**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Topics in Hashkafa**

**Rav Assaf Bednarsh**

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Dedicated in memory of Rabbi Jack Sable *z”l* and

Ambassador Yehuda Avner *z”l*

By Debbie and David Sable

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**Shiur #02: Free Will** (part 2)

Adapted by Leora Bednarsh

In our [previous *shiur*](https://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-01-free-will), we analyzed the mainstream opinion, which holds, like the Rambam, that each of us has free will. We can choose on our own to do good or evil, and neither God nor any other force makes us choose either possibility. In this *shiur*, will now address the minority view in our tradition, which holds that in fact we do not have free will. This minority view comes in two different formulations, one found in the *Rishonim* and one in the *Acharonim*.

**The Position of R. Chasdai Crescas**

Among the *Rishonim*, we find the opinion of R. Chasdai Crescas, a 14th century Spanish philosopher and halakhist (*Ohr Hashem*, book 2, section 5), who questions the existence of non-determined events, such as human choices, that are spontaneously and freely decided. He demonstrates that although there is much evidence for free choice, there is also much evidence for the possibility that all our actions are determined. He concludes that in one aspect we have free will, but in another aspect, we do not.

The first proof for R. Chasdai’s position is God's foreknowledge. If God is omniscient, then that must mean that all that we do was known beforehand by God and therefore not subject to change. His second proof is in line with the argument of many contemporary scientists – that human beings are ultimately just machines and that the laws of cause and effect work inside our brains as well. Expressed in terms of modern neuropsychology, every decision that we make has a neurological cause. The cause may be genetic, based on the structure of our brains, or the result of some stimuli we experienced in our lives. Between nature and nurture, if you add up our genetic makeup, all the experiences we had in our lives, and all the various factors that acted upon us, everything we do is the result of various causes that determine our thoughts and deeds.

R. Chasdai Crescas, convinced by these arguments, concluded that we have free will, but only in a limited sense. No one forces us to do anything; God does not move our hands like a puppeteer moves a marionette. We do only what we want to do. But what we want to do is programmed neurobiologically and psychologically by the kind of brain we were born with, together with the experiences we have had in our lives. In a certain sense, we are free, because we do whatever we want; no one makes us do anything that we don't want to do. It is simply that what we want is determined by forces beyond our control.

To some, this sounds like we have no free will. After all, if everything we do is determined by forces beyond our control, then it seems that there is no place where we can break the chain of cause and effect and decide for ourselves what we want to do. R. Chasdai, however, sees this as a type of free will, because we alone decide what we will do. The fact that our brains are mere computers that are programmed when we are born and have determined answers inside of them does not take away the fact that we are free to choose to do what we want, although we are not free to choose what it is that we want.[[1]](#footnote-1)

R. Chasdai claims that all the proofs brought by mainstream Jewish philosophers for the existence of free will can be adequately addressed by his theory. Let us address some of those proofs.

*R. Chasdai on the Proof from Experience*

One proof of the existence of free will is from experience. We feel we can do whatever we want and no one forces us to do otherwise. R. Chasdai Crescas agrees that we can do what we want. I can decide to pick up a piece of paper or put down a piece of paper, to speak or to remain silent. But that merely proves that we are free to do what we want; it does not explain why we want to do something. That, R. Chasdai claims, is determined by forces beyond our control.

*R. Chasdai on the Proof from the Commandments*

A second proof that we discussed is based on the language of the Torah and the prophets, which tells us, "Choose *mitzvot*; don't choose transgressions. The choice is yours. Choose life." Why would God send the prophets to encourage us to make the right choice if that choice is determined by nature and nurture, by the stimuli that act upon us? R. Chasdai answers that this fits in perfectly with his theory. After all, if our choices are determined by our surroundings and by the forces that act upon us, then one of the forces that acts upon us is the messages God sends us through His Torah and His prophets.

