**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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Series Introduction

In this series, we will explore a number of basic topics in Jewish philosophy. For each topic, we will present and develop the full range of opinions within traditional Jewish thought. We will attempt to elucidate the logical basis of each opinion and clarify the relative strengths and weaknesses of the different approaches. The sources we draw on will range from Tanakh and Chazal through contemporary thinkers.

We will initially focus on topics relating to Divine Providence and human initiative in the life of the individual, including free will, theodicy, the efficacy of prayer, and the working of Divine Providence and the efficacy of human effort in the realms of economics, medicine, and marriage. We will then discuss topics relating to redemption and the afterlife, including the Messianic age, the world to come, and resurrection of the dead.

We will finally deal with the nature of belief in God, and survey the different opinions about the nature and means of attainment of such belief. We will attempt to elucidate the philosophical axioms underlying the different approaches, and compare the different portraits of belief and unbelief that emerge. If time permits, we will also include an exploration of the philosophical nature of Jewishness and the distinction between Jew and gentile.

**Shiur #01: Free Will**

Adapted by Leora Bednarsh

In the fifth chapter of the *Laws of Repentance*, the Rambam discusses the debate about whether human beings have free will to choose between good and evil. He implies that most philosophically unsophisticated Jews of his time thought that man does not have free will and that all our actions are decreed by God. The Rambam, however, was of a different opinion:

Free will is granted to all people: If one wanted to turn oneself to a good path and to be righteous he has free will, and if one wanted to turn oneself to an evil path and be wicked he has free will, as it is written in the Torah: “Behold, the man is become like one of Us, to know good and evil” (*[Bereishit](https://www.sefaria.org/Genesis.3.22)* [3:22](https://www.sefaria.org/Genesis.3.22)). (Rambam, *Mishneh Torah,* Laws of Repentance 5:1)

This is the opinion of most Jewish philosophers throughout the ages. In this *shiur*, we will examine this majority opinion, which maintains that each of us can choose between good and evil; in the next *shiur*, we will move on to the minority opinion, which dissents.

**Reasons to Believe in Free Will**

Why do most philosophers believe that we have free will? The Rambam in the *Laws of Repentance* and, at greater length, R. Saadia Gaon (*Emunot Ve-De’ot*, *ma’amar* 4) list four reasons to believe in free will.

*1. Experience*

One reason, not necessarily connected to religion, is that we “feel” that we are free. For example, if I am holding a pen, I feel that I can choose whether to drop the pen on the floor or to remain grasping it. My experience teaches me that I have free will.

*2. Divine Justice and Reward and Punishment*

The second argument, which is a specifically religious argument for free will, is the belief in reward and punishment. As Jews, we believe that God rewards us for doing *mitzvot* and punishes us for committing transgressions. We also believe that God is just, as articulated by Avraham in his argument to save Sedom: *“*Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?” (*Bereishit* 18:25). If God is just and rewards and punishes us for our actions, then we must have free will. After all, if someone was forced to commit a sin, it would be unjust of God to punish him.

*3. Biblical Command and Exhortation*

The third argument advanced by R. Saadia Gaon and others is based on the language of the Torah. The Torah includes many commandments, and it would only make sense to command if people have free will to follow the commandment or to refrain from following it. In particular, the Torah exhorts us with what we call *mussar*: “Choose the right path,” “Do the right thing.” The fact that God encourages us to make the right choice clearly implies that the choice is ours to make.

*4. Talmudic Statements*

The fourth and most direct and specific argument for free will is stated in the Talmud: “R. Chanina states: Everything is in the hands of Heaven except for whether or not we fear Him” (*Berakhot* 33b). God controls everything, except for one thing – whether we listen to Him or not. The one thing that God leaves up to us is whether we do *mitzvot* or sin, indicating that we have free will.

**Philosophical Objections to Free Will**

For these four reasons, almost all Jewish philosophers believe that we freely choose whether to do *mitzvot* or to transgress. However, several philosophical objections have been raised to this position.

*Scientific Argument*

Many scientists in the current era object to the notion of free will on scientific grounds. After all, if Newtonian physics and its later developments prove that every physical action is caused by something, since our brains are physical machines, which decide to do something based on the physical firing of synapses, there must be a cause. If everything has a cause, then something about the structure of our brains or the experiences we have in the world cause us to do things, and therefore we cannot choose freely.[[1]](#footnote-1)

*Argument from Divine Omnipotence*

One philosophical objection that the Rambam himself mentions (*Laws of Repentance* 5:4) is the argument from Divine omnipotence. If God in fact is all-powerful and controls the whole world, then everything is up to God. How can I decide to do something that is against God's will? If God wills for me to sin, then I must. And if He doesn't want me to, then I can't. So how is there room for free will if God is all-powerful and controls everything in the world?

