



FREE WILL: DOES IT MAKE US MORAL PEOPLE?

In an experiment described in the journal *Science*,¹ psychologists asked participants a series of questions about people who did reprehensible things, such as a man who hired someone to kill his wife and children or a man who cheated on his taxes. Researchers discovered that people’s answers depended on whether they believed in free will or determinism.² Absolute determinism is the general view that all events, including human actions, are produced by prior conditions, which make those events and actions inevitable. These predetermined influences can be internal biological and psychological drives, scientific-environmental rules, or metaphysical-divine forces. In contrast, the notion of absolute freedom of the mind

assumes that we are able to make decisions independent of either natural or metaphysical controlling forces.³ If we have free will, according to most respondents, then we are responsible for our actions both good and bad, but if everything is predetermined then we are simply following a script, rendering us free of any responsibility.

The results of this study seem to imply that people believe that the *belief* in free will leads us down a moral path, because we hold ourselves more morally responsible when we believe in free will. But does free will truly lead us to be better people? To act in a more moral fashion?

In Judaism, according to many of our great rabbis, free will, or *bechira chofshit*, is an essential part of Judaism.

The Rambam in *Hilchot Teshuvah* 5:3 describes free will as *ikar gadol hu, v’hu amud Hatorah v’hamitzvah* — It is the essence of all of the Torah and mitzvot.

The Rambam adds:

אל יעבר במחשבתך דבר זה שאומרים טפשי אמות העולם ורב גלמי בני ישראל שהקדוש ברוך הוא גוזר על האדם מתחלת ברייתו להיות צדיק או רשע.

Do not let enter your mind that which is said by the foolish people among the Gentiles and the boorish among the Jews: that God decrees from the start whether a person is to be righteous or wicked.

Laws of Teshuvah 5:2

What is the basis for the concept of free will within Judaism?

There are many sources that form the basis for the belief in free will. A few of them include:

העידית בכם היום את השמים ואת הארץ:
החיים והמוות נתתי לפניך, הברכה והקללה;
ובחרת בחיים, למען תחיה אתה וזרעך.

Today, I testify with the heavens and the earth as my witness, I place before you life and death, blessing and curse, you should choose life in order for you and your descendants to live.

Devarim 30:19

In the Mishnah in *Avot* 3:15, it is taught:

הכל צפוי, והרשות נתונה.

All is anticipated, and a person has the ability to act in any fashion they want.

And in the Gemara in *Brachot* 33b, it is written:

הכל בידי שמים – חוץ מיראת שמים.

Everything is in the hands of Heaven, except for the fear of Heaven.

But do we always have the choice to be “good or bad”? There are many instances in the Torah where it seems that our choice is taken away from us. If that is the case, then how can we be held responsible for our actions? How can we ever repent and do teshuvah? Let us examine two of these situations that will help us, at least on some level, to answer these questions.

In the stories of Pharaoh and Bilam, God intervenes and limits or removes the ability of these individuals to make and act on their own choices. What happens in these two situations? Why does Hashem seemingly take away their free will? And what, if anything, does this teach us about the limits of free will?

Pharaoh

In *Shmot* 7:3, Hashem tells Moshe that He will harden Pharaoh’s heart (*va’ani aksheh et lev Paroh*). In this sense, it seems that Hashem is taking away the free will of the Egyptian

ruler. And in each plague, there is mention of Pharaoh’s heart being hardened. In the beginning, Pharaoh hardens his own heart, but by the last five plagues Hashem hardens Pharaoh’s heart.⁴ We clearly see that Hashem intends to take away Pharaoh’s free will from the beginning. Hashem tells us what He wants to achieve (7:3) — that He wants to bring about many great wonders and show those great wonders to others. But isn’t there an alternate way to achieve this goal? Why did it have to involve taking away Pharaoh’s free will?

There are different schools of thought on this. According to many, including the Ramban, the Seforno, Rasag and Rav Yitzchak Aramah, hardening Pharaoh’s heart was actually a preservation of his free will.