If one were to hold (like many contemporary liberal thinkers) that people do not choose for themselves but are rather products of their environment, then the best way to improve people's lives is to improve their environment; if you improve their environment, that will make them act better. God chose to improve our environment in various ways. One of them was by sending us messages in the Torah encouraging us to choose the right path. God added this message of inspiration to do *mitzvot* into our environment with the knowledge that in many cases, the positive messages of inspiration and encouragement will deterministically cause our brains to want to do the right thing.

*R. Chasdai on the Proof from Chazal*

 A third proof that many Jewish philosophers brought for free will was from the statement of *Chazal* that everything is in the hands of Heaven except for whether we choose good or evil (*Berakhot* 33b). R. Chasdai explains this statement in consonance with his theory. God does not directly force us to do good or evil. It is up to us to do whatever we want, and we are not directly controlled by God as if He were a puppeteer forcing us to do things. Rather, what we want to do is controlled by the various physical and psychological forces that act upon us, so it is not in the hands of direct control of God. *Chazal* never said that our choices are freely up to us, just that they are not controlled by God directly. They are, however, controlled by those God-made forces inside our brain that determine what we want.

*R. Chasdai on the Proof from Divine Justice*

The argument from divine justice is taken most seriously by R. Chasdai Crescas. We are quite certain that God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked, and we can expect to be rewarded for fulfilling a commandment and punished for committing a transgression. We know that God is just and fair. If we choose what we do on our own, then it is perfectly just and fair of God to reward and punish us. But if what we want to do is determined by our nature and our nurture, how is it fair of God to reward and punish us? After all, our decisions were pre-programmed, as if we were robots, by our genetic makeup and by forces in our environment.

To address this objection, R. Chasdai says that we must differentiate between two different understandings of reward and punishment. When we say that *mitzvot* are rewarded and transgressions punished, what do we mean? To illustrate the two possibilities, take the following example. A driving instructor can say, "If you do not wear a seatbelt, you will get a 750 shekel fine and four points on your license." Or he might say, "If you do not wear a seatbelt, then if you get into a crash, your head will hit the windshield, which will crack open your skull." There is a fundamental difference between these two punishments. Getting a ticket is not a natural effect of not wearing a seatbelt; it is an externally imposed punishment. In contrast, losing your life in a car crash is a natural consequence of failing to wear a seatbelt. It is built in to the laws of nature.

When we assert the principle of reward and punishment, do we mean that God artificially imposes a reward or punishment, like a judge handing down a sentence in a courtroom? Or do we mean that He built into the world that the natural consequence of a *mitzva* or a transgression is a reward or a punishment? Does God sentence sinners to Hell as an externally imposed sanction, or is it the nature of things that if you sully your soul with transgressions throughout your lifetime, then your soul will be unable to receive the purity and everlasting bliss of the next world, and will thus be consigned to suffering? According to the latter, the natural result of transgression is being distanced from goodness, and the natural result of fulfilling a commandment is some improvement to our soul, which will benefit us in the long run.

If we accept the first version of reward and punishment and believe that God sits as a judge and sentences us to reward or punishment, then it would indeed be unjust to do so if what we wanted to do was determined by our genetic makeup and by our environment. R. Chasdai, however, accepts the second understanding of reward and punishment. Naturally, when we do a *mitzva* we are better off, and the natural consequence of a transgression is being worse off, and ultimately suffering. When it comes to natural consequences, it is not valid to object that the result is unfair. If I fall into a fire, I will get burned, and if it is a large enough fire, I will likely die. If I jump into a fire with reckless negligence, I deserve to get burned; if I was careful but an evil person picked me up and threw me into a burning house, I don't deserve to get burned, but I will suffer nonetheless, because the natural consequence of contact with fire is the suffering of being burnt. Since it is a natural consequence, it doesn't matter whether it is fair. That is simply the natural order of things.