This objection is relatively easy to parry. The Rambam, R. Saadia Gaon, and many others[[2]](#footnote-2) point out that although God is all-powerful, one of the ways of exercising power is to give that power over to someone else. A king might be an all-powerful ruler over an empire; one of the ways in which he exerts power over that empire is by appointing ministers and having them make decisions on his behalf. The human king does this because there aren't enough hours in his day for him to control every detail of his kingdom. God, of course, is all-powerful and He could choose to control everything, but He can also choose to delegate that power to others. God chose to delegate the power of choice to human beings because He wanted us to have free will. His Divine plan for the world was not merely to create mineral, vegetable, animal, and angel. He wanted to create human beings, and He wanted them to decide on their own whether to do the right thing or the wrong thing, so He delegated that power to them. Therefore, free will does not contradict Divine omnipotence. God used His infinite power to delegate to us the power to choose whether to do the right thing.

*Argument from Divine Omniscience*

A thornier philosophical objection, which the Rambam also raises (*Laws of Repentance* 5:5), is the famous argument from Divine omniscience. Not only is God all-powerful, but God is all-knowing. After all, God is perfect, and part of perfection is being all-knowing. If God knows everything, including the future, then He knows what we are going to do before we do it, and if He knows what we are going to do before we do it, then we cannot freely choose.

For example, if God knows that I am going to murder someone next Tuesday, then I must commit murder next Tuesday. God can't be wrong, so I have no free will to choose not to murder. And if God knows that I am not going to commit murder, then I cannot murder, because God's knowledge can't be wrong. Thus, since God knew at the time of the creation of the world what every person would do every minute of his or her life, there is no room for free will; we have no choice but to do what God knew in advance we would do, as God can't be wrong.

**Responses to the Problem of Divine Omniscience**

*1. Deny Omniscience*

There are several different answers in the philosophical literature to defend the doctrine of free will against the objection based on Divine omniscience. One radical answer is that God does not, in fact, know what we will do. This solves the problem quite handily; if God doesn't know what I will do tomorrow, then I certainly have the ability to choose if I will do the right thing or the wrong thing. However, this is a rather radical idea, because if God is perfect then His knowledge is perfect and He should know everything.

There are two different ways of reconciling God's perfection with the fact that He may not know what I am going to do tomorrow.

*a. The Position of Rashi*

Some philosophers claim that lack of knowledge of indeterminate events in the future is not a lack of perfection. If something hasn't happened yet, then not knowing it is not a lack of perfection. Being “all-knowing” means knowing all there is to know, and that which hasn't happened yet does not exist and is not a part of all there is to know. Rashi (*Sota* 2a, s.v. *ini*) seems to imply this approach, but there is much debate among the *Acharonim* as to the correct understanding of Rashi.[[3]](#footnote-3) The simplest understanding is that God knows what we have done, and it is on that basis that He rewards and punishes us, but God does not know what we are going to do. God knows everything there is to be known, which includes the past, the present, and those things that are determined by physical laws that will happen in the future. But He does not know the choices we have not yet made, because they are not there to be known.

*b. The Position of the Ralbag*

The Ralbag (R. Levi ben Gershon), a 14th century French halakhist, Biblical exegete, and philosopher, takes this a step further and suggests the quite radical answer that God does not know the individual actions of human beings at all (*Milchamot Hashem*, book 3, ch. 4). The Ralbag argues that God knows everything in terms of general knowledge. He knows how the human body works; He knows all the laws of physics, psychology, chemistry, and any other branch of knowledge that we can or can't imagine. God knows all the general laws – but He doesn't know specific instances. God knows all about cows, but not about a specific cow. Similarly, God knows all about human beings, including the natural workings of human psychology, but He does not know whether a particular human being used his free will to overcome his nature and do a *mitzva* or an *aveira* today. According to the Ralbag, God's knowledge is limited to those things determined by laws of nature – those events which are deterministic.

But isn't God's knowledge perfect? The Ralbag tells us that God’s perfect knowledge knows perfectly all the laws of the universe and all of those things that are determined by regular laws, but He doesn't descend to know all of the particulars in any given time and place. Those details are beneath God's attention. As a matter of a fact, the Ralbag argues that it would be an imperfection of God if He were to distract Himself, as it were, with knowledge of the particular things that you and I do at every moment. The perfection of God is that He knows the ultimate, eternal truth of the universe, and not the ephemeral, transient actions that happen at a particular time and place.

