YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Manitou**

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**Shiur #07: Freedom of Choice**

The world works according to a system of laws, with fixed regularity and order, so we expect certain things to happen at certain times and can predict what the results of different actions will be. Science develops this awareness and arrives at a profound understanding of natural phenomena. The scientific endeavor is committed to uncovering the causes of events and the natural laws that they follow, seeking to predict what will happen in the future. This points to a deterministic world in which the laws of nature are the ultimate and absolute causes of all that happens, and in which free choice is meaningless. Any choice that one makes is the end product of a chain of blind forces that follow natural laws.

The Torah, in contrast maintains that a person has the power to choose. Near the beginning of *Bereishit* (3:22) we read, "Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil;” and near the end of *Devarim* (30:19) we read, "I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse; therefore choose life.” The different possibilities are open to man, and they choose for themselves. In addition, without free choice, all the commands in the Torah would be meaningless, for man would lack the ability and power to choose them. For this reason, in *Hilkhot Teshuva* 5:3, the Rambam asserts that the principle of free choice is "the pillar of the Torah and the mitzva.” If all our actions were predetermined or the necessary and inevitable product of deterministic causality, there would be no justification for reward and punishment for different actions — nor any point in commanding any specific actions in the first place. The entire moral dimension of the Torah is relevant only for humans who have free choice, on the basis of which they are meant to choose that which is good.

Thus, the contrast between the two approaches — natural laws versus free choice — is clear. But must this contrast between science and Torah necessarily lead to a head-on collision? Does the Torah deny the natural world and its laws, regarding them as pure illusion (as certain groups in the world maintain)? Not necessarily: science maintains that there is no free choice in nature, and the Torah confirms this, but it places man above nature. The first chapter of *Bereishit* offers the description of a natural world that is clearly governed by laws and a fixed order, while Chapter 2 introduces man's unique characteristic of free choice.

This would seem to narrow the gaping divide between Torah and science. The Torah does not deny or negate the laws of nature, it merely distinguishes between them and the case of man. Man is an exception in the natural world; they are not subject to its deterministic laws.

However, the essential conflict remains, because determinism makes no room for free choice — even that of man:

There is something that stands in the way of natural thinking, interfering with our acknowledgment that free choice is a fundamental component of man’s essence. Free choice may put man in a unique position in the world, but the deterministic world will not allow man to evade its laws. If everything in this world is predetermined and subject to unchanging order and regularity, then this must apply also to man, who is an inseparable part of nature. If man is endowed with freedom of choice, then all of nature must similarly be endowed with free choice. (*Sod Ha-Ivri,* p. 69)

According to the deterministic view, it is impossible for the natural world to include “exceptions” to whom its fixed order, regularity and laws do not apply. And so the debate has raged on throughout history.

**Different incarnations of determinism**

The pagan world is characterized by a deterministic worldview. To this day there are those who believe in astrology — a modern descendant of ancient stargazing — which is based on absolute constancy and causality: all that happens to a person is the result of the regular, unstoppable, unchangeable course of the heavenly bodies. This view is adopted to a degree by Greek philosophy and later, in the Middle Ages, by Islam. The Rambam elaborates on this in his *Moreh Nevukhim* (I, Chapter 71), where he challenges Ash’arism, which claims that everything is preordained. The same principle also appears in Christianity, as set forth in the doctrine of Original Sin and also in the doctrine of a future Redemption which is independent of man and his actions. According to all of these schools, freedom of choice is meaningless.

This view has been passed down over the generations, and it is embodied in our times in the form of modern science. Among the manifestations of determinism in modern science we may point to those realms of academia that apply the principles of natural sciences to the social sciences (such as some central schools of sociology and anthropology), or to human behavior (psychology and brain sciences), analyzing man’s thoughts and actions in terms of fixed patterns. Another expression of the same phenomenon is the endeavor to create artificial intelligence. All in all, we are speaking of a very broad spectrum of views, beliefs and cultures that differ greatly from one another, but all are interwoven with the view that denies free choice.

