

# Big Questions in Jewish Spirituality

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UNIT 9



## UNIT 9

# What is Free Will?

## Unit Objectives

### Students will be able to:

- Explain that there are many opinions about free will among Jewish scholars, but most argue that people have some level of free will.
- Explain that they are free to make choices in their day-to-day lives that facilitate spirituality and connection, although sometimes their choices are impaired or influenced by circumstances beyond their control.
- Reflect on the idea that everyone can choose to live a life of connection to God or a life of disconnection from God.

**NOTES:**

- As educators, we know it is impossible to answer all philosophical questions about free will in one unit—some scholars devote their entire lives to exploring such ideas. This unit aims to provide students with a healthy perspective or framework for thinking about free will, so that they appreciate the spiritual benefits of free will and how it can directly impact their lives.



## Introductory Essay

*This essay, for the teacher, is meant to provide some context and walk the teacher through the main ideas in this unit.*

The concept of free will is the idea that humans can choose to do good or to do evil and that no outside force determines that choice. We all have the experience of making choices, but a number of philosophical and theological issues bring into question the extent to which those choices are in fact free.

Consider a person struggling with addiction—if they indulge in their addiction, are they genuinely exercising free will, or are they being overpowered by their condition? We should also consider that free choice might differ from person to person. Common sense would seem to indicate that not everyone has an equal freedom to choose—Someone who has a natural tendency towards anger will have a harder time controlling their temper than someone who is naturally slower to anger. The way someone is raised, the experiences they have, certain beliefs and practices might influence, or even seem to control the choices they make. Both inherit traits (nature) and life experiences (nurture) seem to directly impact people’s choices. If I am influenced and sometimes even compelled by these factors to make a particular decision, is the choice really free?

Theological questions complicate the matter as well. We believe that God is omniscient (all-knowing) and omnipotence (all-powerful). If God knows what I am going to do before I even do it, then was my choice really free when I made it. If God

is all powerful, what power is left for me to actually decide? If God wants me to act in a certain way, do I really have the power to decide to do something else? These questions challenge our understanding of free will and force us to consider the balance between Divine knowledge, human agency, and the forces that shape our choices.

The vast majority of Jewish thinkers have asserted that humans are endowed with free will, or freedom of choice. The Kabbalistic tradition approaches free will through the concept of *tzimtzum*—God’s self-imposed contraction. While God is indeed Omniscient, Omnipotent, and Omnipresent, God contracts in order to make space for us in the world and to give us agency, including the ability to make our own choices. This can be likened to a parent who, although they might have complete control over their baby’s life, gives up that control overtime, because they want their child to grow and have agency in the world. Over time, the parent might even choose to conceal their own preferences in order to let the child truly make their own choices.

So too *tzimtzum* includes an aspect of concealment. If God’s presence were obvious and undeniable, there would be no struggle—no real choice, because the truth would be too clear to ignore. Free will exists precisely because God has created a world where right and wrong aren’t always obvious, where we have to wade through the fog of our own desires, insecurities, and biases to get to the truth.

The Tanya frames this struggle in terms of the two souls within each person: the *nefesh Elokit* (Godly soul) and the *nefesh ha’behemit* (animal soul). The *nefesh ha’behemit* isn’t evil—it’s just looking out for itself. It’s driven by self-preservation and the pursuit of physical, emotional, intellectual, and even spiritual fulfillment. The challenge of free will is choosing whether to follow the call of the *nefesh Elokit*, which seeks to align with God’s will, or to be swayed by the impulses of the *nefesh ha’behemit*, which often seeks immediate gratification.

Sometimes we are faced with a choice between immediate gratification and a greater good. Likewise, some choices bring us closer to Hashem, while others might move us further away. The fact that we have choice allows us to determine the path that we will take in life; if we will choose to have a connection to God or not. But why would God allow us to make a choice that might distance ourselves from Him? God created the world to give us pleasure. The ultimate pleasure is reached through achieving connection to the Divine. The act of choosing, and working toward a relationship with God, therefore earning that sense of closeness, allows for a much deeper pleasure than if it was given unearned. This is the Kabbalistic idea of bread of

shame—if we take free handouts, we do not enjoy it as much as we do if we choose it, if we earn it. This explains why God placed us in a world of moral complexity rather than a world of automatic good. By struggling with our choices and choosing the path of good, we draw closer to God and earn the pleasure of that closeness.

The more we align our will with God's, the closer we draw to Him. When we make choices that distance us from His will, we suffer the consequences of that distance. The great challenge is to overcome the concealment or *tzimtzum* of Divine clarity and to choose Godliness even when it is not obvious or easy.

If we think about our evolution as a Jewish people, God cared for us in the desert, fed us, clothed us, directed us, but as the time came to enter the land of Israel, God increasingly gave us the freedom to make our own choices. Like a good parent, God set out a pathway for us to guide those decisions. Given that guidance, we are free to choose. Whether we choose the right or wrong path, the choice is still ours.



