

Part III – We Can Affect the Parameters of our Free Will

1. We have Free Will to Direct our Various Starting Points in Life

Despite all of these sources which discuss limitations on our free will, there is much to affirm its applicability and relevance, even so.

First of all, as Rabbi Weiderblank¹ points out, intuitively, we feel free. Many times each day, we see before us two paths and must choose our course. We grapple to figure out what is right, and we struggle to make the virtuous choice. Sometimes we emerge victorious, and other times we fail. We feel confident, however, that the choice is ours. We can imagine choosing the other option, and frequently we do.

And, of course, society has not accepted the various challenges to free will. Our legal system is based entirely on the presumption of free will. Separate from the rare cases of legal insanity, we do not exonerate a murderer simply because he says he had no choice but to commit the crime.²

And even in an evil country like Nazi Germany, where the social pressure to participate in the evil was massive, the Nuremberg trials established the principle of full legal culpability.

The Gra fully recognized and acknowledged this fact that everyone is born with a distinctive orientation. This explains why he put such a great emphasis on the verse,³ “Educate a child according to *his way*; even when he grows older, he will not turn away from it.” This teaches us that every child must be educated in terms of his unique nature.

However, even though he understood — “A person cannot change his [basic] nature...”, everyone still has —

“the freedom to direct it in the way he sees fit, to become a *tzadik*, a *rasha*, or a *beinoni* (neutral). This can be seen from the passage in the *Gemara*⁴ — “Someone who is born under [the astrological sign of] Mars will be a shedder of blood. Rav Ashi observed: Either a murderer, a slaughterer, or a circumciser.” It mentions these three examples because they demonstrate all three options; the circumciser who uses his orientation to do a *mitzvah* is a *tzadik*, the butcher is a *beinoni*, and the murderer, of course, is a *rasha*.”

In addition to this, Rabbi Weiderblank⁵ writes that many of the masters of the Mussar movement urged that a person should not simply accept his nature as a given. Changing a negative character trait, while exceedingly difficult, is certainly within man’s reach. Rav Yisrael Salanter famously remarked that it is easier to master the entire Talmud than to change one negative character trait. However, all thinkers likely agree that a person *need not* attempt to change his basic nature. All traits (even the attraction to blood) are morally neutral, insofar as they can be used for good. Rather, one’s job is to overcome the negative manifestations of these traits (such as arrogance). Accomplishing this is indeed more difficult than mastering the entire Talmud.

¹ *Illuminating Jewish Thought*, p. 4

² *Illuminating Jewish Thought*, p. 5, footnote #5

³ *Mishlei* 22:6

⁴ *Shabbat* 156a

⁵ *Illuminating Jewish Thought*, p. 202

The Rambam⁶, as well, after he writes about the various character traits every person has, including from birth, spells out the obligation we all have to make significant changes within them:

If a person finds that his nature leans towards one of the extremes or adapts itself easily to it, or, if he has learned one of the extremes and acts accordingly, he [can and] should bring himself back to what is proper, and walk in the path of the good (men). This is the straight path.

Therefore, the early Sages instructed a man to evaluate his traits, to calculate them and [perhaps most importantly] to direct them along the middle path, so that he will be sound [of body].

And, finally, the *Meiri*⁷ writes explicitly that we all have the freedom to direct our inborn inclinations in positive, negative, or neutral ways:

Among the foundations of our religion is the belief that freedom is in the hands of man in all of his actions to do as he sees fit. Even if it is known through the ways of wisdom that stars have an effect on the acquisition of character traits...we nevertheless must believe that this does not limit freedom and does not cause a person to be considered compelled. Rather, if he transgresses, it is with his own freedom and will, *since G-d gave him the freedom to compel his nature that he was born with, and the bounds of religion will return him from his nature to control himself so he will not follow the tendencies he was born with*, because he can choose another way.