According to the Ramban and Seforno,⁵ Pharaoh really did not want Bnei Yisrael to leave Egypt. During the first five plagues he was able to stick to his plan — he hardened his own heart with his determination not to let them go. But then it became a challenge for him. In the words of Ramban:

רך לבו והיה נמלך לשלחם מכבוד המכות לא לעשות רצון בוראו ואז הקשה השם את רוחו ואמץ את לבבו.

His heart had softened and he was prepared to let them leave because of the severity of the plagues, not because he wanted to fulfill the will of his creator. At that point, Hashem hardened his heart and gave him the strength [to reject Moshe’s request].

Hashem needed to give Pharaoh free will. Otherwise, if Pharaoh let the Jews out at this point, it would be as if Hashem coerced him. And so Hashem enabled Pharaoh to have free will by strengthening his heart.

The other school of thought, led by the Rambam, believe that Hashem did constrain Pharaoh’s free will.

Both in *Hilchot Teshuva* and in *Shemoneh Perakim*, the Rambam teaches us that there are times when Hashem takes away our free will. Different choices yield different consequences. According to the Rambam in *Shemoneh Perakim*, chapter 8:

והוא הבוחר במעשיו, מה שירצה לעשותו יעשהו, ומה שירצה שלא לעשותו לא יעשהו, אלא אם כן יענשהו ה' על חטא שחטא בשׁיבטל רצונו.

A person can choose his actions, to do something or not do it, unless Hashem punishes him and then his free will is nullified.

We certainly have free choice and free will. We can choose to put our hand in the fire. But every choice we make will have a consequence. If we choose to put our hand in the fire, we will most likely get burned. If we choose to violate a Torah law and not listen to Hashem, He may punish us. A possible consequence could be the removal of our free will.

But what are those circumstances that Hashem takes away our free will? If Hashem takes it away, then how can we do teshuvah? Do we ever gain back our free will?

To add to our understanding of the limits of free will, and whether we can ever gain it back, let us examine the story of Bilam.

Bilam

In *Bamidbar* 22:5, Balak asks Bilam to curse Bnei Yisroel. Twice, Bilam refuses, saying that he must listen to God. God tells Bilam not to go to Balak, but when Bilam presses

Hashem, he is granted permission, as long as he abides by God's words:

וַיָּבֹא אֱלֹקִים אֶל בִּלְעָם לֵילָה וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ אִם לְקַרְא לָךְ בָּאוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים קוּם לֶךְ אִתָּם וְאָךְ אֶת הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר אֲדַבֵּר אֵלֶיךָ אֹתוֹ תַעֲשֶׂה.

That night God came to Bilam and said to him, "If these men have come to invite you, you may go with them. But whatever I command you, that you shall do."

Bamidbar 22:20

However, if we look at the pesukim, we see that Bilam is required to do more than follow what Hashem has told him to say. Four times we see an idea that implies that Bilam had his free will removed.

When Bilam speaks with Balak he says — *Everything that Hashem puts in my mouth that is what I will say (22:38).* And then when Bilam tries to curse Bnei Yisrael, Hashem literally puts the words in his mouth: *וישם ה' דבר בפי בלעם — God placed the words in the mouth of Bilam (23:5).* These words are repeated twice more. After Bilam initially blesses Bnei Yisrael, Balak becomes angry with him and Bilam responds *הלא את אשר ישם ה' בפי אתו אשמר לדבר — I can only repeat faithfully what God puts in my mouth (23:12).* And then when Bilam tries to curse Bnei Yisrael again *וישם דבר בפי בלעם — And [God] placed the words in his mouth (23:16).*

If we believe in free will, how is it that we are told four times that Hashem literally put words in Bilam's mouth and takes Bilam's free will away?

The Or Hachayim (R. Chayyim ben Moshe ibn Attar), says there are many times when Hashem takes away our free will. In this case, he emphasizes that our language has incredible power and is holy. When Bilam tried to use it improperly — *לעשות תיקון — נתחכם ה' לעשות תיקון —*

לדבר קדושה — Hashem tried to rectify this situation by manipulating Bilam's words.

Bilam did not fully understand how powerful his words were, and so Hashem taught Bilam a lesson by taking away his free will and showing him the right way to use his words.

Similar to Pharaoh, when Bilam attempted to defy Hashem, his will was constrained. There are many similarities between the situations of Pharaoh and Bilam but also many notable differences.