**Man’s place in Creation**

The debate between the deterministic view and the principle of free choice boils down to the question of man’s essence. Is man a natural being, just one of innumerable creatures that exist as part of the natural system; or is man a unique, different being? Chapter 1 of *Bereishit* certainly teaches that man is unique, for only they are described as being created “in the image of God” — meaning that they are an exception to the entire natural order. In Chapter 2 we find that a central aspect of their uniqueness is their ability to choose. Our question pertains to the issue of one’s general approach to Creation: is man equal in value to all other parts of the natural world, or is everything created for man’s sake, such that they cannot be evaluated like any other natural creature? In other words, our question pits the cosmological approach against the anthropocentric one.

It is important to understand that this is more than just a matter of worldview; it is a profound existential question: is man governed by and at the mercy of what happens to them? This question has fateful ramifications: hope versus despair, humanity versus alienation; and the upholding of morality versus its collapse.

**Two elements of man’s experience**

The tension between freedom and predetermination does not arise only when we attempt a philosophical, cultural inquiry. It has an inner source within human beings themselves. The human consciousness certainly experiences itself as acting as a unique creation, not as just one of many species of animals that exist in the world. Human beings puts themselves at the center; they offer their opinion about anything and everything, and uncover and study the secrets of the cosmos. Their sovereignty in this world, granted to them in Chapter 1 of *Bereishit* (“and fill the land and subdue it”) allows them, for instance, to decide to protect the world’s atmosphere and to take steps to advance this aim. The plant and animal kingdoms do not hold conferences on global warming. At most, plants and animals act out of their innate equilibrium. However, we must ask: is man’s uniqueness limited to their ability to dominate nature, as set forth in Chapter 1 of *Bereishit*, or do they also possess the additional level that is manifest in Chapter 2 — the ability to choose that which is good and moral?

In practice, on the level of existential experience, man is able to choose. At every step they make decisions, and their experience is that it is they who make these decisions. Beneath the surface, however, deep down, they are troubled by the question of whether they are truly free. Along with all the situations in life in which they choose, there are also situations in which they feel themselves driven and propelled by powerful forces. They sometimes yield to mighty inner and outer factors that are not of their choosing. Sometimes they see themselves as physiological creatures; at other times they know themselves to be spiritual, free beings. They have two different perceptions of themselves: one view encounters predetermination; the other encounters freedom.

There is no escape from this vicious circle, and hence natural thought finds itself at a tragic dead-end. A philosopher who claims that he believes in man’s free choice says this not as a philosopher, but rather as a believer; were this not so, all philosophers would be obliged to recognize man’s freedom. And the converse: real philosophical inquiry rejects the idea of freedom, which does not accord with the essence of philosophical thought. But at the very same time, deep down, a thinking person encounters the experience of freedom within his own soul, forcing him to believe in this experience from a completely different place in his being. Thus, for natural man, a wedge is driven between thought and experience. (ibid.)

**The foundation — necessity or freedom**

Deterministic philosophy cannot accept an exception; there can be no free choice only for man. For someone who looks at the world through the eyes of a philosopher, the causal/ deterministic picture is the only one they can see, since the fundamental quest of human intelligence in general, and of philosophy in particular, is to understand the reason for things. The quest for causality includes the implicit assumption that every event or phenomenon has a necessary cause, and if this is the case then even a seemingly freely chosen action is the result of antecedent circumstances. (A philosopher who believes in the concept of free choice is influenced by *Tanakh*, or their existential experience, rather than systematic philosophical thinking. Pure philosophical reasoning would lead to a deterministic conclusion — as, for example, in the philosophy of Spinoza.)

A metaphor may make this easier to understand. It is important to be aware of the spectacles that we wear. Those who wears spectacles with red lenses, such that everything looks red to them, have to know that blue and yellow also exist in the world; it is they themselves who are not seeing the full spectrum of reality. The philosophical perspective is likewise limited, and there are shades of reality that philosophy cannot see because of the lenses that it chooses to wear. Manitou argues that the Jewish perspective is different: God creates a world that is free, and within it He creates a deterministic casing. The question is, what is the ultimate nature of the world? If its ultimate nature is deterministic, then no element of freedom can coexist with that essence. But if a free-willed Creator is the ultimate cause, then He can also create causality and order. Freedom is the ultimate foundation of the world, and it allows for the existence of natural laws, such that each and every day the laws of nature continue to function in accordance with the free will of the Creator. Natural necessity and causality, on the one hand, and free choice, on the other, both flow from the same Divine source.

