

## CLASSICAL JEWISH APPROACHES TO FREE WILL

### Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance 5:1

רְשׁוּת לְכָל אָדָם נְתוּנָה. אִם רָצָה לְהֵטוֹת עֲצָמוֹ לְדֶרֶךְ טוֹבָה וְלִהְיוֹת צַדִּיק הָרְשׁוּת בְּיָדוֹ. וְאִם רָצָה לְהֵטוֹת עֲצָמוֹ לְדֶרֶךְ רָעָה וְלִהְיוֹת רָשָׁע הָרְשׁוּת בְּיָדוֹ. הוּא שְׂכָתוֹב בַּתּוֹרָה **בְּרֵאשִׁית ג כב** הֵן הָאָדָם הִיָּה כְּאֶחָד מִמֶּנּוּ לְדַעַת טוֹב וְרָע. כְּלוּמַר הֵן מִיִּן זֶה שֶׁל אָדָם הִיָּה יָחִיד בְּעוֹלָם וְאִין מִיִּן שְׁנֵי דוּמָה לוֹ בְּזֶה הָעִנְיָן שֶׁיְהִיָּה הוּא מְעַצְמוֹ בְּדַעַתוֹ וּבְמַחְשַׁבְתּוֹ יוֹדֵעַ הַטּוֹב וְהָרָע וְעוֹשֶׂה כָּל מַה שֶׁהוּא חָפֵץ וְאִין מִי שֶׁיַּעֲכֹב בְּיָדוֹ מִלְעֲשׂוֹת הַטּוֹב אוֹ הָרָע.

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* 3:22). Ie

### R. SAADIA GAON (EMUNOT VE-DE'OT, MA'AMAR 4) HOW DO WE KNOW WE HAVE FREE WILL?

#### 1. Experience

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

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 Sodom: “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 משפט כל הארץ לא יעשה משפט 18:25)

#### 3. Biblical Command and Exhortation

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: “Choose the right path,” “Do the right thing.”

#### 4. Talmudic Statements

"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.

### PHILOSOPHICAL OBJECTIONS TO FREE WILL + CLASSICAL RESPONSES

#### 1. Scientific Argument & the Response

**Scientific argument:** 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.

**Response: R. Assaf Bednarsh:** 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.

#### 2. ARGUMENT FROM DIVINE OMNIPOTENCE – GOD IS ALL- POWERFUL + RESPONSE

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?

ואל תתמה ותאמר היאך יהיה האדם עושה כל מה שיחפץ ויהיו מעשיו מסורים לו וכי יעשה בעולם דבר שלא ברשות קונו ולא חפצו והכתוב אומר [תהילים קלהו](#) "כל אשר חפץ ה' עשה בשמים ובארץ". דע שהכל בחפצו יעשה ואף על פי שמעשינו מסורין לנו. כיצד. כשם שהיוצר חפץ להיות האש והרוח עולים למעלה והמים והארץ יורדים למטה והגלגל סובב בעגול וכן שאר בריות העולם להיות כמנהגן שחפץ בו. ככה חפץ להיות האדם רשותו בידו וכל מעשיו מסורין לו ולא יהיה לו לא כופה ולא מושך אלא הוא מעצמו ובדעתו שנתן לו האל עושה כל שהאדם יכול לעשות. לפיכך דנין אותו לפי מעשיו. אם עשה טובה מיטיבין לו ואם עשה רעה מרעין לו.

Now, do not wonder and ask: **"How is it possible for man to do what his heart desires, and have his entire course of action lodged within himself seeing that he can not do aught in the world without the permission of his Master and without His Will, even as the Verse says: "Whatsoever the Lord pleased, that hath He done, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps" (Ps. 135.6)?** Know all that man does is in accordance with His Will, although our actions are really in our own keeping. For example? Even as it is the Creator's Will that fire and air shall ascend upward, and that water and earth shall descend downward, or that the sphere shall revolve in a circle, and that other creatures of the universe should likewise follow their respective natural laws, as it was His Will for them to be, so was it His Will that man shall have the free choice of conduct in his own hand, and that all his actions should be lodged within him, and that he should be neither forced or drawn, but he, of his own free will and accord, as God endowed him with, he exercises in all that is possible for man to do. He is, therefore, judged according to actions; if he did good, his is rewarded with good; and if he did wrong, he is punished.