Both of these men were leaders. There are many details described in the Torah of Pharaoh as the king of Egypt, but very little about Bilam other than that he was a powerful sorcerer and had a relationship with Hashem. Both men sought to harm Bnei Yisrael, albeit through different means and for different purposes. Pharaoh wanted Bnei Yisrael to remain his servants in perpetuity because he was worried that they were a great and strong nation — *עם בני ישראל רב ועצום ממנו (Shmot 1:9).*

Pharaoh caused Bnei Yisrael physical suffering, not only to maintain them as slaves, but to create within them a "slave mentality." Bilam attempted to curse Bnei Yisrael, to harm them through his words. However, he was not motivated by any personal desire. Balak was concerned, similar to Pharaoh, about Bnei Yisrael's strength. Balak describes Bnei Yisrael in Bamidbar (22:3,5) as *rav hu* (numerous) and *atzum hu mimeni* (more numerous than me), and so he asked Bilam to curse them. In both cases, Hashem punished these individuals by taking away their free will. However, Bilam seems to acknowledge that Hashem might do this while Pharaoh has no knowledge of Hashem's plan.

But the end of their stories diverge. Bilam eventually recognizes what the right path is:

וַיֵּרָא בִלְעָם כִּי טוֹב בְּעֵינָי ה' לְבָרֵךְ אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא הָלַךְ כְּפָעַם בְּפָעַם לְקַרְאֵת נְחָשִׁים וַיָּשֶׁת אֶל הַמִּדְבָּר פָּנָיו.

Now Bilam, seeing that it pleased the Lord to bless Israel, did not, as on previous occasions, go in search of omens, but turned his face toward the wilderness.

Bamidbar 24:1

Bilam saw — on his own — that it was good in Hashem's eyes to bless the Jewish people. It further states (24:3) "*vayisa meshalo*" — he presented his parable, his own parable. The words that came next, the real bracha, came from him and not from God. Hashem no longer needed to intervene, since Bilam now recognized the right path to take; his free will was thus reinstated.

This point is made by the Or Hachayim:

שעד עתה היה מדבר מה שישם ה' בפיו כנגד רצונו שהדיבור היה יוצא מפיו בעל כרחו ועתה רצה שישכים הוא על הדברים היוצאים מפיו. Up until now, Hashem has taken away his free will but now that he recognizes what he should do, the words came out on his own.

Bilam's free will may have been taken away, but he was able to gain it back. Pharaoh never regained his free will because he continued on the immoral path that he had chosen.

In these situations, Pharaoh and Bilam's free will did not make them more moral people, and in fact we can argue that Pharaoh's free will perhaps made him less moral.

Free will, according to the Rambam, is the ability to choose between good and bad:

רשות לכל אדם נתונה: אם רצה להטות עצמו לדרך טובה ולהיות צדיק - הרשות בידו, ואם

רצה להטות עצמו לדרך רעה ולהיות רשע -
הרשות בידו.

*Every man was endowed with a free will;
if he desires to bend himself toward the
good path and to be just it is within the
power of his hand to reach out for it,
and if he desires to bend himself to a bad
path and to be wicked it is within the
power of his hand to reach out for it.*

Hilchot Teshuva 5:1

אבל נדע בלא ספק, שמעשה האדם ביד
האדם, ואין הקב"ה מושכו ולא גוזר עליו
לעשות כך... ומפני זה נאמר בנבואה, שדנים
את האדם על מעשיו - כפי מעשיו: אם טוב
ואם רע.

*But we do know without a doubt that
man's behavior is in the hand of man, and
that the Holy One, blessed is He neither
draws him nor issues edicts against him to
do as he does ... For this reason, we our
told through our prophets that a person
is judged for his actions: according to his
actions whether good or for bad.*

Hilchot Teshuva 5:5

We learn from this that free will is
our ability to discern good from bad
and our ability to choose to act based
on this understanding.⁶ Free will can
be used for both moral and immoral
purposes. It does not make us moral
people, but it gives us the choice to be
moral.