R. Chasdai argues that the reward for doing *mitzvot* or punishment for violations is the natural result of our actions. It is not fair, but it doesn't matter whether it’s fair. God would not intervene in the world and do something unfairly. But we believe that God created this world with the laws of nature that control it, and in this world, sometimes people fall into fires or die in accidents. Even if they were driving safely and wearing their seatbelts and they said the Traveler's Prayer, they will still be injured or killed if they are hit by a drunk driver, because that is a natural consequence of a crash. Likewise, says R. Chasdai, in the realm of reward and punishment, it may not ultimately be fair. But since the natural consequence of, say, violating Shabbat or worshiping idols is ultimately suffering, therefore, whether fair or not, it is what happens to someone who commits these transgressions.

This is perhaps the weakest point of R. Chasdai's presentation. It is difficult to accept that God would create a world in which there are natural spiritual consequences to all the things mentioned in the Torah, with no system of fairness behind these consequences. But R. Chasdai is willing to pay this philosophical price to defend his theory of free will. He accepts that God in His Divine wisdom decided that this was the kind of world He wanted to create.

**Summary of R. Chasdai Crescas’ Position**

To summarize, R. Chasdai Crescas says that we have complete free will to do what we want, but what we want to do is completely determined. It is determined not by our free will, but rather by nature and nurture. *Chazal* meant only that God doesn't force our hand; He lets the rules of physics and the nature of the universe determine our behavior. The *Tanakh* encourages us to make the right choices in order to affect our environment. Although we feel that we have free will, that is only insofar as we are free to do what we want, but what we want to do is determined. R. Chasdai believes that reward and punishment are natural consequences and not artificially imposed, and natural consequences don't have to be fair.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**The Position of the *Mei Ha-Shiloach***

Taking things a step further than R.Chasdai, the Izhbitzer Rebbe (R. Mordechai Yosef Leiner, Poland, 1801-1854) argues in his famous work, *Mei Ha-Shiloach* (*Parashat Vayera* 18:15 and *Parashat Korach* 16:1), that we do not have free will at all. Everything we do and everything that happens in the world is merely an expression of the Divine will. If I perform a *mitzva*, it is merely because God wanted me to do so, and if I transgress, it is merely because God wanted me to do so. God is omnipotent and does not delegate His power to others. According to the *Mei Ha-Shiloach,*a proper appreciation of God's role in the world is available only to those who realize that we have no free will and everything is done by God. The ultimate form of worship of God is to completely nullify ourselves and our own power to the will of God and recognize that we control nothing and He controls everything.

Of course, the *Mei Ha-Shiloach* must deal with all the objections we raised above, but he is willing to use radical means to address these issues. In this world, God hides His power and presence somewhat; He pretends that He gave us the option to make decisions, but this is in fact an illusion. When *Chazal* said that all is in the hands of Heaven except for fear of Heaven, they meant only that it appears that way within the limited bounds of human understanding. But in truth, all is in the hands of Heaven including whether we obey God's commandments. *Chazal*’s statement is accurate within the realm of this-worldly logic, but the truth transcends human logic. Therefore, the *Mei Ha-Shiloach* does not need to respond to any of the philosophical arguments for free will; he admits that logic dictates that we have free will, but nonetheless claims that there is a higher truth accessible to us that defies logic. The truth transcends logic; the ultimate truth is that there is God and only God.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The ultimate achievement of a human being in his lifetime in this world is to recognize the truth. This is something that only a few people in this world can do, such as the forefathers, and, surprisingly, apparent sinners such as Korach*.* They were unique people who were on a high enough spiritual level to not just pay lip service and say that they believe that God controls everything, but to really believe with every fiber of their being that they were nothing. Everything anyone else did, anything that happened, and anything that they did was merely an expression of the power and will of the Divine; there is nothing else in this world.