The basis of all of this appears already in the words of the Rambam, further on in *Hilkhot Teshuva* (5:4):

Were God to decree that an individual would be righteous or wicked or that there would be a quality which draws a person by one’s essential nature to any particular path [of behavior], way of thinking, attributes, or deeds, as imagined by many of the fools [who believe] in astrology, how could He command us through [the words of] the prophets: "Do this," "Do not do this," "Improve your behavior," or "Do not follow after your wickedness”?

[According to their mistaken conception,] from the beginning of man's creation, it would be decreed upon one, or one’s nature would draw one to a particular inescapable quality.

What place would there be for the entire Torah? According to which judgement or sense of justice would retribution be administered to the wicked or reward to the righteous? [As *Bereishit* 18:25 states:] "Shall the whole world's judge not act justly!"

And do not wonder and say: How is it possible that a person can do whatever one wants and be responsible for one’s own deeds? Is it possible for anything to happen in this world without the permission and desire of its Creator? As it is written (*Tehillim* 135:6), "Whatever God wishes, He has done in the heavens and in the earth”? One must know that everything is done in accordance with His will, even though we are responsible for our deeds. [But] how can this be so?

Just as the Creator desired that fire and wind rise upward, while water and earth descend downward, and that the heavenly spheres follow a circular orbit, and all the other creations of the world have the nature which He desired for them, so too, He desired that a person have free choice and be responsible for one’s deeds, without being coerced or forced. Rather, on one’s own initiative, with the knowledge which God has granted him, one can do anything that man is able to do.

Therefore, one is judged according to one’s deeds. If one does good, one is treated with beneficence. If one does bad, one is treated harshly. This is implied by the Prophets' statements: "This has been the doing of your hands” (*Malakhi* 1:9); "They also have chosen their own paths” (*Yeshayahu* 66:3).

This concept is also implied by Shelomo in his statement (*Kohelet* 11:9): "Young man, rejoice in your youth... but, know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment," i.e., know that you have the potential to do [what you want], but in the future, you will have to account for your deeds.

Why is the world created in this way? Why is there a need for both dimensions, free choice along with fixed order? The Rambam does not offer a reason; Manitou’s explanation is based on the writings of the Ari, Rav Yitzchak Luria.

**No responsibility without regularity**

Lurianic Kabbala proposes two concepts that point the way to a solution: linearity and circularity. "Linearity" denotes the Divine will or intention, while "circularity" denotes the fixed laws of nature. In the process of the unfolding of Creation, what appears first is the world of circularity, a spiritual world characterized by order; later comes linearity, a spiritual world defined by God's will. This description parallels Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 of *Bereishit*, where the creation of nature is followed by the creation of man. The difference between the two chapters is expressed very clearly by the Names of God: In the first chapter, we find the name *Elokim* alone, while in Chapter 2 it is joined by the Tetragrammaton. We need to examine why this is the order, and whether there is a unifying principle underlying this duality.

Here we encounter one of Manitou's most profound and original insights. He proposes that determinism is necessary for man's freedom of choice, so that they can know what the results of a choice in either direction will be. In other words, regularity and causality must precede Divinely bestowed free choice. There is no meaning to man's free choice if anything could happen at any time. There must be clear universally-known laws so that man can be aware of what the ramifications and results of their choices will be. If there is no order and no fixed laws of how things work in the world, then man is absolved of responsibility, just as they would be if they were entirely subjugated to the order and fixed laws of a deterministic universe. God's intention is for man to be free; to mold their own image through their own personal choices and their responsibility for their actions. This is the ultimate aim, but it cannot be realized in a world of anarchy, devoid of order. Before taking any action man has to know what its result will be, and hence what responsibility they assume by acting. Thus, fixed order and causality surround man at every level of the natural world around them, but they themselves are free to act in accordance with their own will.

