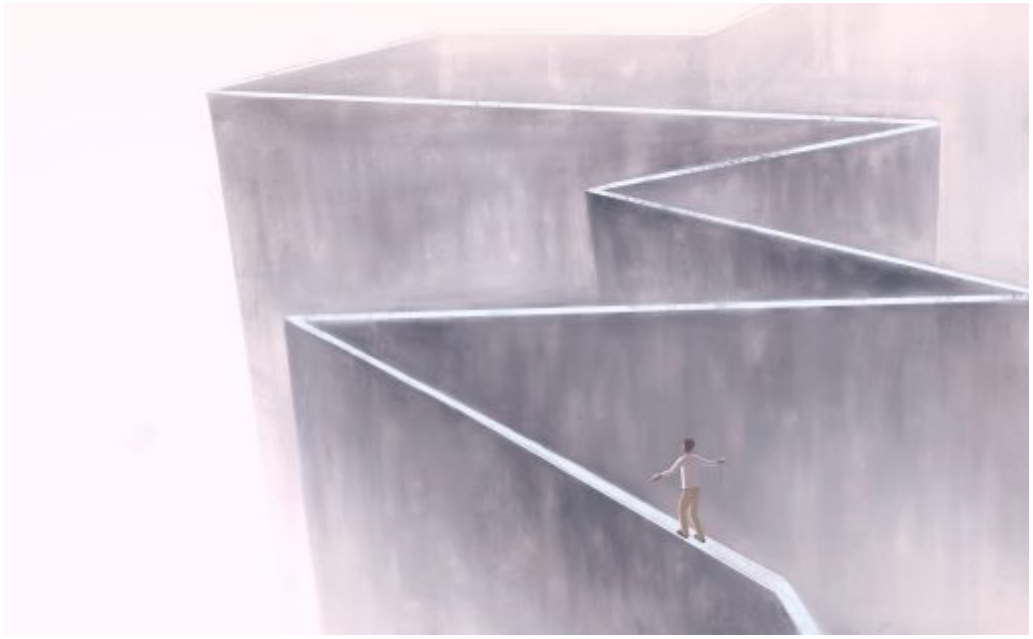
Do You Have the Free Will to Read This?



This is the sixth essay of 18Forty's "Faith in Reason" series with Rabbi Steven Gotlib, released the last Sunday of every month. Sign up for it here, and read the fifth essay here.

Are you choosing to read this article, or are you compelled to? Every article in our series thus far touched on our ability to make decisions and better our actions. But the unaddressed elephant in the room is whether we are truly "free" to do any of those things.

Libertarian Free Will: The Classic Conception

In his book, *The Significance of Free Will*, philosopher Robert Kane wrote that free will "is the power of agents to be the ultimate creators (or originators) and sustainers of their own ends or purposes." This includes both freedom of *action* and freedom of *will*.

Freedom of action is, in Kane's words, "to be unhindered in the pursuit of your purposes (which are usually expressed by intentions)"—that you are physically capable of carrying out your intended action. Freedom of will, on the other hand, is "to be the ultimate creator (prime mover, so to speak) of your own purposes." Both components make up what one might call libertarian free will, which is consistent with what most Jews assume humans generally have from a straightforward reading of the Torah. Hashem, after all, says directly to the Jewish People: "I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life…" (Devarim 30:19). To make that choice, you need free will.

Still, many find libertarian free will philosophically problematic.

Theoretical physicist Sean Carroll is one example. In *The Big Picture,* he writes that libertarian free will "violates everything we know about the laws of nature. In order for libertarian freedom to exist, it would have to be possible for human beings to overcome the laws of physics just by thinking." Science governs not only the world around us, this position maintains, but our internal worlds—from bodily systems to mental cognition; we may *feel* that we have free will, but our "choices" are only the outcome of how our neurons developed. Science chose, not us.

Of all places, the Artscroll Commentary on the Book of Ezekiel makes a similar point: Freedom of will in moral matters is the first and irreplaceable condition for living one's life on the higher plane demanded by Torah. Belief in man's freedom of action, however, is endangered by the fact that man cannot avoid death and that he is subject to the superficial limitations imposed by the forces of nature.

And let us not forget the famous Talmudic passage that "everything is in the hands of Heaven, except for the Fear of Heaven." Rashi explains that being "tall or short, poor or rich, wise or foolish, light-skinned or dark-skinned—all this is in God's hands."