## Key Ideas

*These are the key ideas of the unit. This list can be used to ensure that all the key ideas are covered over the course of the lessons.*

- There are multiple positions on free will among Jewish scholars, but most believe in some level of free will.
- Many Jewish thinkers believe that while God has a plan for the world and therefore our ultimate destination may be known, the path is up to us.
- People have desires, but it is up to us to decide if we control those desires or if they control us.
- We can choose to follow the path of God, or not follow the path of God.
- God created the world to give us the ultimate pleasure, which is achieved through choosing a life of connection to God.
- We have multiple choices along the way and some of our choices will lead to a meaningful journey while others might lead to spiritual pain and disconnection.
- On our paths, we need to constantly ask ourselves is this choice the right choice—does it serve a long-term goal or is it a matter of instant gratification?
- There are many things in the world which are not in our control. However, even when it comes to those forces, we do control our own reactions and perspectives.



## Important Terms

*These are terms that may come up in classroom discussions. It is important to have definitions on hand and to make sure that the teacher and students are talking about the same thing.*

- **Choice** – The act of making a decision. Choice involves the exercise of free will, where an individual considers options and decides on a course of action.
- **Constraint** – In this unit, it is any factor that limits freedom of choice.
- **Desire** – Wanting or wishing for a specific outcome/object/experience. Desires often influence an individual toward certain choices or actions.
- **Free will** – Being able to make decisions without being constrained.

## Classroom Activities

*In order to get the most out of this unit, and to help students understand the key ideas, we suggest that teachers complete the classroom activities (unless otherwise indicated) in the order that they appear.*

### **Trigger and Introduction – Question Generation**

Students should spend a few minutes—individually or in groups—formulating questions related to the topic. Then, come together as a class and make a master list of questions. Clarify that you will not necessarily answer all of the questions together, but this unit will address the topic and hopefully help them to think differently about the concept of free will.

Here are some possible student questions:

- Do I have free will?
- How do I know if I have free will?
- Why does it matter?
- What are the limits of my free will?
- If I have free will, does it extend to all of my choices?
- Are my choices predetermined and if so, are my choices free?
- If God knows what will happen, do I really have free will?
- How does my free will affect my moral responsibility and does it matter?
- Am I punished for the choices I make, and should I be?
- Why might God want us to have free will?

Here are some questions that you may formulate:

- How does the assumption of free will impact you? Does it change the way you relate to your behavior?
- What is the relationship of animals to free will? What about computers?
- What are the limits of free will, or, are there choices that would be impossible for you to make? Does that mean you don't have absolute free will?
- How is moral responsibility related to free will?

## How Do You Decide? – Activity

Use the following activity to jumpstart a conversation about free will. Ask students to reflect on a period of time over the previous day (an hour, two hours, etc.). Ask them to try to record decisions that they made during that time: everything from what to wear in the morning, what food to eat, whether to go to school, etc. For each decision they made, they should try to record the factors that *influenced* or *constrained* their decision. In *chavrutot*, have students reflect on the way they make decisions—what impacts the various decisions that they make? Are there decisions that they feel are completely “free?” What does that mean to them? Could they have made a different decision?



## Who is the Most Free? – Activity

Continue exploring the nature of free will with your class. Below, find four profiles of teens/young adults. Put their descriptions on four different walls in the room (feel free to add images if you would like) and ask students to walk around the room and read each of the four profiles. Once they have read all four, each student should decide who is the “most free” by going to stand next to their chosen profile. Choose one student from each group to explain why they think that character is the most free. Ultimately, the students should recognize that there will be no single answer—everyone is on their own path.

- Amit – A 20-year-old who left college after two years. Wandering around India for a few months, a huge backpack on his back and a guitar in his hand, every day he chooses where to go, looking for exciting experiences. He decided to go on a soul-searching trip and he has no obligation to anyone in the world—he is like a bird, gliding from place to place, as he desires.
- Shelly – A 16-year-old girl, studying in high school. She gets up early in the morning, spends about 10 hours a day in school, and when she gets home she has to do her homework and study for exams. Occasionally she hangs out with friends or watches a TV show, but usually she is too busy. She loves learning, and that is how she spends her time. She is a focused student.
- Yoni – He is a senior in high school. He really does not know what to do when he graduates. Should he go straight to college? And if so, which college? Should he take a gap year and learn in Yeshiva? Should he join the Israeli army as a lone soldier? Should he just take some time off to make money and then figure things out? He has so many good options and cannot figure out how to make a decision.
- Liat – She is 22 and just graduated from her parent’s alma mater, cum laude. She is engaged to marry her boyfriend of the last four years, and she has a prominent position waiting for her in the family business. Her life is on track and everything is working out exactly as planned.

## Deep Dive – Source Review

*There are a range of sources in the source sheet at the end of this unit—select the ones that will best work with your students, referring to the Key Ideas to ensure that main points are shared with the class. Many of the sources are followed by pedagogic notes or questions.*

Explain that free will is a topic that Jewish scholars have always grappled with and explored. The idea of free will first appears in the Tanach, but discussions about what it means have continued until today. While the majority opinion among Jewish scholars is that free will exists, many believe it is limited in some way, and there are a few who argue that it does not exist.

This deep dive into the sources can be run in a few ways:

- a. Run a loosely structured discussion in your class about some of the questions that you gathered, only referring to the sources without studying them inside.
- b. Run a [jigsaw activity](#) with your students, first selecting the texts you want them to study. Bring the students back as a class at the end for a discussion.
- c. Teach the sources frontally. Clarify the meaning if there are any misunderstandings, and make sure the key points are covered.

