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/31faith.htm>

Shuir #31: Freedom continued

# Introduction

In the last shiur, I set out what I regard to be a deep problem with the idea of human freedom. I argued that human freedom seems to involve the embrace of a contradiction: on the one hand we claim to own our own actions – they are ours in that they are functions of who we are and what we care about. On the other hand, we claim 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 presumably means 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, or more generally, how there is conceptual space to be found between determinism and randomness.

# Freedom as the Ability to Change One's Character

The Rambam offered us a point of departure in his Aristotelian focus on action and decision making as products of a person's character. Freedom, he claims, is the capacity to change one's character and through that change one's actions. Each particular decision is indeed a function of one's character – that is how we own our actions, but the nature of one's character is not given. Beyond the causal and random forces that go into the construction of each individual's personality, people also have the ability to reflect on their own dispositions and tendencies and, up to a limit, recreate themselves. Freedom lies in this capacity for reflective self-improvement.

Each person is born with certain hereditary tendencies. Growing up, our characters are further shaped by our experiences and environment, particularly our parents. But the process of "growing up" is never completely over. At some point in his or her life, a person can take responsibility for his or her own actions and behavior. In doing so, she takes upon herself the task of self-creation. It is no wonder that the Rambam placed his discussion of freedom in *Hilkhot Teshuva*, for it is in *teshuva*, remaking oneself through repentance, that freedom is found.[[1]](#footnote-1)

How does this work? Recall my decision go to the grocery store, out my sense of responsibility for feeding my family. That sense of responsibility is part of my character, presumably instilled in me by my parents and upbringing. Accordingly, my acting in this way is not particularly a manifestation of my freedom – it is simply who I am. My freedom is manifest when I perceive my character to be flawed and figure out a way to correct it. Let's say that growing up, my family ate junk food all the time and that is the model I have for food shopping (I know the example is so simplistic as to border on the absurd, but bear with me). When I become aware that I am unthinkingly loading up on chips, cookies and candy, I can consciously change that behavior and make it my habit to buy healthy food. If I have this ability about food shopping, then it is reasonable to say that I have it for everything. If so, then we can claim that (nearly) all my actions are free because they reflect something about my character, and my character is under my control.

As it stands, this understanding of human freedom is subject to the same critique that I delineated in the previous shiur. After all, my ability to reflect on my character in order to improve it depends upon who I am, my values and concerns, combined with my reflective ability and the strength of will that I have in order to carry out the correction. Presumably, these all result from some combination of heredity and experience. In order for reflective self-improvement to be truly free and not just pre-determined fine tuning, the reflecting self must somehow transcend its own background. Freedom depends upon my being more than the sum of my heredity and experience. But how?

# Cognition as the Source of Freedom

I believe that there are two ways to make sense of human freedom, and to find a coherent notion of freedom that is neither determinist nor random. The first is to understand freedom as fundamentally dependent upon the human capacity for knowledge. Human beings, as created in the image of God, are endowed with the ability to (at least partially) know the world they live in, including themselves. We are not simply extremely complex machines carrying out God's programs, or, at the other extreme, atoms randomly banging against each other under no one's control. How does this help with freedom?

As I mentioned above, freedom must involve the ability for people to transcend themselves – to break out of their private subjective existences that are shaped by their pasts and to remake themselves objectively. One way this self-transcendence could take place is through cognition of the world: we transcend ourselves cognitively in our ability to conceive of the world objectively. That is to say, when we understand some piece of the world as it is, and not merely as we expect it to be, or are inclined or conditioned to see it, we break out of the subjective and into the objective realm. That is not to say that cognition can be conceived of without reference to the subjective – the concepts and categories by the means of which we conceive the world are not just 'there' but are rather conceived of as the acquisition of more and more concepts. So in a sense the question of human freedom extends to human knowledge as well.