We can choose how we act —
positively or negatively. In both

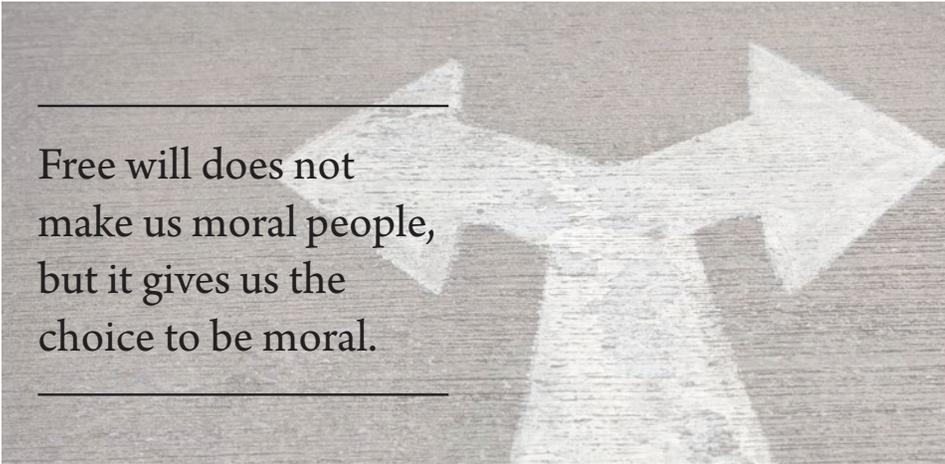
situations, there will be consequences.
When we use our free will the wrong
way and make poor choices, we are
deviating from the moral path. Hashem
may punish us and try to show us that
we have gone in the wrong direction,
even removing our free will in that
moment. But it is not a permanent
constraint — we can always gain
our free will back. We can choose to
rectify the situation. That process of
rectification is teshuvah. The Maharal,
Rabbi Yehuda Loew ben Betzalel, in
Gevurot Hashem (ch. 31) differentiates
between those who are overtaken by
desire, emotion and passion and those
who choose evil willingly. Those who
sin because of the former, if they are
sincere in their teshuva, are forgiven
by Hashem. Through their teshuva,
they are expressing who they really are,
and as such gain back their free will.
They return to themselves. However,
if they choose evil willingly, teshuvah
is impossible. Pharaoh demonstrated
that he intellectually chose the path of
evil and therefore the gift of teshuva
was impossible.⁷ Bilam, however, who
did not choose evil — and in fact never
succeeded in cursing Bnei Yisrael —
could see the right way and follow that
path. So much so that the bracha he
gave to Bnei Yisrael of his own free will
is said every day in davening — *Mah
tovu ohalecha Yaakov* — how great are

the tents of Jacob.⁸ This is a reminder to
us of our ability every day to choose the
right thing, and that it is not our free
will that makes us moral people but our
choices.

Free will is a cycle. When we use our
free will for good, we put ourselves
on a moral path, and following this
moral path leads us to greater free will.
But when we use our free will for the
negative, we may lose the opportunity
to continue to use our free will. So the
choice is ours: how will we use our
free will?

Endnotes

1. Summarized in John Tierney, "Do You Have Free Will? Yes, It's the Only Choice," available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/22/science/22tier.html>
2. See the resources referenced at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Determinism>
3. See the resources referenced at <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/FreeWill.pdf>
4. It is interesting to note that in the pesukim there are three different words used to describe the same action: *vayechazek* — he strengthened, *va'aksheh* — and I will make hard, *vehachbed* — and he made heavy. Hashem said that he will harden (*va'aksheh*), but that verb does not appear when Pharaoh's heart is actually hardened.
5. On chapter 7, verse 3.
6. There are many other definitions and aspects to free will. For a more comprehensive analysis see Wiederblank, Rabbi Netanel, "Illuminating Jewish Thought: Explorations of Free Will, the Afterlife and the Messianic Era." The RIETS Hashkafa Series, The Michael Sharf Publication Trust of Yeshiva University Press, Magid Books, 2018.
7. Wiederblank, p. 240.
8. There is much discussion about what Bilam's actual sin was. From the pesukim it is not clear. See <http://www.nechama.org.il/pages/924.html>. He was killed later in the battle between Bnei Yisroel and Midyan.



Free will does not
make us moral people,
but it gives us the
choice to be moral.