The source sheet can be found on page 11, following the Spirituality Journal.

## Spirituality Journal

Ask students to reflect on the following questions and then choose two to respond to. (Students who are comfortable with sharing can be invited to share their thoughts, either with a small group of peers, or with the whole class.)

- Reflect on a moment when you had to make a significant choice. How did you feel your desires influenced your decision? Did you feel in control of those desires, or did they control you?

- Reflect on a time when you made a choice that caused you to feel a sense of personal growth. Describe the experience including the decision-making process.
- True freedom is different from “doing whatever I want.” Reflect on a time when you made a decision that would bring you momentary happiness, but later realized did not bring true freedom or happiness.
- We learned that one understanding of free will is that though our ultimate destination is known, we are free to choose the path. Is this an empowering or a limiting idea for you? Why?
- In life there are some situations which are out of our control. Reflect on a time when your choices were limited by factors outside of your control. How did you react to the situation? How did it feel? Would you do anything differently if confronted with the same situation again?
- Can you think of an issue in your life that you have struggled with (using bad language, eating junk food, procrastinating with homework, etc.) and have reached a point where you no longer struggle? Would you say that you have moved to a point where it is no longer part of your *nekudat habechira* (reference from *michtav me'eliyahu* source), meaning, that you no longer need to choose in that area? How did you reach that goal? What can you learn from that process?

## Conclusion

Ask the class: *How have the activities or sources helped you clarify your understanding of free will? How will it impact your behaviors and attitudes?* Make sure to allow a range of students to share their ideas. Remind students that choices are made all the time and that some things are beyond their control.

# Source Sheet

## *Devarim 19:30*

העידתי בכם היום את השמים ואת הארץ החיים והמות נתתי לפניך הברכה והקללה ובחרת בחיים למען תחיה אתה וזרעך:

**I call-as-witness against you today the heavens and the earth: life and death I place before you, blessing and curse; so choose life, in order that you may stay alive, you and your seed.**

*This is considered to be the foundational Biblical text indicating that humanity has free will. The text notes that humanity has a choice. We are instructed to choose life, but the choice is still ours to make.*

## *Pirke Avot 3:15*

הכל צפוי, והרשות נתונה, ובטוב העולם נדון. והכל לפי רב המעשה:

**Everything is foreseen yet free will is granted, And the world is judged with goodness; And everything is in accordance with the majority of deed.**

## *Talmud Bavli, Berachot 33b*

ואמר רבי חנינא: הכל בידי שמים, חוץ מיראת שמים.

**And Rabbi Hanina said: Everything is in the hands of Heaven, except for fear of Heaven.**

*According to Rabbi Hanina, is there such a thing as free will?*

## *Rambam, Hilchot Teshuva 5:1-2 (c. 1170)*

רשות לכל אדם נתונה. אם רצה להטות עצמו לדרך טובה ולהיות צדיק הרשות בידו. ואם רצה להטות עצמו לדרך רעה ולהיות רשע הרשות בידו. הוא שכתוב בתורה (בראשית ג כב) "הן האדם

הִיָּה כְּאֶחָד מִמֶּנּוּ לְדַעַת טוֹב וְרָע. מְלוֹמֵר הֵן מִיִּן זֶה שֶׁל אָדָם הִיָּה יְחִיד בְּעוֹלָם וְאִין מִיִּן שְׁנֵי דוּמָה לוֹ בְּזֶה הָעֵנִין שִׁיָּהָא הוּא מַעְצָמוּ בְּדַעְתוֹ וּבִמְחַשְׁבֹּתוֹ יוֹדֵעַ הַטּוֹב וְהָרַע וְעוֹשֶׂה כָּל מַה שֶּׁהוּא חֹפֵץ וְאִין מִי שִׁיעֲכַב בְּיָדוֹ מִלַּעֲשׂוֹת הַטּוֹב אוֹ הָרַע. וְכִיּוֹן שֶׁכֵּן הוּא פֶּן יִשְׁלַח יָדוֹ:

...כָּל אָדָם רָאוּי לוֹ לְהִיּוֹת צְדִיק כְּמֹשֶׁה רַבֵּנוֹ אוֹ רָשָׁע כִּיְרֵבֵעַם אוֹ חָכָם אוֹ סָכָל אוֹ רַחֲמָן אוֹ אַכְזָרִי אוֹ כִּילִי אוֹ שׁוֹעַ וְכֵן שֶׁאֵר כָּל הַדַּעוֹת. וְאִין לוֹ מִי שִׁיִּכְפְּהוּ וְלֹא גּוֹזֵר עָלָיו וְלֹא מִי שֶׁמוֹשְׁכּוֹ לְאֶחָד מִשְׁנֵי הַדַּרְכִּים אֲלֵא הוּא מַעְצָמוּ וּמַדַּעְתוֹ נוֹטֶה לְאִי זֶה דֶּרֶךְ שִׁירְצָה.

Permission is given to every individual to direct himself to follow a good path and become righteous or to follow a bad path and become evil. This is what is written in the Torah, "And now man is like one of us, knowing good and evil" (*Bereshit* 3:22). This means that a human being is unique in creation in the respect that through his intelligence he can distinguish between good and evil, and can choose to do either; and there is no one who will prevent him from doing so.