Understood causally, the human subject is formed by its background and experiences and everything it comes to understand depends upon them. Knowledge is simply a psychological state of confidence in the beliefs one has acquired. But that is not how we generally conceive of knowledge: knowledge is not mere confidence – when you know something, you are legitimately capable of stating how the world actually is.[[2]](#footnote-2) On a deterministic causal picture of the world, the best that we can achieve is that where different subjectivities converge at some point, we will call that objective truth. The claim that there is more to it than that, and that knowledge involves access to the object world, requires the knower to transcend his causal self. If that is possible, then cognition can be said to be a case of self-transcendence by a subject.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Cognition, even understood as self-transcendence, while a necessary condition for freedom, is not a sufficient condition; two more elements are required. First of all, only if self-transcendent cognition can be applied to the self – only if we can, at least some of the time, truly see what we ourselves are like, can the possibility of reflection lead to true freedom to shape our own character. Furthermore, there remains the question of motivation: we might have the ability to understand ourselves but we are free to change who we are only if that ability is associated with the motivation to do so. As far as the question of how one becomes motivated to change oneself, according to Aristotle, and the Rambam, this motivation is built in to moral cognition. That is to say, the recognition of something as a good or right thing to do always involves at least some degree of motivation to do so. Likewise, the recognition of something as wrong always involves at least some amount of motivation not to do it. So, if one conceives of one’s character as flawed, it is intrinsic to that conception that one be motivated to change it. That motivation might not win out in the struggle with other motivations and temptations but the possibility for it doing so exists. Since the motivation is built in to the cognition, its strength is a function of the clarity of the cognition. Insofar as I see myself clearly, I will be motivated to improve myself.

# Creativity as Self-Transcendence

There is another, more direct, but perhaps less accessible route to self-transcendence. As creatures created in God's image, perhaps we are endowed with the ability to create something from nothing, in the manner that God did in creating the world. As opposed to God, we are limited in the object of our creation; we are bound by the laws of physics such that we cannot create matter and energy from nothing. But perhaps we can create ourselves "from nothing," in that creativity involves an unexplainable leap from one state to the next. Sometimes we see people diverge from their expected course, doing something unexplainable (at least by us) given what we know about them. Now it is perfectly likely that most of the time this is just the appearance of divergence – people are often driven in ways that are hidden and not accessible even to themselves, let alone an outsider. But perhaps, extraordinary people do what is seemingly impossible: they change themselves in an act of self-creation. This is not the reflective correction described above. It does not involve self-knowledge so much as vision and drive that seemingly spring from nowhere. Such people conceive of themselves in some way and that self-conception is so powerful that they become it. .

This process of self-creation is by definition not subject to explanation. At best, I can offer the analogy of an artist and his art. Though we can offer a psychological, historical account of how and why the artist made the choices she did, such accounts are always only partial – they never suffice to explain the coherent totality of the work of art. Likewise, one's canvas can be oneself – through a spontaneous act of creation, you make yourself anew.

If we want to distinguish transcendent self-creation from simple randomness, then the product of the change, the new self, must make post facto sense; it must be a natural continuation of what went before except that no one would have thought so until it actually happened. The relevant change need not be a huge one: one can have small scale vision as well as large scale. But for it to escape the Scylla and the Charybdis of determinism/randomness, the creative realization of vision can be a mode of freedom only if the end result is an enhanced coherence rather than just a radical shift.

# The Possibility of Freedom

Cognition and creativity are two models of self-transcendence that make the notion of human freedom a coherent possibility. The fact that we can conceive a coherent possibility that lies between casual determinism and mere randomness does not mean that it actually exists. Most of the time we conceive of ourselves as free: as the authors of our own lives in some way such that the self is more than merely a causal nexus or a random decision generator. I offer no argument that this is the case: on the contrary, I think that a great deal of the time our self-conception as free is self-deception. We are vastly influenced by things beyond our control that enter into our psychological and emotional makeup and impact upon our actions. What we do and who we are is mostly a function of the convergence of our heredity and experience. To deny that is to blind ourselves to the truth of human nature. Yet the fact that we often deceive ourselves into denying how we came to be who we are does not mean that it is impossible to break out of that process and to transcend ourselves. That possibility is the possibility of freedom.