This is a radical doctrine, and does not fit with what we or most Jews over the millennia consider a religious orientation. By positing that God knows generalities but not specifics, the Ralbag solves the problem of free will vs. Divine omniscience, but the cost of that solution is higher than most of us would be willing to pay. The Ralbag's philosophy takes away the element of a personal relationship between God and man that most of us consider essential to a religious worldview. Already in his own day, most Jewish philosophers rejected the Ralbag as too Aristotelian.[[4]](#footnote-4) Mainstream Jewish philosophy has utterly rejected the Ralbag’s view and assumes, like the simple reading of *Tanakh* and *Chazal* imply, that God in fact has a relationship with each and every one of us. Perhaps we don't understand why God, so transcendent and perfect, would bother to concern Himself with the actions of me or you, but we nevertheless believe that He does, and that is exactly what makes Him great. As *Chazal* teach (*Megilla* 31a), in the exact place where we find God's greatness we find His humility as well. That humility expresses itself in the personal relationship that each of us human beings has with God Himself. Therefore, we believe that God certainly knows and cares very much whether we make the right choices or the wrong choices.

*2. Maintain That God Is Omniscient*

*a. The Position of the Rambam*

The Rambam himself provides an answer to resolve the apparent contradiction between free will and God's omniscience, but this answer is somewhat difficult to understand:

Know that the answer to this question – the measure of it is longer than the earth and broader than the sea (*[Iyov](https://www.sefaria.org/Job.11.9)* [11:9](https://www.sefaria.org/Job.11.9)), and several great principles and lofty mountains depend on it, but you must know and understand this matter that I will say. We have already explained in the second chapter of the *Laws of the Foundations of Torah* that the Holy Blessed One does not know based on separate knowledge, like humans, who are distinct from their knowledge; rather, God (may His name be exalted) and God’s knowledge are one. And a person’s intellect is not able to comprehend this matter with clarity; just as a person lacks the power to comprehend and discover the Creator’s Truth, as it says, “For a human shall not see Me and live” (*[Shemot](https://www.sefaria.org/Exodus.33.20)* [33:20](https://www.sefaria.org/Exodus.33.20)), a person lacks the power to comprehend and discover the Creator’s knowledge, as the prophet said, “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways” ([*Yeshayahu* 55:8](https://www.sefaria.org/Isaiah.55.8)). And since it is thus, we do not have the power to know how it is that the Holy Blessed One knows all the creations and all the actions. But know without a doubt that a person’s actions are in his hands, and the Holy Blessed One does not pull him or decree for him to do so. And this is known not only from acceptance of the religion, but through clear proofs from philosophy. And therefore it says in prophecy that a person is judged on his actions such as they are, whether good or evil, and this is the principle upon which all words of prophecy depend. (Rambam, *Laws of Repentance* 5:5)

In the *Laws of the Foundations of the Torah* (2:10) the Rambam explains that God does not have knowledge that is “outside” of Him; God and His knowledge are one and the same. My knowledge of mathematics is something different than me. I did not always know mathematics, and I could have not known mathematics, but I happen to have knowledge of mathematics. That is one of my attributes. God, however, is One. The Rambam took the idea of monotheism to an extreme, arguing that God is One to the extent that He doesn't “have” anything. Not only doesn’t He have body parts, He doesn't even have emotions, or mercy, or wisdom. He just is. He is One. Therefore, the Rambam says, anything that God "has" is not the same as the human version that we are familiar with. When God has mercy, it is not similar to me or you having mercy, because our mercy is something that we added to ourselves. We describe God as merciful because that is how it comes across to us, but He is just the all-perfect God. Similarly, if God is all-knowing, it is not because God “has” knowledge; it is simply part of the definition of being God. According to the Rambam, anyone who believes that a human word of description applies to God is a polytheist!

Part of being God is that He has omniscience. Accordingly, just as we can't understand the nature of God, we can't understand what it means that God “knows.” Since we can't understand what it means that God knows, we can't understand what it means that God knows what I will do. And if we don't know what it means that God knows what I will do, then we can't possibly figure out the nature of this conundrum; we just have to believe that although God knows what I will do, I still have free will.