**Dangerous Implications of the *Mei Ha-Shiloach***

One of the dangerous and risky implications of this philosophy is that on the ultimate level, there is no difference between *mitzva* and transgression, between good and evil. Whether I do good or bad is equally good, because everything I do is what God wanted me to do.[[4]](#footnote-4) This is one of the reasons why the *Mei Ha-Shiloach*'s philosophy was never accepted in broad circles of Jewish thought – because of the danger that someone might transgress and justify his actions by saying that God wanted him to commit the transgression. Of course, the *Mei Ha-Shiloach* himself said that very few people achieve the high level of spirituality necessary to honestly assert this belief, and those people would not commit transgressions except under the most limited and historically rare circumstances. Nonetheless, he holds that philosophically, there is no difference between a *mitzva* and a transgression; ultimately, they are both expressions of God's plan for the world and what God wanted to happen.

**Repentance According to R. Tzadok Ha-Kohen**

One of the interesting implications of this view is how to understand the process of repentance. The mainstream understanding of repentance is that I take responsibility for my own actions and I know that it was my own fault and blame myself.[[5]](#footnote-5) But for his student R. Tzadok Ha-Kohen of Lublin (*Tzidkat Ha-Tzadik* 40), true repentance means precisely the opposite. I don't blame myself, but rather recognize that it was the will of God and not my own decision, and therefore it was for the good. This is how he explains the statement of *Chazal* that when one performs the highest form of repentance, his transgressions count as *mitzvot* (*Yoma* 86b)*.* The goal of life, according to the *Mei Ha-Shiloach*, is to recognize that everything is in the hands of God, even my own actions and decisions. Thus, everything I have done, *mitzvot* and transgressions, are fulfillment of God’s will, and therefore can be classified as *mitzvot*.

**Summary**

We have seen three approaches to the concept of free will in Jewish thought. The majority of Jewish thinkers throughout the ages maintained that we have free will. That is why we are punished for our actions; that is why we are rewarded for good deeds; that is why we must take responsibility for our actions and do *teshuva*. This is the mainstream approach.

The minority view of Rav Chasdai Crescas is that we are free actors to do what we want, but what we want is determined by various laws of neurophysics.

The third, radical approach of a minority of Hasidic thinkers, such as the *Mei Ha-Shiloach*and R. Tzadok Ha-Kohen, is that the ideal is to realize that everything is controlled by God and I am nothing. I am not even able to control my own actions, because everything is under the dominion and direct control of God. The philosophical difficulties raised by this position do not bother these thinkers because they hold that all these difficulties are relevant only on the level of human intellect, where we have the illusion of free will, and not on the true level of reality accessible to those unique individuals who realize the ultimate truth – that God and only God acts in the universe.

1. In the general philosophical literature, this position is known as compatibilism or "soft determinism". [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In contemporary times, some scientists and philosophers maintain that someday, if we understand all of the laws of physics well enough, we will see that R. Chasdai Crescas is correct and that everything we want to do is determined by the physical processes in our brains; we are simply very advanced computers. However, others speculate that perhaps when we understand matters properly on the level of quantum mechanics (which posits that subatomic particles behave in ways that are not scientifically determined), we will see that perhaps not everything that our brains decide is determined by some scientific law or force. Rather, perhaps mental processes are among those phenomena that are intrinsically not subject to scientific determinism – which in philosophical language can be translated as free will. Science is not yet advanced enough to resolve this issue conclusively. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Ari (R. Yitzchak Luria) is quoted in the book *Arba Me'ot Shekel Kesef* (falsely ascribed to R. Chaim Vital, pp. 91b-92a) as resolving the contradiction between Divine foreknowledge and free will by distinguishing between these two levels of reality, but unlike the *Mei Ha-Shiloach*, he concludes that we ultimately have free will. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is stated explicitly in his commentary to *Parashat Vayera*. See, however, his commentary to *Parashat Beshalach* (14:14), where he acknowledges the pernicious effects of this belief upon the irreligious. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See, e.g., Rambam*, Laws of Repentance*, ch. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)