# The Plausibility of Freedom

I want to return to the Rambam's radical conception of freedom:

… Each person is fit to be righteous like Moshe, our teacher, or wicked, like Yarov’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….[[4]](#footnote-4)

As I mentioned previously, in claiming that everyone has the potential for the righteousness as Moshe, the Rambam is stating a radical conception of freedom. Is it a reasonable understanding of human freedom to claim that anyone, at least in principle, can be as righteous as Moshe *Rabbeinu* or as evil as Yarov'am (I do not know why the Rambam chose particularly Yarov'am as the personification of evil)? If we understand freedom without denying the fact of human nature, with the myriad tendencies and inclinations that each person is given, it is outrageous to propose that everyone has equal potential. The malnourished refugee who spends most of his time searching for his next meal has neither time nor energy for either reflection or creativity. He spends his life under the brutal rod of necessity. Some people have more education, more opportunities and more time free from existential worries than others. Even ignoring these external factors, some are more sensitive, more intelligent, more perceptive or more creative than others. Surely these differences affect the degree to which one can remake oneself! Given the Rambam's emphasis on freedom as the ability to shape one's character he must have been aware that where one can get to is not independent of one's point of departure.

I can think of two reasons why the Rambam insists that the fact of freedom means that the sky is the limit and anyone can potentially be as righteous as Moshe. First of all, a person's ability to change his or herself is in fact unlimited in principle if not in practice. The constraints that prevent each of us from being as righteous as Moshe *Rabbeinu* are not intrinsic to the concept of freedom so much as to the practical application of it. One of those constraints involves one's own sense of potential: one cannot change more than what one imagines is possible. In insisting that anything is possible (and ignoring the practical constraints) the Rambam seeks to help free us of such a self-imposed constraint. The power of self-improvement that is at the core of the idea of freedom is limited by focusing on the constraints associated with one's starting point.

Another reason that can contribute to the explanation of why the Rambam's understanding of freedom seems so psychologically naïve can be found by considering his polemical opponents. Immediately prior to the passage about Moshe *Rabbeinu* the Rambam writes:

A person should not entertain the thesis held by the fools among the gentiles and the majority of the undeveloped in Israel that, at the time of a man's creation, the Holy One, blessed be He, decrees whether he will be righteous or wicked.[[5]](#footnote-5)

One can speculate that the "fools among the gentiles" that the Rambam mentions refers to a dominant trend in Islamic theology (*'El Ashariya'*) that denies free choice in favor of the notion that everything that happens is by divine decree. Presumably, this attitude was common amongst "the undeveloped in Israel" as well. In combating this attitude, and in insisting that human beings are not divinely activated puppets, the Rambam saw a need to emphasize the potential that derives from the fact that we are free.

That being said, one is nonetheless left with some degree of discomfort. The reality of freedom cannot involve the denial of human nature and of the constraints imposed upon human beings by both native ability and environment. Freedom understood that way, i.e., freedom understood as the total lack of real constraints, besides being wildly implausible, is, I have argued, basically indistinguishable from randomness. It is not enough to deny that human action is simply the end result of some causal chain. Meaningful human freedom must include an element in which the individual "owns" her actions, that she expresses herself through her actions. Therefore those actions must be a result of her personality and character (with all of its limitations). I have suggested that freedom is thus best understood as self-transcendence in which one gains, in some way or another, the ability to transform oneself. Yet if the act (or process) of self-transformation is meaningful, it must be the agent's own action and as such limited by his point of departure.

# Why Freedom Matters

Finally, I want to say a few words on why freedom matters. Often one hears the claim that freedom is necessary for moral responsibility. I am not at all sure that is a good answer, at least as moral responsibility is usually understood. Let me explain.

