

# Onnes Rachmana Patrei — Hashem Exempts One Who Is Coerced

## Part I – Understanding Free Will

### 1. Appreciating the Significance of Free Will

The Rambam<sup>1</sup> writes about the centrality and critical importance of free will:

Free will is granted to all men. If one desires to turn himself to the path of good and be righteous, the choice is his. Should he desire to turn to the path of evil and be wicked, the choice is his...Man can, on his own, with his knowledge and thought, know good and evil, and do what he desires. There is no one who can prevent him from doing good or bad.

This principle is a fundamental concept and a pillar [on which rests the totality] of the Torah and *mitzvot* as it says,<sup>2</sup> “Behold, I have set before you today life [and good, death and evil].” Similarly, it says,<sup>3</sup> “Behold, I have set before you today [the blessing and the curse]” since the choice is in your hands.

Anything which a person desires to do, he may, whether good or evil...The Creator does not compel or decree that people should do either good or bad. Rather, everything is left to their [own choice].

[If not], what place would there be for the entire Torah? According to which judgement or sense of justice would retribution be administered to the wicked or reward to the righteous?

The *Ramchal* writes similarly in *Derech Hashem*<sup>4</sup>

It was necessary that man be created with free will. Man’s inclinations are therefore balanced between good and evil, and he is not compelled toward either of them. He has the power of choice, and is able to choose either side, knowingly and willingly, as well as to possess whichever one he wishes. Man was therefore created with both a *yeitzer tov* (positive inclination) and a *yeitzer hara* (negative inclination). He has the power to incline himself in whichever direction he desires.

### 2. Free Will has been Challenged from the Beginning of History

As essential as free will is, its reality has been challenged from the very beginning of human history. The *Medrash* tells us that even *Kayin*, the first murderer in the history of the world, actually blamed G-d for his murder of his brother Hevel:

*Kayin* said [to G-d], “I killed him? You created an evil inclination within me! You watch everything, and You allowed me to kill him. [So,] You [really] killed him. [Plus,] if You would have accepted my sacrifice as You accepted his, I would not have [even] been jealous of him.”

While denial of free will was always a problem, it is much more of an issue today. Rav Wolbe writes:<sup>5</sup>

Of all the heresies that have arisen throughout the ages, our era has reached a low point. The heresy of our generation is denial of freedom itself...In secular courts, there is a tendency to exonerate terrible murderers from responsibility if there is a

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<sup>1</sup> *Hilchot Teshuva* 5:1,3,4

<sup>2</sup> *Devarim* 30:15

<sup>3</sup> *Devarim* 11:26

<sup>4</sup> Part One, ch. 3, *Man*

<sup>5</sup> *Alei Shur*, vol. II, p. 41

psychological issue related to their actions. This perspective has entered into our world as well. Who among us believes that a person is not compelled to transgress? Who believes that it is possible to go from Yom Kippur to Yom Kippur without transgression? In fact, who even thinks a single day can go by without transgression? If only we would leave Yom Kippur with the clear conviction that we are truly free to arrange our lives in a manner that we will not stumble in transgression...We must know that the foundation of man and the foundation of Torah is choice...Particularly in our time, preceding the coming of *Mashiach*, we need to greatly strengthen our clear conviction that we are capable of overpowering our *yeitzer*, we are responsible for our actions, and we will ultimately be held accountable for them.

Rabbi Netanel Wiederblank explains:<sup>6</sup>

According to Rav Wolbe, a central challenge to our growth as people is our subliminal questioning of the extent of our freedom. Scientific evidence bears this out. Psychological studies show that people who believe they have free will tend to act with a greater sense of moral responsibility than fatalists and determinists, who deny their ability to control their destiny. For example, people who believe that their self-control is nearly unlimited, tend to be much more successful at fulfilling resolutions than people who believe that we are all born with a limited amount of self-control...This accentuates the grave danger we face when we are exposed to a society that keeps on denying our freedom, and highlights the need to consider the Torah's response to these challenges.

