YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PRINCIPLES OF FAITH**

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The htm version of this shiur is available at:

<http://vbm-torah.org/archive/faith/30faith.htm>

Shiur #30: Freedom

# Introduction

The vast quantities of ink spilled writing about the idea of human freedom make it a daunting task to add anything with any hope of saying anything interesting (saying something new is more or less out of the question). But I cannot conclude a series about the basic beliefs of Judaism without at least touching on it. The great Jewish principle of *teshuva*, repentance, which is so emphasized in the Torah (see especially *Devarim* 30) and which is so central to the liturgy[[1]](#footnote-1) appears to rely on the idea that our actions are in some ultimate way up to us. The Rambam left the idea of freedom out of his 13 principles for reasons that I cannot explain, but he took care to dedicate a whole chapter of *Hilkhot Teshuva* to elaborating his notion of human freedom. There he states:

This principle is a fundamental concept and a pillar of the Torah and *mitzvot* as it says (*Devarim* 30:15): "Behold, I have set before you today life [and good, death and evil]." Similarly, [*Devarim* 11:26] states, "Behold, I have set before you today [the blessing and the curse]," implying that any possible human action that a person desires to do, good or evil, is in your hands. For this reason it says "Would that their hearts inclined [to fear Me and keep My *mitzvot*…], meaning that the Creator does not force people or decree that they should do good or evil – rather it is all up to them.[[2]](#footnote-2)

That being said, there are a few voices in the tradition who have maintained that human freedom, at least as it is usually understood, is impossible.[[3]](#footnote-3) I don't propose to tackle the question of who is right about this question. Additionally, I do not propose to discuss the famous puzzle of how God's knowledge (particularly of the future) is consistent with human freedom. In fact, I am pretty sure that I do not even know how to begin to answer such questions without presuming a specific understanding of how God is involved in His world. I hope it was clear by the end of my discussion of providence that I consider any such specific vision difficult to accept wholeheartedly. Yet, the alternative need not be agnosticism. I believe that we are better off religiously and philosophically maintaining a kind of dialectical tension around most of these questions. I will return to this issue in my concluding shiur.

# The Rambam on Human Freedom

What I do propose to do is to explore what human freedom *means*, how it fits into other basic concepts about our place in the world, and what is at stake in that conception. Because of space limitations, this week I will focus on what I take to be a deep problem with our understanding of human freedom and only next week will I be able to offer some degree of resolution. I will begin, as is my wont, with the Rambam, and proceed from there.

As I mentioned above, the Rambam is committed to the idea of free choice:

Permission (capability) is granted to every person. If someone wants to incline himself to a good path and be a righteous person, it is within his capability. If he wants to incline himself to an evil path and be wicked, it is within his capability[[4]](#footnote-4)

Throughout, the Rambam does not use the Hebrew equivalent of "free choice," *bechira chofshit*, or that of "free will,” *ratzon chofshi*. Following *Chazal*, the Rambam uses the term *reshut*, which can be translated as permission or perhaps better, access or capability. It is noteworthy that this term contains no reference to freedom, i.e., as opposed to slavery, because the traditional Jewish conception insists that we are not free to choose. We are servants of God and as such commanded to follow His Law. Yet we are capable of not so doing.

The Rambam emphasizes that freedom is not focused on individual choices but on character. Each person is capable of making himself or herself into someone who makes good choices. That does not mean that at any given moment, one's choices are completely free. Who you are at that moment impacts what you can choose. Freedom lies in the capacity to change who you are.[[5]](#footnote-5) This is a very important point which I will return to next week.

The Rambam's vision of human freedom is radical:

… Each person is fit to be righteous like Moshe, our teacher, or wicked, like Yorov’am. He may be wise or foolish, merciful or cruel, miserly or generous, or [acquire] any other character traits. There is no one who compels him, sentences him, or leads him towards either of these two paths. Rather, he, on his own initiative and decision, tends to the path he chooses….[[6]](#footnote-6)

Given the Rambam's reverence for Moshe *Rabbeinu*, this is an extraordinary claim. The Rambam seems to be rejecting here any causal limitation, be it nature or nurture, on what one can make of oneself. Any person has the ability to be as righteous as Moshe. It must be noted, however, that this refers exclusively to Moshe's righteousness – his character and inclination to good. It is worth noting that other aspects of Moshe's greatness are not available, even in principle, to everyone. Particularly, Moshe's intellect, which the Rambam associates with his unmatched level of prophecy, is not available to just anyone who tries hard enough.