...Rather, each person has the capability to choose to become righteous like Moshe Rabbeinu or evil like Yeravam, wise or foolish, merciful or cruel... and similarly regarding any other attribute. There is no one who will force him, nor has it been decreed upon him, nor is anyone pulling him to one of these paths. Rather the person himself uses his own intelligence to choose the path which he desires.

*Do we have free will? Is there a limit to it? Is change possible?*

**Rabbi Moshe Ben Maimon, Rambam, *Hilchot Teshuva* 5:5 (c. 1170)**

דַּע שֶׁתְּשׁוּבַת שְׂאלָה זֶה אֲרוּכָה מֵאַרְץ מִדֵּה וּרְחִיבָה מִנֵּי יָם... וְאִין דַּעְתוֹ שֶׁל אָדָם יִכּוֹלָה לְהַשִּׁיג דְּבַר זֶה עַל בּוֹרִיו וְכַשֵּׁם שֶׁאִין כַּח בְּאָדָם לְהַשִּׁיג וּלְמַצּוֹא אִמְתַּת הַבּוֹרָא...

Know that the answer to this question is longer than the earth and wider than the seas ... A human being is not able to understand this issue completely, just as he is unable to perceive the true nature of God.

*How does Rambam explain how free will can exist given God's omniscience?  
Do you feel that this answer is satisfactory?*

**Rabbi Avraham Ben-David, Ravad, *Hasagot Ha-Ravad* on Rambam's *Hilchot Teshuva* 5:5 (c. 1175-1195)**

וכיון שכן הוא אין בנו כח לידע היאך ידע הקב"ה כל הברואים ומעשה ידיהם. א"א לא נהג זה המחבר מנהג החכמים שאין אדם מתחיל בדבר ולא ידע להשלימו והוא החל בשאלות קושיות והניח הדבר בקושיא והחזירו לאמונה וטוב היה לו להניח הדבר בתמימות התמימים ולא יעורר לבם ויניח דעתם בספק ואולי שעה אחת יבא הרהור בלבם על זה. ואע"פ שאין תשובה נצחת על זה טוב הוא לסמוך לו קצת תשובה. ואומר, אם היו צדקת האדם ורשעתו תלויים בגזירת הבורא ית' היינו אומרים שידיעתו היא גזירתו והיתה לנו השאלה קשה מאד ועכשיו שהבורא הסיר זו הממשלה מידו ומסרה ביד האדם עצמו אין ידיעתו גזירה אבל היא כדיעת האצטגנינים שיודעים מכח אחר מה יהיו דרכיו של זה והדבר ידוע שכל מקרה האדם קטן וגדול מסרו הבורא בכח המזלות אלא שנתן בו השכל להיותו מחזיקו לצאת מתחת המזל והוא הכח הנתון באדם להיותו טוב או רע והבורא יודע כח המזל ורגעיו אם יש כח בשכל להוציאו לזה מידו אם לא וזו הידיעה אינה גזירה, וכל זה איננו שוה:

This being so, etc. This one did not follow the custom of scholars; for no man begins a thing which he knows not how to finish it, whereas he commenced with inquiries and questions and left the matter under question and turned it around to faith. It would have been better for him to leave the matter to the innocence of the innocent, not to awaken their hearts and leave their mind in doubt, lest, during some hour, a suspicion will enter their heart concerning it. Moreover, although there is no convincing reply to this question, it is best to lean himself upon a partial answer like this, saying: If either the righteousness or wickedness of man would have been dependent upon the decree of the Creator, may He be blessed!, we would be saying that His knowledge is His decree, then would the question be to us very difficult, indeed. But now, since the Creator ceded this power from His Hand to the hand of the man himself, His knowledge can not be said to be a decree, but it is similar to the knowledge of the astrologists who know by another power what the conduct of a certain person would be. And, it is common knowledge that from the smallest to the biggest thing which happens to man the Creator transmitted to the power of the planets, only He endowed him with an intelligence to sustain himself, and be delivered from the influence of the planet, and this very same is the power endowed to man to be either good or bad,

and only the Creator knows the power of the planet and its movements whether it be within the power of the intelligence of one to be delivered from its influence or not. And, such knowledge is not a decree. But even this is not a comparison.

*Ravad was probably the fiercest critic of the Rambam, disagreeing with the premise of writing the Mishneh Torah.*

*What is Ravad's challenge of the Rambam?*

*How does Ravad see the issue of free will?*

*Does he see his answer as satisfactory?*

### Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Tanya*, Chapters 9 and 12 (1796)

פרק ט - אך הנה כתיב: "ולאום מלאום יאמץ", כי הגוף מקרא "עיר קטנה", וכמו ששני מלכים  
לחמים על עיר אחת, שכל אחד רוצה לכבשה ולמלוך עליה, דהיינו, להנהיג יושביה כרצונו ושיהיו  
סרים למשמעתו בכל אשר יגזור עליהם, כך שתי הנפשות, האלקית והחיונית הבהמית...לחמות זו  
עם זו על הגוף וכל אבריו, שהאלקית—חפצה ורצונה שתהא היא לבדה המושלת עליו ומנהיגתו,  
וכל האברים יהיו סרים למשמעתה ובטלים אצלה לגמרי, ומרכבה אליה...ויהיה הגוף כולו מלא  
מהם לבדם, ולא יעבור זר בתוכם חס ושלום...