The Kabbalistic masters turn the problem on its head by viewing the determinism of the natural world as a necessary precondition for man's true freedom. We cannot speak of real freedom in an environment that is chaotic and altogether unpredictable. No serious decision can be made if the conditions are constantly changing and there is no way of knowing what new conditions will prevail in the near or distant future. Only if one knows in advance what the ramifications of a certain action would be can one make a decision based on free choice, and only then can one be held responsible for one’s choice.

Hence, establishment of the constant functioning of the world prior to the beginning of human history at the end of the sixth day of Creation is a necessary precondition for the creation of man, who is the subject of the history of the "seventh day.” The Creator has to cease His creative work as Creator over the course of human history in order to enable mankind to fulfill its role and purpose in the world.

To put it differently: the world has to be transformed into "nature" (i.e., to function in a deterministic way) so that man can make real decisions over the course of their history. This is exactly what the Torah teaches us in the transition between the sixth day, where the active agent is the Creator, and the seventh day, where the active agent becomes man. "And on the seventh day God finished His work which He had made; and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had made" (*Bereishit* 2:2).

A world in which anything is possible leads man to a state of mind ruled by magic and the occult, because he spends all his time appeasing natural forces, plagued by constant anxiety that everything could turn upside down at any time. A world in which God can do anything at any time absolves man of all responsibility. Nothing that he does has any value, nor any purpose. Everything is just a matter of Divine caprice. A world in which everything, including man, is bound by natural laws likewise absolves man of all responsibility. There is no basis for morality. An unbridgeable chasm separates the way in which the Hebrew views the world, and the way in which the world is viewed by a Greek or Muslim philosopher. Modern Western culture would like to have it both ways: to believe in that which the Hebrew believes in (that man is free) while thinking as a Greek thinks. This is impossible. First one has to think as a Hebrew thinks. (*Sod Midrash Ha-toladot* III, 215-219)

**The paradox of determinism and the freedom of modern culture**

Towards the end of the excerpt above, Manitou makes an important observation: modern Western culture tries to “have it both ways.” What does he mean by this?

Manitou is pointing out the inherent contradiction in modern culture, which is based on science and deterministic thought, but also three other features: it raises the banner of freedom, it operates as possessing moral demands (and even seeks to define moral values itself, as in Adam’s sin in the Garden of Eden) and it is centered around a legal system that holds man responsible for their actions.

Let us dwell on this contradiction for a moment. Modern Western culture views freedom as one of its most supreme values. Morality and law are also awarded great importance. The world is measured according to a moral yardstick, and runs in accordance with the law. These values are opposed to determinism: according to the regularity proposed by science, man’s behavior is not under their control, and they cannot be judged or punished for their actions.

There are instances where a court may rule that, owing to a psychiatric condition or some other mitigating factor, a certain person cannot be held responsible for what they have done, but these exceptions merely serve to reinforce the general rule: in the vast majority of cases, the legal system views a person as responsible for their actions. One might try to argue that even the judges themselves are actually acting out of compulsion, but the implications of such an argument would render the modern world devoid of any values at all, turning humanity into a society of robots.

We see that Western culture goes much further in its promulgation of freedom than Judaism does. The Jewish view is that our values come from the Torah, and we can choose to follow them, knowing that the Torah tells us that this is good. Modern culture, on the other hand, wants to set down its own values. In fact, sometimes it even seeks the freedom to live a life devoid of values. Thus, not only does modern culture try to seize both ends of the stick; it also takes each end to its extreme.

Modern culture is thus plagued by an internal contradiction which it tries to ignore. The freedom, morality and law that it upholds do not flow from its scientific way of thinking. On the contrary: these principles go against all that science — and the determinism upon which it is based — suggests and entails. According to Manitou, modern culture has no way out of this contradiction but to turn to the Hebrew faith. The encounter with the Torah can help to find the route to building its world of values.

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