There is broad agreement, then, that the ability to make choices is constrained to at least some degree; there are many things we do not (and cannot) choose. The question that this essay will explore is what degree that is.

Determinism: The Free Will That Isn't

In addition to libertarianism, there are two other major schools of thought regarding free will: determinism and compatibilism.

The determinist position is perhaps best associated with the 17th-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza, who wrote in *Ethics* that "all things are determined… to exist and to act in a definite way" and that "all things are predetermined by God, not from freedom of the will… but from God's absolute nature."

Today's most articulate champion of determinism is the atheist philosopher Sam Harris, who wrote in *The Moral Landscape* that "all of our behavior can be traced to biological events about which we have no conscious knowledge: this has always suggested that free will is an illusion" and that "the phrase 'free will' describes what it *feels like* to be identified with the content of each thought as it arises in consciousness." Such thoughts "simply arise" due to various unconscious causes, "unauthored and yet author to our actions."

Harris' framing of free will as an illusion has led to a subcategory of determinists called "illusionists," who are themselves determinists but believe that the popular illusion of free will ought to be maintained for the masses. That view is championed by the Israeli philosopher Saul Smilansky, who wrote in *Free Will and Illusion* that "illusory beliefs are in place, and that the role they play is largely positive. Humanity is fortunately deceived on the free will issue, and this seems to be a condition of civilized morality and personal sense of value. Illusion and ignorance seem to be conditions for social and personal success."

In other words, the illusion of free will should be maintained so society can best function—but it doesn't actually exist.

Compatibilism: Learning to Have Free Will

The third school of thought, compatibilism, meets the two extremes of libertarianism and determinism in the middle.

In his book, *Freedom Evolves*, atheist philosopher Daniel Dennett argued that the phenomenon of free will is the result of humanity evolving "minds powerful enough to capture the reasons for things and make them our reasons" retroactively. The resulting sense of autonomy as a "rational, self-controlled, and not wildly misinformed" agent does not depend "on anything like the miraculous suspension of causation" but instead depends "on the integrity of the processes of education and mutual sharing of knowledge." In other words, over time, we came to experience life as freely choosing beings—and beyond just "feeling," we came to *be* freely choosing beings. Biological and culture evolutions made our brains this way.

This development can even be seen in a microcosm as babies grow into children and then into young adults. As Dennett puts it in *Just Deserts: Debating Free Will*, "if your past is roughly normal, it contains the caused chains that turned you into an autonomous, self-controlling agent" as you learn to respond to various stimuli and situations. In responding to these stimuli and situations in real-time, we exercise genuine autonomy and free will. In this way, free will is *compatible* with the existence of various determining factors that inspire particular decisions in particular moments.

The advantage that compatibilism has over determinism is in maintaining not only the subjective experience of free will, but also, in a real way, its legitimacy. Within a compatibilist framework, free will is a reality rather than an illusion.

And so we are left to ask: Do determinism or compatibilism have places within the Jewish tradition, though? The answer, perhaps surprisingly, is yes!

Determinism and Compatibilism in Judaism

While most assume that the Jewish tradition of understanding free will is decidedly libertarian, a brief examination of sources will reveal that both determinism and compatibilism find strong representation across a wide range of time periods and philosophical approaches.

Let's start with Ancient Judaism. Back then, Judaism comprised three sects: the Pharisees, Sadducees, and the Essenes. The Pharisees would eventually pave the way towards the rabbinic tradition, and some assume the Sadducees evolved into the Karaites. The Essences are assumed to have died out, though some scholars link them to early Christianity. Here, we see different positions on free will staked out.

The historian Flavius Josephus records in his *Antiquities of the Jews* that only the Sadducees "do away with Fate, holding that there is no such thing and that human actions are not achieved in accordance with her decree." Josephus wrote that the Pharisees, on the other hand, "say that certain events are the work of Fate, but not all; as to other events, it depends upon ourselves whether they shall take place or not" while the Essenes (as corroborated by the Dead Sea Scrolls) "declares that Fate is mistress of all things, and that nothing befalls man unless it be in accordance with her decree." These positions all find contemporary expression within Jewish sources, as we will now examine.