Finally, the alternative to freedom that the Rambam is concerned to deny is not, technically speaking, determinism – i.e., the notion that anything that happens is caused and every cause itself has a cause such that even one's decisions are simply the results of long chains of causes. Rather, the Rambam is concerned mostly to deny that God determines people's actions, i.e., God consciously makes people behave in a certain way. At first blush, this might sound like a purely theological problem, unrelated to more modern concerns of how freedom is possible given a world that is organized by (semi-deterministic) natural laws. However, a moment's consideration should remind us that for the Rambam, the theological and the scientific are not very far apart. For the Rambam, God is not a participant in day to day life. He is rather the founder and creator of the universe, the First Cause and it is as such that He influences events. The Rambam agrees that everything has a cause, and that every cause has a cause, going back to the First Cause, who is God. With this notion in place, there is not much difference between the claim that God determines human behavior and the determinist assumption that everything is caused.

Does it even make sense to claim that people's actions are up to them in some significant way? It is not enough to simply point out that people's decisions are not caused by external forces. Imagine a situation in which, at points of decision, the human psyche had the analog of a random number generator, such that if the number generated was odd the decision would be X and if even, the decision would be Y (we can even model such decision making and much more complex versions of it with computers). A life lived in that manner, while certainly not deterministic, would not be free in any significant way. When we conceive of human freedom, we are looking for a way of thinking about human action and decision making which is, on the one hand, not determined by forces beyond our control, and on the other hand, not just random. Is there a space between these two options for decisions and actions that are our own?[[7]](#footnote-7)

# Determinism, Randomness, and Freedom

Let's first refine the problem. We like to think of ourselves, at least at the best of times, as people who make decisions for reasons. Freedom presumably is connected to such decision making. Clearly, not every decision is totally free – many of our decisions are controlled by larger decisions that we have made. I might decide to go grocery shopping but accomplishing that task involves all kinds of other actions – I have to get there, make a list, etc. If fact, the decision to go grocery shopping is itself controlled by a larger reason – I need to feed my family and need to get food in order to do so. Ultimately, or at least so the story goes, there is a point at which it is up to me. For the sake of ease of exposition, let's stipulate that that point is in the decision to take responsibility for feeding my family (it is of course never that simple). In what sense is it up to me? Here the determinist has an answer: it is up to me in that the causal chain that leads to my deciding to feed my family goes through my psyche. That does not make it less determined by causes that go back to creation. Who I am is a function of causal forces such as my genes, my family background, my environment and personal history. All these (incredibly complex) factors together determine my personality and hence my decision. So in one sense, claims the determinist, it is indeed up to me to decide to feed my family – it is caused by who I am. But who I am is no less a result of deterministic forces than anything else.

Furthermore, challenges the denier of human freedom, there is no other sense in which we can call the decision to feed my family my decision. There are only two other possible alternatives:

1. Some of the forces involved in making me who I am are just random, uncaused events (for the physically minded – say the quantity of radiation my genes were exposed to). That would undermine strict determinism but does not give any special meaning to it being my decision. Who I am, and hence, what I do, is simply some combination of causal and random factors.

2. At the point of decision – do I feed my family (if that can be called a decision) – what I do is uncaused; it is not a function of the factors (heredity, upbringing, etc.) that make me who I am. If that is the case, however, it surely looks as if what I do is simply random – it is as if, in leading my life, there are certain junctures in which what I decide is a function of rolling dice (or a random number generator) rather than making a decision on its own merits. Deciding something on its own merits, if it is to be a meaningful decision and not just a coin toss, involves invoking my values and concerns. But these are themselves caused by my upbringing, etc., making the decision caused and not random.

This sketch of an argument is a very powerful challenge to the idea of human freedom. The upshot of the argument is that the idea of human beings making free decisions is incoherent; there is no way to think about human action such that what someone does belongs to him or her in some special way that is neither determined nor random.