The Raavad (R. Avraham ben David, 12th century Provence) criticizes the Rambam for raising philosophical problems without resolving them, arguing that it would have been better not to bring them up at all (comment on *Laws of Repentance* 5:5). However, the Rambam in fact gave a technically sufficient answer to his question. The Rambam is of the opinion that it is impossible to truly describe God, because all the human words we have for describing things are based on our human, physical world, in which there are additional qualities that people and things have. No human word can properly describe God because that would entail adding another part to God, and then there would be two Gods (*Guide of the Perplexed* 1:35). According to the Rambam, the ultimate knowledge of God is realizing that He transcends any of our descriptions. If we say God is merciful it means that He does things that to us look similar to what merciful people do; it doesn't mean that God is merciful. If we say God is omniscient, that means He acts in a way that to us looks similar to the way someone all-knowing would act. But any word we use to describe God really has no meaning.

Philosophically, this is an ideal way to resolve a contradiction. If one side of the contradiction has no meaning, there can't be a contradiction! According to the Rambam, when we call God omniscient, it can’t mean anything that we can possibly understand. There is no contradiction between free will and something that doesn't mean anything. Thus, although this answer might not be satisfactory on the level of common sense, it does solve the philosophical problem.

*b. The Position of Rav Saadia Gaon*

A simple and satisfying answer to our question is offered by R. Saadia Gaon (*Emunot Ve-De’ot* 4). He notes that the very question – “How can I have free will if God knows what I will choose?” – is based on a mistake. In our human world, causation works only in one direction: Things that happen earlier cause things to happen later. Things that happen later never go back and affect things that happen earlier. That would be against all the rules of physics and is the stuff of science fiction. But God transcends the limits of the workings of time. We can never imagine doing something tomorrow that will affect what happens yesterday, but God can, because God is beyond time.

Let’s say God knew yesterday that I would give charity tomorrow. God's knowledge yesterday didn't cause me to give charity tomorrow; rather, my giving charity tomorrow caused God to know about it yesterday – or, more precisely, at the beginning of time. God always knew that I would give charity tomorrow, but that doesn't take away my free will; rather, it is the result of my free will. Because I will give charity tomorrow, God always knew that I would do so. If I change my mind and decide not to give charity tomorrow, then God would have always known that I would not do so. God's knowledge did not make me give charity; my decision to give charity resulted in God's knowledge. Therefore, God's omniscience is no contradiction to free will. This is the simplest and most satisfying resolution to our conundrum.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**Summary**

We began by noting the longstanding debate regarding whether humans have free will. The vast majority of Jewish thinkers believe that we do, for four reasons: our experience, reward and punishment and Divine justice, the Torah's commandments and exhortations to do the right thing, and the teaching that all is in the hands of Heaven except for our decision to obey the commands of Heaven. We mentioned three potential problems with the doctrine of free will: one, the scientific laws of causation (which I did not deal with at length); second, the question of Divine Omnipotence, which we answered easily; and third, the question of Divine Omniscience. We presented four possible responses to this last problem. Rashi may have denied that God knows our decisions in advance. The Ralbag denied God’s knowledge of our particular actions, an answer that does not resonate well with the mainstream religious worldview. The Rambam said that God's knowledge does not mean what we mean by the human term “knowledge.” God's knowledge is something inscrutable; we don't know what we mean when we use these words, and we therefore cannot ask any questions or present contradictions based on God's knowledge. This is a philosophically satisfying answer, but perhaps not intuitively satisfying. Finally, as R. Saadia Gaon and many others answer, God's knowledge yesterday doesn't make me do something tomorrow; rather, my doing it tomorrow made God know it yesterday. Even though this is not the direction we are used to thinking about when we think about cause and effect, for God, Who transcends time, that's no problem whatsoever. Thus, God's knowledge that we are going to choose does not force our choice, but rather our choice retroactively causes God to know that choice.

In the next *shiur*, we will move on to the other side of the debate and discuss those Jewish philosophers who held that we do not, in fact, have free will to choose between good and evil. We will examine some of the implications of that minority opinion and how exactly these thinkers deal with the philosophical and textual proofs from the Written Law and Oral Law that seem to prove that we do have free will.

1. This is a matter of scientific debate, as quantum physics teaches us that while most physical phenomena can be explained by scientific cause and effect, there are phenomena that fundamentally cannot be attributed to any scientific causation. We will leave the application of quantum physics to human psychology as a question for scientists to explore and limit ourselves to purely philosophical objections. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See in particular *Kuzari* 5:20. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See *Be'er Sheva, Chokhmat Shelomo,* and *Hagahot Ha-Bach* ad loc. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. e.g., *Or Hashem 2:1, Akeidat Yitzchak* 19, Responsa of *Rivash* 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Rambam could not accept this solution, because if God's knowledge is not an additional attribute but is rather synonymous with the nature of God Himself, a human action obviously cannot cause God to know, because then a human decision would be changing God's essence, which is clearly impossible. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)