2. We have Free Will to Widen or Limit Our Free Will Choices.

The *Chasid Ya'avetz*, in his commentary on *Pirkei Avot*, speaks about the ability of free will to overcome one's starting point in life:

The *Mishnah*⁸ says — "*Hakol tzafui v'hareshut n'tuna* — Everything is foreseen, but the permission [to choose] (i.e., free will) is given." There is no doubt that the structure of a person, his temperament, and the time when he is born (i.e., astrological influences) have a great impact on his actions, as the *Gemara*⁹ says, "He who is born under Mars (i.e., red and associated with blood) will be a shedder of blood...One who is born under Jupiter (the astrological sign of *Tzedek* — righteousness) will be a righteous person. Rav Nachman says he will be righteous with *mitzvot* [i.e., particularly the mitzvah of *tzedaka*]."

But, even so, in terms of the soul of the person, which is above the planets [and their influence], he is able to subdue his physical [nature] and to choose the straight path. And this is certainly true for one who has been enlightened through toiling in Torah. However, *rov ha'anashim nisharim al tivam* — most people remain with their [inborn] nature and operate according to what they received. There are some who complete themselves through their choices in terms of what they were born with. There are some who consciously add to what they were given. There are those who change what they were given from good to bad. And there are those who do the opposite — their *yeitzer tov* (good inclination) conquers their *yeitzer hara* (negative inclination). But [all of] these are few in number...

The fitting approach according to a person's nature, what he was given, and when he was born, was not diminished at all. Rather, *bechira* was given into the hands of a person to control everything, to nullify what he was given, to act against it, and to

⁶ *Hilchot De'ot* 1:1–3,4

⁷ *Gemara Shabbos* 156a

⁸ *Pirke Avot* 3:19

⁹ *Shabbat* 156a

prevent the evil from expressing itself...And this is the meaning of the *Gemara*¹⁰ — *Hakol biyedei Shamayim chutz mi'yirat Shamayim*. And it [also] says, “*Tzadik mosheil yirat Elokim* — the *tzadik* rules over the fear of G-d.” [Hashem says,] “I rule over My world, and who rules over Me? The *tzadik*, since I (Hashem) make a *gezeirah*, and he (the *tzadik*) can nullify it...” *Bechira* is always given over to man to do evil or to do good...Hashem gave *bechira* to man and that is how he creates his own world.

Rav Dessler’s well-known concept called the *nekudat habechira*, or exact point of free choice, speaks explicitly about one either raising or lowering the range of his free will choices:

Everyone has free choice at his “*nekudat habechira* — point of free choice,” but the position of the “*nekudat habechira*” itself is determined by various factors. This may be affected by one’s own previous choices, which may have raised or lowered his “*nekudat habechira*.” Or it may be affected by factors outside of his control. Divine Providence may have placed him from childhood in a certain environment, higher or lower as the case may be.

There is thus no free choice except at the “*nekudat habechira*”...But there are no outside factors which can affect the act of choice itself. Here the human being himself reigns supreme.

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. [One’s education and environment play an enormous role with this.] 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 [also due to external factors like upbringing] may be taken simply because the person does not realize they are bad. In such cases, no truly free 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.

It must be realized that this “point of free choice” does not remain static in any given individual. With each good choice successfully carried out, the person rises higher in spiritual level; that is, things that were previously in the line of battle are now in the area controlled by the positive inclination, and actions done in that area can be undertaken without struggle and without choice. In this sense we can understand the saying that “one *mitzvah* leads to another.”¹¹

And so, in the other direction. Giving in to the negative inclination pushes back the frontier of the good, and an act which previously cost one a struggle with one’s conscience will now be done without free will at all. The positive inclination is no longer functioning effectively in that area. And so, we have learned “one *aveirah* leads to another,”¹² and “as soon as one has committed an *aveirah* twice, it no longer [seems to him to be] an *aveirah*.”¹³

So, we see that education and environment cannot in any way change the essential act of free choice, but only the location at which it takes place — the position of the point of free choice on the moral scale. Every human being possesses the power of perceiving the truth available to him at his particular level, clinging to it, and refusing to be deflected from it by the seductive illusions of falsehood. In this there is no difference at all whether his

¹⁰ *Brachot* 33b

¹¹ *Pirkei Avot* 4:2

¹² *Pirkei Avot* 4:2

¹³ *Yoma* 86b

upbringing raised or lowered his “point of free choice.” The ability to adopt the truth as he knows it is equal in all situations.

