks exactly that question—how
do we understand God's foreknowledge and our free will as both co-existing?

15 Maimonides says the whole difficulty we have is that we don't really understand
the idea of a being that is outside of time. What does it mean that God knows the
future? We don't know what it means to know the future. We don't know what it
means to transcend time. From God's perspective, He is not living in the present
20 moment. For God, who transcends time, past and present and future are all really
one.

It is almost like looking at a strip of a film and standing and looking at the whole
thing: there is *that* moment and there is *this* moment and there is *this* [other]
25 moment and seeing them all together. So therefore, in order for us to understand the
resolution, we have to understand the idea of transcending time.

So let's look at an example. Let's say you, the viewer, were watching me, and I was
about to make a choice. I am either going to pick up my left hand or pick up my right

hand. And you don't know which one I am going to do. So I have a choice to either pick up my left hand or my right hand.

- 30 Let's say you, watching me, could actually go into the future. Let's say right now it was 4:00, I had both hands here, and I hadn't made up my mind. Let's say you could go into a time machine, and in the time machine you go forward to the moment called 4:15. So you zoom forward to 4:15, you come back into the room, I'm holding up my right hand. Now you know what I chose. You go back into your time machine,
- 35 you press the buttons that say 4:00, you come back to the moment called 4:00, and here I am, I haven't made up my mind yet; welcome back to 4:00.

- Now you went into the future, you **know** that between now and 4:15 I will have decided to pick up my right hand, but right now I haven't. Does your knowledge
- 40 affect my choice? Would we say that because you know I am going to pick up my right hand, therefore I am going to pick up my right hand? Is your knowledge affecting my choice?

- So if we think about it—it is a little complex—but if we think about it, we realize:
- 45 your knowledge is not affecting my choice at all. As a matter of fact, it's the exact opposite. The only reason you have the knowledge that I picked up my right hand is because I chose to pick up my right hand. Your knowledge isn't affecting my choice, it is my choice that is affecting your knowledge.

- 50 We can only understand that by understanding that God is outside of time. We can understand that God knows what we are going to do, but it is us doing it, God knows that tomorrow morning I'm going to eat the Cheerios, but that's because God observes that in the future I will make that choice.

- 55 So God's knowledge doesn't affect our choices at all. It is our choices that really affect God's knowledge. At the end of the day, as much as God is in control of the entire world, He knows what we are going to do; He still allows us to make those choices, and those are the choices that we are responsible for in life.

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