פרק יב - אך מהות ועצמות נפש האלקית... לא להן לבדן המלוכה והממשלה בעיר קטנה, כי אם  
בעתים מזומנים, כמו בשעת קריאת שמע ותפלה שהיא שעת מוחין דגדלות למעלה, וגם למטה  
היא שעת הכושר לכל אדם, שאז מקשר חכמה בינה דעת שלו להי - להעמיק דעתו בגדולת אין  
סוף ברוך הוא, ולעורר את האהבה כרשפי אש בחלל הימני שבלבו, לדבקה בו בקיום התורה  
ומצותיה מאהבה...ואז, הרע שבחלל השמאלי כפוף ובטל לטוב המתפשט בחלל הימני מחכמה  
בינה דעת שבמוח המקושרים בגדולת אין סוף ברוך הוא. אבל אחר התפלה, בהסתלקות המוחין  
דגדלות אין סוף ברוך הוא, הרי הרע חוזר וניעור בחלל השמאלי, ומתאוה לתאוה לתאוה עולם  
הזה ותענוגיו.

Chapter 9 - It is written, however, "One nation shall prevail over the other nation." The body is called a "small city." Just as two kings wage war over a town, which each wishes to capture and rule, that is to say, to dominate its inhabitants according to his will so that they obey him in all that he decrees for them, so do the two souls - the Divine and the vitalizing animal soul...wage war against each

other over the body and all its limbs. It is the desire and will of the Divine soul that she alone rule over the person and direct him, and that all his limbs should obey her and surrender themselves completely to her and become a vehicle for her...and the entire body should be permeated with them alone, to the exclusion of any alien influence, God forbid...

Chapter 12 – However, the essence and being of the divine soul...do not constantly hold undisputed sovereignty and sway over the “small city,” except at appropriate times, such as during the recital of the *Shema* or the *Amidah*, which is a time when the Supernal Intellect is in a sublime state; and likewise below, this is a propitious time for every man, when he binds his *chabad* (intellectual faculties) to God, to meditate deeply on the greatness of the *Ein Sof*, blessed is He, and to arouse the burning love in the right part of his heart, to cleave to Him by virtue of the fulfillment of the Torah and its commandments out of love...At such time the evil that is in the left part is subjected to, and nullified in, the goodness that is diffused in the right part, from the wisdom, understanding, and knowledge (*chabad*) in the brain, which are bound to the greatness of the *Ein Sof*, blessed is He. However, after prayer, when the state of sublimity of the Intellect of the *Ein Sof*, blessed is He, departs, the evil in the left part reawakens, and he begins to feel a desire for the lusts of the world and its delights.

*The author is the founder of the Chabad movement. This text maintains that there is a spiritual battle which takes place between the two parts of our souls—the Divine soul (נפש האלוקית) and the animal soul (נפש החיונית הבהמית). The Divine part wants to control the body (the person) completely, transforming even the animalistic parts to be in line with the love of God.*

*What does the author maintain can help “control” the “small city?” Is it always effective? Does the author think that people have free will? Does it have limits?*

**Rabbi Tzadok ha-Kohen Rabinowitz of Lublin, *Tzidkat Hatzaddik* 130 (1902)**

אף על פי שהבחירה נתונה לאדם מ"מ אין אדם יכול להשתנות משרשו ועיקרו וכאותה שא' בסנהדרין (מד.) אף על פי שחטא ישראל הוא משום שהוא משרשא וגזעא קדישא וכך אמר בברכות (כט.) טבא לא הוה בישא אם לא ברע מעיקרו וכ"א בחגיגה (טו:) טינא היתה בלבם וכן



להיפך בישא לא הוה טבא אע"פ שלא רצו רז"ל לגלות זה הגמירא בפירוש מ"מ גילוהו בסוד בכ"מ למבינים וע"ז א' (ברכות מח.) בוצינא מקטפי' ידוע. רק השורש הזה נעלם מכל הברואים [דזהו בסוד הידיעה והבחירה שנתקשו הקדמונים] כי לבא לפומא לא גליא ולכך מצינו ג"כ חטאים שאז"ל שאין להם חלק לעוה"ב. ואין לו חלעוה"ב היינו שהעיקר חסר מן הספר ושורשו רע [ולכך למ"ד מנשה אין לו חלק לעוה"ב לא הועילה לו תשובתו כי מאחר דעיקרו בישא ולכן א' אידך דמרפה ידי בע"ת. ולכן לא גילו זה רז"ל בפירוש. אבל באמת אין זה רפוי כלל ואכמ"ל] והוא נעשה ע"י פעולתו ובחירתו לרע וכן להיפך ע"י תשובה ומעשים טובים יכול להתקרב ואפילו עכו"ם ועוסק בתורה הרי הוא ככה"ג (ע"ז ג.) וכל התורה מלא מזה ונא' לב טהור ברא וגו' ובריאה הוא יש מאין והיינו שמאחר שזה בידו של הקב"ה מועיל רחמי שמים [ולכשיזכה ברחמים או להיפך ח"ו אז יהי' באמת למפרע שורשו כך ואין שינוי בידיעה כי ידיעת הש"י אין נופל תחת הזמן דעבר ועתיד רק אנו תחת הזמן ואכ"מ ביאורו]. ולכ"א (ילקוט יחזקאל שנח) שאלו לחכמה כו' לתורה כו' לנבואה כו' והקב"ה אמר יעשו תשובה אבל מצד כולם בישא לא הוה טבא. וזה הי' טענת העם ביחזקאל בפ' ובשוב צדיק וגו' ובשוב רשע וגו' ואמרתם לא יתכן דרך ה' ובוודאי דעת שוטים לא נז' בכתוב רק הם אטבא ובישא מעיקרו אמרו והם חשבו שגם הם מבינים וע"ז אמר להם דרכיכם וגו' שאתם אין יודעים כלל בזה וכשהש"י מקבלו אז מתגלה למפרע דעקרו כך:

Even though free choice is given to man, no person can change his root or his essence, as the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 44a) says, A Jew even after he sins remains a Jew. That's because his roots and very essence are holy. That's why the Talmud (*Berakhot* 29a) says that a righteous person cannot become evil unless the evil was there to begin with. The reverse is also true, an evil person cannot become a good person, which is why our Sages write that an evil person has no place in the world to come. Of course, who really knows who is truly good or truly evil at their core?

There is, however, an important exception, and that is when someone completely changes who they are, to the extent that they become like a new person with a new root and a new essence. This is what is described in *Tehillim* (51:12) as, "O, God, create for me a pure heart and make a new spirit within me" (*Tehillim* 51:12). When they get to the stage of total transformation, they can stir up Divine mercy which can make them as if reborn. Thus, even an idolater who studies Torah and changes their essential identity can become like the High Priest (*Avoda Zara* 3a).

*Does this author think we have free will? If we do, is there a limit to it? If we don't, is change possible?*

*Is free will true, or only possible from our perspective?*

*Can we really go against God's will or damage his plan?*

**Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag, Ba'al Hasulam, "On Freedom" (Essay) (c. 1930s)**

אמת הדבר, שאין חירות לרצון, אלא מתפעל מארבעה הגורמים האמורים...כדוגמת החטה שכבר נזרעה בסביבה. אולם יש חירות לרצון לבחור מלכתחילה בסביבה כזו, בספרים ומדריכים כאלו שמשפיעים לו שכליות טובות. ואם לא יעשה זאת, אלא מוכן לבוא בכל סביבה המזדמנת לפניו, ולקרוא בכל ספר שמזדמן לפניו. שמשום זה ודאי יפול בסביבה רעה, או יבלה זמנו בספרים שאין בהם תועלת, שהם מרובים ויותר נוחים לפניו. שמתוך זה נעשה מוכרח להשכלות גרועות ורעות, המביאים אותו לחטא ולהרשיע, ודאי ענש יענש, לא מטעם המחשבות והמעשים הרעים, שאין לו בחירה עליהם—אלא מטעם שלא בחר להיות בסביבה הטובה, כי בזה וודאי יש בחירה כמבואר. לכן, המתאמץ בימי חייו, ובוחר בכל פעם בסביבה טובה יותר—הרי הוא ראוי לשבח ולשכר. וגם כאן, לא מטעם מחשבותיו ומעשיו הטובים, הבאים לו בהכרח בלי בחירתו, אלא מטעם התאמצותו לרכוש לו סביבה טובה המביאתו לידי המחשבות והמעשים האלו. וזה שאמר רבי יהושע בן פרחיא "עשה לך רב וקנה לך חבר".

The truth is that there is no freedom of the will, but it is influenced by the aforementioned four factors [e.g. genetic matter]... However, there is freedom for desire to initially choose such an environment, with books and guides that influence him towards good intellect. And if one does not do this, but is prepared to enter any environment that happens to come before him, and to read any book that happens to fall into his hands, because of this he will certainly fall into a bad environment, or waste his time on books that are of no benefit, which are numerous and more readily available to him. From this, he becomes compelled towards poor and bad intellects, which lead him to sin and become wicked, and he will surely be punished, not because of the bad thoughts and actions, for he has no choice over them—but because he did not choose to be in a good environment, for in this there is certainly a choice, as explained. Therefore, he who exerts himself during his lifetime, and chooses at every opportunity a better environment—he is worthy of praise and reward. And here, too, not because of his good thoughts and actions, which come to him inevitably without his choice,

but because of his effort to acquire for himself a good environment that leads him to these thoughts and actions. This is what Rabbi Joshua ben Perachiah said, "Make for yourself a teacher and acquire for yourself a friend."

*Does this author believe there is free will? If yes, what are its limits?  
What can a person control?*

**Rabbi Yehoshua Ashlag, *Talmud Eser Hasefirot*, Introduction, 3-4**

ג)...וז"ש בתורה (פרשת נצבים): "ראה, נתתי לפניך היום, את החיים ואת הטוב, ואת המות ואת הרע". כלומר, בטרם נתינת התורה, לא היו לפנינו, אלא המות והרע. פירוש, כמ"ש חז"ל, שהרשעים בחייהם נקראים "מתים", משום שטוב מותם מחייהם...אלא הכונה על החיים, בקיום תורה ומצוות. שאז חיים באמת. משא"כ חיים בלי תורה ומצוות, המה קשים ממות. וז"ש חז"ל: "רשעים בחייהם נקראים מתים"....