Rav Dessler¹⁴ then explains the fundamental *Gemara*¹⁵ that — “Everything is in the hands of Heaven except for the fear of Heaven”:

“All is from Heaven” — all that befalls a person, everything that determines where his choice shall take place, the level of his choice as well as the kind of test to which he will be subjected — all this is from Heaven. The only thing in man’s hands is “the fear of Heaven,” which is the sense of responsibility to the truth which he can either adopt or reject as he wills. The fear of Heaven — whether the fear of material consequences, or fear and awe on higher levels — is essential to prevent one being deflected from the truth. This is the essence of free choice.

The *Sefer HaChinuch*, on the prohibition of following after the thoughts of the heart and what the eyes see, ¹⁶ explains that running after physical cravings will limit our freedom:

This mitzvah is actually a great foundation of the religion, since negative thoughts are the source of impurity, and the actions are their offspring...

One should become accustomed to say what our Sages taught,¹⁷ “*Aveirah goreret aveirah, u’mitzvah goreret mitzvah* — one transgression leads to another transgression, and one mitzvah leads to another mitzvah.” If you decide to fulfil your evil craving even one time, you will be drawn after it many times. And if you manage to be strong enough to conquer your passions and to shut your eyes from seeing evil one time, it will [then] seem easier to do this many more times.

Every person who becomes accustomed to desires and frequently gives in to them — his *yeitzer hara* will overpower him every day. And if one refrains from them, he will be happy with his portion constantly, every day.

Rav Aharon Soloveichik¹⁸ writes that, according to the *Sefer HaChinuch*, this mitzvah prohibits a person from taking drugs, since it forbids “running after physical cravings [which] will limit our freedom.”

Rav Moshe Feinstein directly addresses drug use:¹⁹

It is simple, from many fundamental laws in the Torah, that this is prohibited. Firstly, it damages and ruins the body. And even if one finds healthy people who are not damaging themselves [physically] so much, they are still damaging the mind since they are no longer able to understand a matter correctly. This is actually more serious than simply holding oneself back from learning Torah properly. It also prevents one from *tefillah* and fulfilling the *mitzvot* of the Torah, since doing [these things] without proper awareness is akin to not doing them at all. Furthermore, one is causing a great *taavah* (desire), which is greater than the *taavah* to eat and similar things which one needs for their sustenance. And there are some who will be unable to control their *taavot*. This is a severe prohibition, as it says about the *Ben Sorer u'Moreh* (the rebellious son) who had a much greater desire for eating, even if it was for kosher food. All the more so is it forbidden to bring oneself to a much greater *taavah*, and to a matter which has no purpose whatsoever... There is also the prohibition of the *mitzvat aseï* of “*kedoshim te’hiyu* — be holy,” according to the explanation of the Ramban. They will additionally be violating many more prohibitions besides these.

¹⁴ *Illuminating Jewish Thought*, p. 200, footnote #28

¹⁵ *Brachot* 33b

¹⁶ #387

¹⁷ *Pirkei Avot* 4:2

¹⁸ “*Torah Tzniut* versus New Morality and Drugs,” *Tradition* (Fall 1972)

¹⁹ *Igrot Moshe* (*Yoreh Deah* 3, # 35 — *Issur Ishun Samim* — The Prohibition Against Smoking Drugs)

The end of the matter is that it is simple and clear that this is among the most serious prohibitions, and one needs to try with all of one's ability to remove this *tumah* from the Jewish people, and particularly for those who are learning in *yeshivot*.

In other words, the mitzvah of the *Ben Sorer u'Moreh* (the rebellious son) prohibits forming addictive behaviors that have negative consequences. We, therefore, see that a significant aspect of our free will is to determine whether and how much to have free will.

One will also directly limit his own *bechira* by habituating himself to transgressions. The *Gemara*²⁰ tells us: Once a person commits a transgression and repeats it, it then becomes permitted to him. The *Gemara* asks incredulously: Can you imagine that it [really] becomes permitted to him? Rather, it *seems to him* that it is permitted.