# Freedom and the Will

Some of you might already be objecting that this argument leaves out an essential part of the phenomenology of free will. Namely, it does not give enough (or indeed almost any) account of how we are creatures with a *will*. Actions do not just occur – decisions are made and then carried out by the force of the will. Looking back on the example above: I do not merely decide to feed my family. I may more or less consciously have a sense that it is my responsibility to provide for them but it is not in that sense *per se* that free will is expressed. Rather, my freedom lies in the fact that I can impose my will to carry out that decision, in the face of other desires and inclinations (e.g., my *yetzer ha-ra*). Because I know that feeding my family is the right thing to do, I "force myself" to go to the grocery store, despite my powerful desire to take a nap. The will, with its ultimate control of executive function, is the locus of freedom in that it is something that uniquely belongs to my personality and is the source of my actions. When my actions are willful (some actions are not – think of automatic actions like absent-mindedly scratching an itch), I am free because on the one hand I am not behaving randomly and on the other hand my actions are not determined causally but rather are a function of the effort that I put into carrying them out.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Though executive function (acting in accordance with one's conscious will) does play an important role in the phenomenology of action, focusing on the will does not solve the problem of how to find space for freedom between determinism and randomness. The will, if we are not to regard it as some sort of powerful, magical entity, distinct from ourselves, is a feature of each person's personality. Some people have strong wills, such that their conscious decisions control their behavior. Others are weak-willed and thus often act against their own perceived best interests, motivated by some fleeting desire. But if the will is a coherent feature of human psychology, then its scope and power are no less the result of those same factors that shape other features of each person's psychology – i.e., heredity, environment, experience, etc. These are either random or determined according to the argument made above and focusing on the will does not give us a route to escape between these two extremes.

# Conclusion

The problem for human freedom I have sought to describe is not whether people are really free, but rather whether it makes any sense to claim that they are. In claiming that we are free, we seem to be asserting two conflicting things: on the one hand we are claiming that we own our actions – they are ours in that they are functions of who we are and what we care about. On the other hand, we are claiming that somehow our actions are uncaused – they are not entirely dependent on those forces that shaped who we are and what we care about. That seems to imply that there is some kind of random element that enters into human behavior. It is difficult to see how embracing that random element can be made consistent with ownership of our actions. In the next shiur I will try to give such an account.

1. Most centrally, this can be seen in the *berakha* in the *Amida* about *teshuva* and in the liturgy of and leading up to *Yom Kippur.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rambam, *Hilkhot Teshuva* 5:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. R. Chasdai Crescas famously defends a position that in modern times has come to be called *compatibilism*, namely that free choice can be reconceived in a way that is consistent with a deterministic world. Additionally there exists a strain in Chassidic thought (associated primarily with the Rabbi Mordechai Yosef of Izbitch but actually broader than that) in which the all-encompassing presence of God precludes the possibility of freedom, at least in the sense of true independence from the divine Will. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rambam, *Hilkhot Teshuva* 5:1. My translation. The translation that appears at chabad.org seems to me to be grossly insensitive to some of the nuances I point out in the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Some might interpret the following passage differently: "Any one of the deeds of men which a person desires to do, he may, whether good or evil. Therefore, [*Devarim* 5:26] states: ‘If only their hearts would always remain this way.’ From this, we can infer that the Creator does not compel or decree that people should do either good or bad. Rather, everything is left to them." (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 5:1). However, note that even when he is focusing on specific action, the actual choice remains a function of the person's inclination and personality. That is why the prooftext refers to "their hearts". The point of this passage is to emphasize that no force, neither God, nor the stars (the Rambam was nearly unique in the Middle Ages in his rejection of astrology) imposes its will on human decision making. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Hilkhot Teshuva* 5:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This problem was articulated clearly by the famous 18th century Scottish philosopher David Hume. He was convinced that there was no such space and that the only alternative to determinism is some sort of randomness, which he believed to be morally far worse. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This quasi-Kantian approach, with its focus on the will, requires what I believe to be an implausible conception of moral cognition. For Kant, moral cognition is autonomous (and hence neither caused nor random) in that it is purely rational and as such detached from the human personality, its desires and causation. This conception of practical rationality seems to me to be incoherent: how could someone possibly decide "rationally" what to do once we have removed from the scope of the rational all desires and concerns? Kant himself struggled to articulate how this vision fit into the world of causation.

   Even disregarding that problem, the conception of freedom that results is very far from the ordinary notion that we freely choose between good and evil. Freedom, on this conception, is equated with rationality and one is free only insofar as one is rational. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)