ד) ... כי אמת הדבר ונכון מאד, שהשי"ת בעצמו, מניח ידו של אדם, על גורל הטוב, דהיינו, על ידי שנותן לו, חיי נחת ועונג, בתוך החיים הגשמיים, המלאים יסורים ומכאובים וריקנים מכל תוכן. שבהכרח, נעתק האדם ובורח מהם, בזמן, שיראה לו, אפילו כמציץ מן החרכים, איזה מקום שלווה, להמלט שמה, מהחיים האלו, הקשים ממות. שאין לך, הנחת ידו של אדם, מצדו ית', גדולה מזו.

ודבר הבחירה של האדם, היא רק לענין החיזוק. כי ודאי, עבודה גדולה ויגיעה רבה יש כאן, עד שיזכך גופו, ויוכל לקיים התורה ומצוות כהלכתם, דהיינו, לא להנאת עצמו, אלא כדי להשפיע נחת רוח ליוצרו, שנקרא "לשמה". שרק באופן זה, זוכה לחיי אושר ונועם, המלווים עם קיום התורה.

ובטרם שמגיע לזכוך הזה, נוהג ודאי בחירה, להתחזק בדרך הטוב, בכל מיני אמצעים ותחבולות. ויעשה, כל מה שתמצא ידו, לעשות בכחו, עד שיגמור את מלאכת הזכוך. ולא יפול ח"ו, תחת משאו באמצע הדרך.

(3)...This is (the meaning of) the verse in the Torah (*Parashat Nitzavim, Devarim* 30:15): "See, I have set before you this day life and good, and death and evil." That is, before the giving of the Torah, only death and evil were before us. The meaning

is as the Sages stated, that the wicked are called dead (even) in their lifetimes (*Berakhot* 18b)...the reference is to a life through the fulfillment of Torah and *mitzvot*, (a life) in which one truly lives, which is not so for a life without Torah and *mitzvot*; (such an existence) is harsher than death. This is (the meaning of) the Sages' statement (that) the wicked are called dead in their lifetimes....

(4)...It is true and absolutely correct that God Himself places a person's hand on the best portion, giving a life of satisfaction and delight within a [world] full of sufferings and pain.... devoid of any content. A man necessarily detaches himself and flees from (that pain, but) when he is shown even a glimpse of some place of tranquility to where he can flee from this life that is harsher than death, there is no greater placement of a person's hand by God than this.

A person's choice is only for the purpose of reinforcement. There is certainly a great labor and much toil here, until he is refined and can fulfill the Torah and *mitzvot* in accordance with their laws, i.e., not for his own benefit but to give his Creator satisfaction. This is called "for its own sake [*lishma*]." It is only in this manner (that a person) merits the life of happiness and comfort that accompanies the observance of the Torah.

Before he attains this reinforcement, it is certainly a choice to become stronger in the good path, through all kinds of methods and strategies. He will (thus be able) to do all that he can with his own strength, until he has completed the work of refinement, and (so that) he will not fall, God forbid, under (the weight of) his burden, in the middle of the journey.

*The author maintains that there are two types of lives in this world. One type is connection via the Torah, mitzvot, and gemilut chasadim. The other is devoid of that, and full of disconnection and suffering.*

*What do you think the author would say about who is responsible for a tough existence?*

*The author argues that choosing the spiritual path is not easy, and it can involve pain and suffering. However, the ultimate goal of reaching a high spiritual path is worthwhile.*

*Let's look at a metaphor to understand this idea: Take the case of a star athlete that trains every day in the hopes of making the Olympics. She may push her endurance, enduring pain and suffering, while trying to attain that Olympic medal. If she was not aware of her goal, her physical pain would have little meaning. Spiritual refinement requires work, however it is worth the ultimate goal. Spiritual awareness might awaken a person to realize: I am suffering because I feel disconnected. The awareness can turn that suffering into something meaningful. When a person approaches life through a lens of spirituality, even difficult moments can become meaningful.*

**Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, *Michtav Me'elياهو* I:113 (c. 1950s)**

כששני עמים נלחמים, הנה המלחמה היא במקום מערכתה, כל מה שאחורי צבא העם האחד הוא כולו תחת רשותו ואין לו שם שום ניגוד כלל, וכן מה שהוא מאחורי השני כולו ברשות השני. אם האחד ינצח פעם בקרב, וידחה את השני מרחק מה, אזי בהתחדש הקרב יהיה במקום שיעמדו שניהם אז, אבל במקום שרכש לו הראשון שם אין עוד מלחמה כי הוא ברשותו. הרי שבפעל יש רק חזית אחת, ובכח, כל שטח שתי המדינות הוא מקום הקרב.

כן הוא גם בענין הבחירה. כל אדם יש לו בחירה, היינו בנקודת פגישת האמת שלו עם האמת המדומה, תולדות השקר. אבל רוב מעשיו הם במקום שאין האמת והשקר נפגשים שם כלל. כי יש הרבה מן האמת שהאדם מחונך לעשותו, ולא יעלה על דעתו כלל לעשות ההיפך, וכן הרבה אשר יעשה מן הרע והשקר, שלא יבחין כלל שאין ראוי לעשותו.