The most infamous example of a determinist position within Judaism is offered by Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Ishbitz in his *Mei Ha-Shiloach*. The Ishbitzer writes at many points that "everything is in the hands of Heaven, *including* the fear of Heaven," recasting the Talmudic to effectively eliminate free will. Indeed, he even seems to imply in Parshat Korach that Korach's objection to Moshe during his rebellion was that if all is in the hands of Heaven, then nothing anyone does can go against the divine will. *Mei HaShiloach* argued that Korach's error was not in this contention that all is predetermined by Hashem, rather in his decision to share that truth with all of the Jewish People. Free will does not exist, he says, but that's not to be publicized. This is not only a determinist position but an illusionist one as well.

The obvious problem wrought by *Mei Ha-Shiloach*'s position is that it could potentially be used to defend those who follow in Korach's antinomian footsteps. In his book *Sin-a-gogue: Sin and Failure in Jewish Thought*, Rabbi Dovid Bashevkin acknowledged the "radical deterministic elements" in Ishbitz theology but is careful to note that applying such a view "as a retrospective means of making spiritual sense of religious failure can be done without insisting on a deterministic perspective that undermines the ideals we are working towards." Within Jewish determinism, then, one may well argue that some sin is inevitable, while simultaneously understanding that such inevitability "does not mean law is no longer relevant and applicable."

A determinist approach that is utilized properly in a Jewish context can act as a pillow which both provides a soft landing as well as an easy rise back into the fold after failure. Indeed, Rabbi Bashevkin cautions that "dismissing our shortcomings as simply unavoidable is a sin unto itself" and that "the existence of sin cannot obscure our aspirations."

On the other hand, a compatibilist approach to free will can be found in the thought of Rav Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler in his *Michtav Me-Eliyahu* (translated into English as *Strive for Truth!*):

> Everyone has free choice—at the point where truth meets falsehood. But the majority of a person's actions are undertaken without any clash between truth and falsehood taking place. Many of a person's actions may happen to coincide with what is objectively right because he has been brought up that way and it does not occur to him to do otherwise, and many bad and false decisions may be taken simply because the person does not realize that they are bad. In such cases, no valid choice has been made. Free will is exercised and a valid choice is made only on the borderline between the forces of good and the forces of evil within that person.

For Rav Dessler, then, we have free choice in particular moments while most of the decisions that we make are due to habit or how we were brought up. Indeed, even active decision-making cannot stay "free" for very long since that new action will ideally become a new habit (when positive), thus falling outside the realm of choice. Adding to this view is Rav Dessler's later articulation that the world of free choice and action in which we live is only from our relative perspective, but the absolute reality is one in which God's will permeates all things, so nothing is truly "free" outside of His will.

Does It Fit Into the Jewish Mainstream?

Of course, it should go without saying that neither determinist nor compatibilist views are considered "mainstream" within the Jewish community.

Rav Saadia Gaon wrote in his *Sefer Emunot Ve-Deot* that "if God had compelled man, there would be no point in giving him commandments and prohibitions." Furthermore, though not technically one of his Thirteen Principles of Faith, Maimonides writes at length about the importance of free will in his *Mishneh Torah* (*Hilchot Teshuvah*). Of course, Maimonides himself has been subject to much controversy regarding determinism because he makes it clear in the *Guide for the Perplexed* that God's knowledge contains everything that will ever happen.

Regardless, while acknowledging that "mainstream Jewish sources have largely rejected and… many would consider heretical" determinist and compatibilist viewpoints, Rabbi Wiederblank suggests that there may be room for such views, utilizing Crescas as the core example:

On the one hand, R. Crescas denies freedom, which, as we have seen, is a fundamental principle for the Rambam. On the other hand, Rambam writes that free will is a fundamental principle because of arguments such as the purpose of *mitzvot* and justice, and R. Crescas upholds the value of *mitzvot* and justice partially by stressing his belief that we are still free with respect to ourselves. Thus, even R. Crescas does not fully deny freedom, though the nature of his compatibilism remains murky.

In conclusion, the only position that is definitively rejected by Judaism is a fully determinist position which rejects the value of *mitzvot* altogether—that articulated by Korach under the Ishbitz reading. Softer forms of determinism and compatibilism may well be justifiable within a Jewish framework, so a rejection of libertarian free will need not preclude one from Jewish identification and observance.

Steven Gotlib is Director of Glebe Shul: The Capital Jewish Experience and Interim Rabbi at the Young Israel of Ottawa.