**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**Topics in Hashkafa**

**Rav Assaf Bednarsh**

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

Ambassador Yehuda Avner *z”l*

By Debbie and David Sable

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**Shiur #03: Free Will** (part 3)

Adapted by Leora Bednarsh

In the [previous *shiur*](https://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-02-free-will-part-2), we examined the minority opinion that severely limits the role of free will. This parallels the modern liberal political philosophy that maintains that every person makes decisions based only on their genetics and the influences of their environment. The mainstream Jewish position, on the other hand, believes that our actions are not determined by our environment, but rather by free choice.

However, we are faced with a challenge, as common sense tells us that not everyone has an equal level of free choice for every decision. Someone who grew up in a Torah observant home will have an easier time keeping Shabbat than someone who did not; someone who grew up in a culture of violence will have a harder time refraining from violence. Additionally, our genetics also limit our free will. Someone with a tendency towards anger will have a harder time controlling his temper. There are clearly factors that make it harder or easier for certain people to choose certain things.

Even the champion of free choice, the Rambam, freely admits that free choice is limited. In his *Shemonah Perakim* (ch. 8), where the Rambam discusses the nature of the human soul, he writes that a newborn baby cannot have vice or virtue, just as he cannot have a skill or craft at that point. However, a child is born with predilections towards certain traits, such as anger or calm, studiousness or distractedness, stinginess or generosity. The Rambam says clearly that while you are not forced to make any particular decision, the odds can be with you or against you. Some people are born intellectuals and will easily achieve high levels of scholarship; others are not and have great difficulty in school. Fundamentally, you can choose – but your choices will be easier or harder based on nature and nurture.

**Limited Free Will and Reward and Punishment**

If free will is limited by our nature and life's circumstances, how is it fair to be rewarded and punished if not everyone has the same ease and ability to observe God's commandments?

We could theoretically answer this question even without admitting any limitations on our free will. *Pirkei Avot* (5:23) states, “According to the effort, so is the reward.” The simplest understanding of this concept is that God rewards and punishes us differently based on the effort required to fulfill or go against His will. One who does *mitzvot*with ease will receive less reward than someone who must expend great effort. We can thus posit that every decision that we make is based on free will; our nature and nurture merely make certain decisions easier or more difficult. According to this formulation, we are held responsible for every action we perform, and our background affects only the amount of punishment or reward that we earn.

R. Eliyahu Dessler (1892-1953, one of the major figures in the mussar tradition, head of Gateshead kollel and then Mashgiach ruchani of the famed Ponovezh yeshiva in Bnei Brak, *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. He uses the model of traditional warfare, in which battles are fought on a front. 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. You win when you conquer the enemy's entire territory. R. Dessler says that life is a war between your *yetzer ha-tov* (good inclination) and your *yetzer ha-ra* (evil inclination). 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. For example, most people could not consider murder. Someone born in a home in which the laws of kashrut are kept scrupulously would not consider eating a cheeseburger. R. Dessler writes of his students who would not consider getting dressed without *tzizit* but would also not consider not speaking *lashon ha-ra.* In their case, *tzizit* was conquered territory of the *yetzer ha-tov*, while speaking ill about a friend was conquered territory of the *yetzer ha-ra.* 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 willis 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.

**R. Dessler vs. R. Crescas**

R. Dessler’s position is similar to that of R. Crescas in that he emphasizes the role of deterministic influences in limiting one’s free will. R. Crescas, however, limits a person’s free will to only the choice to do what one wants; one has no control over *what* he wants in any circumstance. R. Dessler seemingly differs slightly in that he leaves a slice of one’s life in which he truly has free choice. That slight window of opportunity, however, reflects a radically different view of free will. In the end, he differs greatly from R. Crescas in that he believes that one’s free will, while limited at any given period, is powerful enough to truly enable a person to gradually but radically change the course of his life.

Intuitively, R. Dessler's explanation is more appealing than that of R. Crescas, in that it explains why we often find people who grow up in the same environment and go in very different directions. Although very little is in the realm of choice right now, in the long run everything is subject to free will, because you can choose to move the front slowly but surely in either direction until you become a person who unfailingly does very different things than you did at the beginning of your journey.

**Practical Ramifications**

The practical import of R. Dessler's position is very significant. It emphasizes the importance of the little struggles that we face every day. It is never enough to rest on your laurels and pat yourself on the back for the good things you do. Those are generally not the areas that you struggle with and for which you deserve much reward. The areas that we must work on are those that are currently subject to free will, and those are the ones for which we deserve reward and punishment. Additionally, even small decisions can ultimately have huge consequences, since they move us down a path in which we will habituate ourselves to doing those *mitzvot* or sins, and will move the front in the right direction, leading to more and more *mitzvot*, or in the wrong direction, leading to more and more sins. It is the small decisions that we make daily that change the direction that our lives take.

**The Position of R. Soloveitchik**

According to R. Dessler, each of us necessarily exercises our free will every day, but only within the limited territory of his current *nekudat ha-bechira.* The ideal, for R. Dessler, is to have the *yetzer hatov* gradually conquer one's entire psyche and become completely righteous.

R. Soloveitchik (*On Repentance*, pp. 160-169, 186-191) presents a very different way of dealing with the conflict between our subjective feeling of being limited by our nature versus the doctrine of unlimited free will. In his essay *Kol Dodi Dofek*, the Rav posits two modes of existence: fate and destiny. Fate is living life as an object – not making choices, but rather going in the way that nature (and nurture) directs you. Destiny, on the other hand, means living life as a subject and actively controlling the direction of one's life – in other words, *bechira chofshit*. Similarly, in discussing the laws of repentance, the Rav describes two ways of living life. We can live within the framework of scientific determinism, as creatures of fate affected by our surroundings and the course of history and nature, or we can choose to live a life of destiny, as subjects, making our own decisions. We can decide to live as and react in the way that is expected of us, based on the rules of psychology and the influence of outside forces. Or we can make a different choice and choose to do things differently than we are trained and expected to do. Everyone has the power in their soul to resist the forces of nature and nurture, but one must choose to exercise that power. Some people choose to go with determinism, and some people choose to go with free will.

The greatest choice is to choose to live by free will. One who chooses to become the master of his destiny, who exercises free will, can not only overcome his nature and perform a particular act that is against his nature, but can, by sheer force of will, instantly transform his personality and become the type of person who naturally does good when he previously committed evil. This, for the Rav, is the meaning of *Chazal*'s statement that a person can acquire the reward of the next world in one moment (*Avoda Zara* 10b). Rav Dessler speaks of gradual development. According to the Rav, you can conquer all the territory at once by moving from fate and determinism to free will and destiny.

**Summary**

Both R. Soloveitchik and R. Dessler admit that our training and environment affect us significantly, such that it could seem that there is no free will. And they agree that nonetheless there is unlimited free will. They differ in their understanding of how to activate that free will.

For R. Dessler, one does so by facing the present struggles in the no-man's land with free will and by moving the front further and further in the right direction. In the long run free will can change everything.

For the Rav, there is no no-man's land. All the territory is subject to psychological determinism*,*until you decide that you are going to control your life and not have the circumstances of your life control you.

A major practical ramification of these positions is an approach to repentance, *teshuva. Teshuva*for R. Dessler means gradually working on our struggles right now, and then moving on to the next struggle. For the Rav, though, the highest form of *teshuva*, which he calls *teshuva* of redemption, is a decision to take responsibility for one's destiny, take control of one's entire personality, and transform it through an act of courage and creativity.