### 3. Understanding the Nature of Free Will

Rav Wolbe<sup>7</sup> qualifies what free will is, and what it is not:

A child from his very first days feels pleasure and pain. And his will is evident even from when he is an infant. This, however, is different than *bechira* (free will), which is not at all a function of instinct, but rather requires thought. Therefore, without awareness and maturity, there is no *bechira*. If a child knows that he will be punished if he takes a candy, but he still wants it, there is a battle between two different aspects of *negiot* (biases) — a longing for pleasure and a fear of punishment. The *negiah* that is strongest in his heart will be decisive in this battle. This overpowering of one instinct by another, however, is not called *bechira*.

Let's think about ourselves as mature adults. How frequently do we use the power of *bechira*? Our nature, education, habits, and *negiot* rule over us with a virtually complete control from youth until old age. It is actually possible for a person to go through all of his years without [ever] resorting to the power of *bechira*. A person with a pleasant nature, who never deviated from the education of his parents — his *mitzvot* will be habitual, and his *negiot* will strengthen him on his way...He will be able to go through his years with a good name, but without ever having chosen his way with any independent thought.

This is an extreme example. But when we think about ourselves, we find that we very rarely utilize the quality of *bechira*. While, as the Rambam writes, *ha'reshut n'tuna* (the permission [of free will] is given), our actions are generally controlled by our nature, education, habits, and *negiot* (biases), whether in terms of the fateful decisions of our lives, or the small everyday choices. Where then is *bechira*? *Rabeinu Yona* resolves this problem, as he writes,<sup>8</sup> "Realize that the elevated aspects [of life] are given to us in various *mitzvot aseï* (positive obligations). For

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<sup>6</sup> *Illuminating Jewish Thought*, p. 8, which was extremely helpful for this presentation

<sup>7</sup> *Alei Shur*, vol. I, p. 156

<sup>8</sup> *Shaarei Teshuva* 3:17

example, the quality of *bechira*, as it says — ‘*u’bacharta bachaim*’ the quality of *talmud Torah*, to walk in the ways of Hashem, to contemplate the greatness of Hashem, the recognition of His kindness, and understanding it, sanctity, Divine service, awe, love, and clinging to G-d, and many different levels within every one of them.”

It is clear from this that *bechira* is not at all a part of the daily spiritual schedule of a person. It is among the elevated qualities which can only be acquired through much hard work...We are, however, able to attain *bechira*, and therefore we are held responsible to acquire it. After all, *bechira* is the basis of *s’char v’onesh* (positive and negative consequences for our behavior).

The early great philosophers established *bechira* as the foundation for the whole Torah and for the entire service of man, and no intelligent person argues on this. As a result of this, however, it has become understood among the simple Jews of our nation that every person has complete freedom to choose, in any situation whatsoever. This is a complete mistake. Furthermore, we should not rely on our *bechira* by putting ourselves into a *nisayon*...

The ultimate level of *bechira* is *devekut*, meaning a constant *lishmah* — [choosing] G-d’s will, which will take us beyond habituation, to be able to fulfill “*u’bacharta bachaim*”— choosing life.”

#### 4. Limitations of Free Will with Character, Environment, and Astrology

As remarkable and powerful as *bechira* (free will) is, our classical Torah sources tell us that it has many very significant limitations. We all have different starting points in life, in terms of our character traits, environment, and even our astrological influences.

The Rambam<sup>9</sup> tells us:

Each and every person possesses many character traits. Each trait is very different and distant from the others.

One type of man is an angry person, who is constantly angry. In contrast there is the calm individual who is never moved to anger or, if at all, he will be slightly angry, [perhaps once] every few years.

There is the arrogant person and the one who is extremely humble. There is the man ruled by his appetites who will never be satisfied from pursuing his desires, and conversely, the very pure of heart, who does not desire even the little that the body needs.

There is the greedy man, who will not be satisfied with all the money in the world...[In contrast] there is the man who is satisfied with even a little, which is not [even] enough for his needs, and he does not bother to pursue and attain what he lacks.

There is [the miser], who torments himself with hunger, gathering [his money] close to himself. Whenever he spends a penny of his own, he does so [only] with great pain. [Conversely], there is the one who knowingly wastes his fortune.