אין הבחירה שייכת אלא בנקודה שבין צבאו של היצה"ט לצבאו של היצה"ר. הרבה נכשלים תמיד בלשון הרע, מפני שהורגלו בו, ולא יעלה על דעתם כלל כי רע הוא. ואותם אנשים עצמם לא יבוא לפניהם יצר הרע לגנוב או לרצח והיינו משום שנתחנכו והורגלו כל כך עד שאין כניסה שם ליצר הרע.

**When two nations are engaged in warfare, and the war is fought on the battlefield, all the territory conquered by one particular army is now under its control, and the enemy has no foothold there whatsoever. Similarly, the territory of the second army comes totally under its control. If one of the armies conquers further ground and advances and takes over some of the enemy's territory, then subsequent battles will resume with new battle lines. But territory which has already been conquered will not be fought over again, for it has already been occupied. There is only one battleground, and this can shift between the territories of the two warring nations.**

The same is true of the nature of free choice. Each person has a zone of free choice where his conception of truth encounters his imagined truth—which is really falsehood. However, the majority of one's actions occur where there is absolutely no conflict between truth and falsehood. Since a person has been educated to act in many areas in accordance with the truth, when he does so, he is not exercising his free will, since he has no option to do otherwise. Similarly, he might make incorrect decisions based on falsehood and not realize that these are improper actions. Since he is so accustomed to doing them, they are now beyond the range of his free will.

Decisions of free choice are limited to the meeting ground between the positive and negative forces within an individual. For example, many people might be negligent in speaking derogatorily about others, only because they are accustomed to it and are oblivious to its severity. The very same people however would never consider stealing or murder, because their education has ingrained in them not to do so, to the extent that they have no inclination to do such things.

*According to the author, do people have free will? If so, are there limits to that free will? What is the role of habits or previous choices in day-to-day choices?*

**Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh, "Free Will" (Essay excerpt commenting on R. Dessler) (2018)**

R. Eliyahu Dessler (1892-1953, one of the major figures in the *mussar* tradition... in *Mikhtav Me-Eliyahu*, vol. 1, *Kuntros Ha-Bechira*, chs. 2-3) formulates a more radical position, which he calls "*nekudat ha-bechira*," the point of choice... life is a war between your *yetzer ha-tov* (good inclination) and your *yetzer ha-ra* (evil inclination)...The territory being fought over is called no-man's-land. Each side tries to advance and push the enemy army back, conquering more and more territory...We all have a battle being waged between these two inclinations. But we are brought up with certain territory conquered; ninety percent of what we do is not governed by free choice. We are born with certain inclinations and are exposed to a specific environment in which certain actions would be impossible to even consider. There are some sins that would be beyond one's capacity to perform. According to R. Dessler, our free choice governs only "no-man's-

land," the area that is currently the site of battle between the two inclinations. For some, the no-man's-land relates to *bittul Torah*, for some it's using their cellphones on Shabbat, and for some it is intermarriage.

According to R. Dessler, at any specific time, we only have free choice over a narrow area of our lives. Potentially, however, we have free choice over everything in our lives. If we revisit the analogy of conventional warfare, on any given day the two sides are battling over one narrow strip of territory. Ultimately, however, they each have the entire enemy territory as their goal. Every time one army wins a battle, the no-man's land becomes part of their conquered territory and a slice of the enemy's territory becomes the new front. Likewise, one who loses the battle and sins at his *nekudat ha-bechira* will eventually become habituated to that sin and begin to do it automatically, and his *yetzer ha-ra* will then tempt him to commit a greater sin, which he would previously not even have considered doing. Conversely, one who wins his struggle and resists temptation will eventually make a habit out of the good deed he previously struggled to perform and go on to face new challenges of good actions that he was previously not capable of even attempting. Every day, our free will is limited to a small strip of our lives. But in potential, over the long run, we can move the front of the battle little by little and we can change ourselves completely. Most of what we do is *hergel*, habit and training, and at any moment, free choice only governs a small part of our lives, the *nekudat ha-bechira*. That point of choice, though, can move in one direction or the other, such that in the long run, we really do have free choice in every realm of our lives. R. Dessler thus deftly resolves the conflict between our belief in unlimited free will and our subjective sense of the limitations of free choice by differentiating between the short-term and long-term perspectives.

According to R. Dessler, God initially rewards and punishes us only for the choices we make at our *nekudat ha-bechira*, which are the only choices made with free will. But if we work to move the line and conquer territory from the evil inclination, we deserve reward from then on for every good deed that we do that is in that conquered territory. Even if right now, several years after one has made the change, it is no longer a challenge to do a certain mitzva, one would still deserve reward, since he is the one who chose to move the *nekudat ha-bechira*

and habituate himself to goodness. Two people can thus perform the same transgression, without even exercising their faculty of free will, and not both deserve punishment for it. If one person was brought up in a home where this transgression was the norm, then it would not fall in the realm of free choice but rather of *hergel*, and he would not be held responsible. However, someone who was brought up in a home where that transgression was beyond the pale and then moved himself to a point where the sin is completely natural to him would be held responsible.

*According to this author do people have free will?*

*What is a nekudat habechira and how does this concept impact the author's understanding of free will?*