**Parable – R. Assaf Bednarsh:** 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.

### 3. ARGUMENT FROM DIVINE OMNISCIENCE AND RESPONSES

שָׁמָא תֹאמֵר וְהֵלֵא הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא יוֹדֵעַ כָּל מַה שְׂיִהְיֶה וְקֹדֶם שְׂיִהְיֶה יוֹדֵעַ  
 שְׂוֵה יִהְיֶה צְדִיק אוֹ רָשָׁע אוֹ לֹא יוֹדֵעַ. אִם יוֹדֵעַ שֶׁהוּא יִהְיֶה צְדִיק אִי אֶפְשָׁר  
 שְׂלֹא יִהְיֶה צְדִיק וְאִם תֹּאמֵר שְׂיִדַּע שְׂיִהְיֶה צְדִיק וְאֶפְשָׁר שְׂיִהְיֶה רָשָׁע הֲרִי לֹא  
 יוֹדֵעַ הַדָּבָר עַל בְּרִיּוֹ

Peradventure, thou wilt ask: "The Holy One, blessed is He, does he not know what it will be before it will come to pass? Did he know whether a certain person will be either just or wicked, or did He not know it? If he knew that he would be just, then it would be impossible for him not to be just? If thou wilt say that He did know that he would be just but that it is possible for him to be wicked, lo, He did not know the matter clearly?"

#### A. THE POSITION OF RASHI

א"ר שמואל בר רב יצחק כי הוה פתח ריש לקיש בסוטה אמר הכי אין מזווגין לו  
 לאדם אשה אלא לפי מעשיו

**Rav Shmuel bar Rav Yitzhak says: When Reish Lakish would introduce his discussion of the Torah passage of *sota* he would say this: Heaven matches a woman to a man only according to his actions**

איני והא אמר רב יהודה אמר רב ארבעים יום קודם יצירת הולד בת קול יוצאת  
 ואומרת בת פלוני לפלוני בית פלוני לפלוני שדה פלוני לפלוני לא קשיא הא בזוג  
 ראשון הא בזוג שני

The Gemara asks: **Is that so** that a man is matched to a woman according to his actions? **But Rav Yehuda says that Rav says: Forty days before an embryo is formed a Divine Voice issues forth and says: The daughter of so-and-so is destined to marry so-and-so; such and such a house is destined to be inhabited by so-and-so; such and such a field is destined to be farmed by so-and-so.** This clearly states that these

matters, including marriage, are decreed for a person even before he is formed.

### Rashi

**איני** - מי הוי זיווג לפי רשע וזכות והא מקודם יצירתם שאין נודע רשעו וזכותו מכריזין את זוגו ואם תאמר הכל גלוי לפניו הכל בידי שמים חוץ מיראת שמים כדאמר במסכת נדה (דף טז:): מלאך הממונה על ההריון נוטל טיפה ומביאה לפני המקום ואומר לפניו טיפה זו מה תהא עליה גבור או חלש חכם או טיפש עשיר או עני אבל צדיק ורשע לא קאמר ליה דאין זה בידי שמים

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. 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. RALBAG (R. LEVI BEN GERSHON), A 14<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY FRENCH HALAKHIST, BIBLICAL EXEGETE, AND PHILOSOPHER**

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.

### C. THE POSITION OF RAMBAM

דע שתשובת שאלה זו ארבה מארץ מדה ורחבה מני ים וכמה עקרים גדולים והררים רמים תלויים בה אבל צריך אתה לידע ולהבין בדבר זה שאני אומר. כבר בארנו בפרק שני מהלכות יסודי התורה שהקדוש ברוך הוא אינו יודע מדעה שהיא חוץ ממנו כבני אדם שהם ודעתם שנים. אלא הוא יתעלה שמו ודעתו אחד ואין דעתו של אדם יכולה להשיג דבר זה על בריו. וכשם שאין כח באדם להשיג ולמצא אמתת הבורא שנאמר [שמות לג ב'](#) כי לא יראני האדם וחי" כך אין כח באדם להשיג ולמצא דעתו של הבורא. הוא שהנביא אמר [ישעיה נה ח](#) כי לא מחשבותי מחשבותיכם ולא דרכיכם דרכי". וכיון שכן הוא אין בנו כח לידע היאך ידע הקדוש ברוך הוא כל הברואים והמעשים אבל נדע בלא ספק שמעשה האדם ביד האדם ואין הקדוש ברוך הוא מושכו ולא גוזר עליו לעשות כך. ולא מפני קבלת הדת בלבד נודע דבר זה אלא בראיות ברורות מדברי החכמה. ומפני זה נאמר בנבואה שדין את האדם על מעשיו כפי מעשיו אם טוב ואם רע וזה הוא העקר שכל דברי הנבואה תלויין בו:

Know that the answer to this question – the measure of it is longer than the earth and broader than the sea (*Iyov* 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* 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). 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 not only known 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.

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.

#### **D. 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 only works 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.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 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.