All other traits follow this same pattern [of contrast].

The *Malbim* also speaks about every person having a particular nature:

“According to the work of man he is compensated, and *according to the nature of man* he will find.”<sup>10</sup> A person is rewarded or punished based on his *nature*. One who gets angry but was born with an angry temperament is treated differently than someone who gets angry but was not born with the same handicap.

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<sup>9</sup> *Hilchot De’ot* (1:1–4, 6:1), loosely translated as The Laws of Character Traits

<sup>10</sup> *Iyov* 34:11

The *Gra* states a remarkable fact on the *possuk*<sup>11</sup> — “Educate a child according to his way” — that a person *cannot change* his [basic] nature.

The *Gra*<sup>12</sup> even speaks about differences in the quality of people’s souls:

There could be a person whose *nefesh* is good in its nature and *middot* (character), but he could still be a *rasha*...Although it would be very easy for him to do good, he may [simply] not want to...[And then, there could be] someone whose *nefesh* is bad, in other words, very physical, with negative character traits. [If, however,] he has a positive *ruach* (spirit), he will still be able to conquer the *nefesh* to his [positive] direction. This is [one understanding of] *tzadik v’ra lo*, since it is very difficult for him to be in control. His desires are very great due to his [negative and physical] *nefesh*. He realizes that his actions may stem from his physical *middot*, or from his [positive] *ruach* (spirit), and he has a constant battle with his *yeitzer* (desires). [We, therefore, say,] “*I’fum tza’ara agra* — according to the effort is the accomplishment.” And even if he sometimes stumbles in transgressions, G-d forbid, *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* (the Holy One Blessed be He) deals with him *lifnim mishurat hadin* (beyond the letter of the law).

Rav Yechezkel Levenstein writes<sup>13</sup> that there are some people who need special help from G-d to be saved from doing negative things.

One who has a small blemish...will have a difficult time not doing a particular *aveirah*. It is even possible that he is more of a *tzadik* in other matters than other people are, and his elevation is greater than theirs. However, since he has this small blemish in this particular area, he will need some extra protection not to do this action.

The Rambam<sup>14</sup> discusses the power of our environment:

The nature of people is to be drawn after the character traits and actions of one’s friends and associates, and to behave like the people of their country.

And, finally, in terms of the astrological impact of the stars, the *Gemara*<sup>15</sup> says:

He who is born under [the sign of] Mars (which is red and associated with blood) will be a shedder of blood...[and] one who is born under Jupiter (the astrological sign of *Tzedek* — righteousness) will be a righteous person.

## 5. We All Need Divine Protection to Avoid Transgressing.

The *Gemara*<sup>16</sup> tells us –

Rav Yitzchak says – the [evil] inclination of a person strengthens itself against him every day... Rebbe Shimon ben Lakish says – A person’s [evil] inclination [tries to] overpower him every day and seeks to kill him... And if *HaKadosh Boruch Hu* (the Holy One, Blessed be He) didn’t help him, the person would be unable to [be saved from it].

The *Gemara*<sup>17</sup> discusses how to be saved from the *yeitzer hara*:

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<sup>11</sup> *Mishlei* 22:6

<sup>12</sup> *Even Shleimah* 1:8, based on the *Tikunei Zohar* 109a

<sup>13</sup> *Ohr Yechezkel, Darchei HaAvodah*

<sup>14</sup> *Hilchot De’ot* 6:1

<sup>15</sup> *Shabbat* 156a

<sup>16</sup> *Sukkah* 52ab

<sup>17</sup> *Kiddushin* 30b

Torah is compared to a life-giving drug...Hashem says to Israel, "I created the *yeitzer hara* and I created Torah as its antidote. If you are involved in Torah, you will not be given into its hand...but if you are not involved in Torah, you will be given into its hand..." Rav Yitzchak says, "The [evil] inclination of a person renews itself against him every day..." Rav Shimon ben Levi says – "A person's [evil] inclination [tries to] overpower him every day and seeks to kill him...and if *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* (the Holy One, Blessed be He) didn't help him, the person would be unable to [be saved from it]."