The claim that if people are not free they cannot be held accountable for their actions assumes that accountability is a function of being able to do otherwise. This, to my mind is very questionable; people are often held responsible for things that they cannot reasonably have been expected to do otherwise. At the very least, we hold people responsible without respect to the degree to which alternatives are really available. Thus we punish criminals without much regard to the details of their individual life stories: barring extraordinary circumstances like insanity, the drug dealer who grew up in a family of drug dealers is held as culpable as the drug dealer who grew up in suburbia. There is nothing new in this point and the supporters of a strong dependence of moral responsibility on freedom have ways of answering it. I do not propose to enter into that fray. Instead, I want to offer a different explanation of the significance of human freedom.

I have already hinted to the effect that human freedom is a theological necessity. Even if all of the secular claims about moral responsibility and the meaningfulness of human life can be accommodated within a deterministic, or quasi-deterministic framework (I suspect that the former can be and the latter cannot), I do not believe that a religious world view can tolerate the absence of freedom. If human beings are not significantly free, independent of the divine will in their actions, then it is hard to make sense of the world. Such a world would essentially be a divine wind-up toy, in which everything anyone does, good or bad, is not only foreseen but pre-destined. From God's perspective, all of history would be just the manifestation of His pre-conceived program with no possibility of failure or even digression. Only if human beings are free creatures, independent, to some degree, of God, does God's desire for a relationship with humanity make any sense.

Relationships, to be meaningful, require both give and take: they require two sides that recognize one another as distinct. They require the risk of betrayal in order for there to be a meaningful notion of faithfulness. Human beings, and most centrally for our purposes*, Am Yisrael*, though certainly subordinate to God in the relationship, are still participants in it because God has given up on control of their actions. In this supreme act of divine self-restraint, a new thing came into being that did not exist beforehand: a relationship and the model for all human relationships. God created human beings in His image in order that He should have a partner in creation, who He does not control, and thus can be in a relationship with. This self-limitation thus becomes a means by which God expands Himself: the God who is the Creator of independent creatures is the greater God than the God who is the author of a mechanistic universe. The God who has an ongoing relationship with a significant (though necessarily subordinate) other is a greater God than the God who is entirely alone. These are the reasons that I believe that human freedom is a crucial article of faith, for otherwise our conception of God would be diminished.

To be sure, there are voices in the tradition that have not understood freedom in this way and have preferred emphasizing divine power over divine self-restraint as the locus of God's majesty. These voices should not be dismissed or disregarded. We are better served by maintaining a creative tension between the idea of human freedom and divine power than by committing to one at the exclusion of the other. In my concluding shiur next week, I will try to develop my sense of a general approach to the theological questions I have discussed this year.

1. In all honesty, I cannot attribute the conception of freedom that I am trying to articulate to the Rambam. I have no way of knowing if the Rambam conceived of the problem I tried to articulate in the last shiur. For the Rambam, knowledge, or at least knowledge worth having, is a very particular thing and it is not clear if the Rambam would agree that the practical self-knowledge can be self-transcendent in the way that I argue. That being said, the Rambam's conception of freedom (or *'reshut'*) in terms of the ability to change one's character (rather than some sort of local ability to do or not do any individual action) is very congenial to the argument I am making. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. One way of putting this is to claim that knowledge is a *normative* state. To know that X is to be objectively justified in claiming X by the fact that X is true. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This is the deep point of much of the furor over post-modernism. The skeptical post-modernist can be (ironically) understood to be taking what is essentially a *conservative* position: that human beings cannot transcend themselves and the best notion of truth available is the convergence of subjectivities. The anti-skeptic is arguing for the more radical possibility of transcendence, of breaking out of subjectivity and engaging the world as it is. The political overtones and general hysteria of this question has greatly obscured the deep truth to be found in the skeptical position: that at least most of the time we are limited to the frame of our own (collective) subjectivity. It has also obscured how very radical the anti-skeptical position is: that human knowledge somehow supersedes the limits of causality (which would limit cognition to the subjective). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Hilkhot Teshuva* 5:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rambam, *Hilkhot Teshuva*, 5:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)