The *Maharsha* and *Iyun Yaakov* point out that this *Gemara* is referring to a righteous person who truly wants to do the right thing. Even so, the evil inclination may be so powerful that he will be unable to overcome it without G-d's help.

The *Gra*<sup>18</sup> explains that people do not have the ability to complete the work in the fight against the *yeitzer* [on their own], but only with the spirit from above and *siyata d'Sh'maya* (help from Heaven). However, Hashem helps only once the person has begun the battle and done everything in his power to do. Only once one has reached the situation of — "Without G-d's help we could never beat the *yeitzer hara*," then Hashem helps him. And that is the explanation of the verse, "Hashem will never abandon him." Therefore, the *Gemara* uses the language of *ozro* (Hashem *helps* him) and not *matzilo* (Hashem *saves* him). And this is why a person merits to receive *s'char* (spiritual benefit) when he succeeds against the *yeitzer hara*, since he had done everything which was in his power to do.

The *Gra*<sup>19</sup> also discusses the *possuk* in the Torah about *bechira*<sup>20</sup> — "Realize that I am giving (*notein*) before you today *bracha* and *klala*."

He points out that the verse says "*notein*" (giving) and not "*natati*" (I gave). If it would have said "*natati*," then we could have thought that the *bechira* which was given to a person to go on the good path was specifically at the beginning of his *bechira*. And [in a case where] one [initially] chose a bad path, there would then be no way to fix this, even if the person afterwards [wanted to] choose a good path. Therefore, the verse says "*notein*" in the present tense. Hashem tells us, "All of your days, until they are finished, you have the choice to choose the good path, even up until the day of death." A person may say, "What solution is there for me if I have been evil until now?"; "What can I do with the *aveirot* I have done?"; "I have no remedy!" Therefore, the verse says — "*hayom* — today," since the *baal teshuva* is like a newborn infant. One only needs to do *teshuvah* and go on the good path from this point forward. And, additionally, if a person will say, "What can I do with the *yeitzer hara* which forced me?" — therefore the verse says, "*Anochi* — I," meaning that I (Hashem) will be with you, and [therefore] don't be afraid of the *yeitzer*.<sup>21</sup>

The *Chafetz Chaim*<sup>22</sup> also stresses that we should not become discouraged, even if the *yeitzer hara* sometimes defeats us. [We need to remember that the *yeitzer*] is continually strengthening itself, and, therefore, we always need G-d's help to defeat it. However, it needs to be understood that only if the person himself girds his strength, will he then receive Divine assistance. We see this from the *mitzvot* (obligations) of *te'ina* and *prika* (helping someone to load and unload his animal) which the Torah commands us. If, however, the owner of the animal says that he will sit comfortably, since we [are the ones who] have this *mitzvah*, we are no longer obligated. [Just like] the *mitzvah* is [merely] to help him, that is how Hashem treats people.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Kol Eliyahu* on this *Gemara* in *Kiddushin*

<sup>19</sup> *Kol Eliyahu*

<sup>20</sup> *Devarim* 11:26

<sup>21</sup> Notes from *Metivta* on *Kiddushin* 30b

<sup>22</sup> *Tehillim*

<sup>23</sup> Notes from *Metivta* on *Kiddushin* 30b

The *Ramchal*, at the end of the second chapter of *Mesillat Yesharim*, states emphatically that we all need Divine protection to avoid transgressing. He writes:

It is obvious [!] that even if a person monitors himself, he will not have the power to save himself if Hashem doesn't help him. For the *yeitzer hara* is very powerful...Therefore, if one does oversee himself, then Hashem will help him and he will be saved from the *yeitzer hara*. And if one does not monitor himself, then Hashem will certainly not monitor him. For if one does not care about himself, then who should care about him? This is the same concept as what our Sages of blessed memory say — "Whoever does not have awareness, we should not have mercy on him." And this is also what they said<sup>24</sup> — "*Im ein ani li, mi li* — If I am not for myself, then who will be for me?"

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<sup>24</sup> *Pirkei Avot* 1:14