In a similar manner, the *Ramcha*²¹ points out just how destructive it is to live our lives habitually:

"[Merely] following our routine like a blind man in the dark...is one of the tactics of the *yeitzer hara*...to burden people's minds constantly with its toil, until they are left with no free time to contemplate and examine which path they are traveling on.

In other words, without introspection, we are essentially hardening our own hearts and limiting our freedom.

Rav Avigdor Miller²² speaks about how terrible it is for a Jewish slave to choose to extend his servitude:

We need to pay attention to the case of an *eved ha'nirtzah* (the slave who has his ear pierced since he chose to remain an *eved*)...

Rebbe Yochanan ben Zakai²³ explained this verse harshly:

Why among all of the different limbs of the body is it specifically the ear which should [be pierced]? Hashem says, "The ear which heard My voice on Har Sinai, when I said, 'The Jewish people should be servants to Me,' and not servants to servants (i.e., other people), but then he went and acquired a [human] master for himself, should [have his ear] pierced"...According to the normal procedure, he should have been sent away by the master [after a few years] to be free to serve Hashem. But instead, he is punished by remaining imprisoned to his master without the ability to leave until the *Yovel*.²⁴ This principle teaches us that negative choices cause our *bechira* to be limited. And, even more so, when we [directly] choose to limit our *bechira* [like the *eved nirtzah*], we are punished by our *bechira* being diminished even more than we chose.

And, on the positive side, Rav Miller²⁵ tells us that our good choices actually increase our *bechira*:

In all of the cases [in Jewish history where people made positive choices] we see that the one who made the proper choice received the benefit of then being able to make even greater choices, as we say,²⁶ "*s'char mitzvah mitzvah* — the benefit of a mitzvah is another mitzvah." Aharon [who chose properly] was given many *mitzvot* of the *Kehuna*, the *Levi'im* were given the task of teaching the Jewish nation and the service [in the *Beit HaMikdash*], and *Dovid HaMelech* was given the mitzvah of shepherding the flock of Hashem. The one who fulfills the Torah from poverty — i.e.,

²⁰ *Kiddushin* 40a

²¹ *Mesillat Yesharim*, ch. 2

²² *Lev Avigdor, Shaar HaBechira* 43

²³ *Kiddushin* 22b

²⁴ 50th year

²⁵ *Lev Avigdor – Shaar HaBechira* – 53

²⁶ *Pirkei Avot* 4:2

with a limited *bechira*, will fulfill it in the end from wealth — with an enhanced degree of *bechira*. And whoever does not choose properly, will be given a diminished *bechira*, with only a fraction of what is possible to choose.

Rav Miller²⁷ emphasizes that there is no benefit in this world like the opportunity to fulfill unlimited *bechira*, and there is no greater negative than the loss of the opportunity to make choices. [In fact,] the essential bitterness of death is due to the loss of *bechira*, which is the greatest misfortune.

And, finally, Rav Miller²⁸ writes:

Once we see that the foundation of man and his success in life is *bechira*, the intelligent person understands that there is a heavy obligation to guard his freedom of choice... This is [exactly] the claim the Torah makes against the *eved ivri* [the Jewish slave who wants to extend the period of his slavery] — “But the Jewish people are [really] subjugated to Me,” so how can this one (i.e., the *eved ivri*) go and acquire a master for himself?²⁹

The *Gemara*³⁰ tells the remarkable story of a man whose desire for a particular woman was so great that his life actually became endangered.

The *sefer Margalioth HaYam* writes:

This man was responsible for the [danger to his life] since he caused the *yeitzer hara* to come upon himself [as the *Gemara* put it — “*he set his eyes upon this woman*”] until it overpowered him. In other words, he was the one who directly limited his own *bechira*.

People will sometimes even embrace one forbidden behavior to allow themselves to engage in a different prohibited action. The *Gemara*³¹ tells us that Yisrael knew there was no reality to idolatry. They worshipped idols only in order to justify public immorality for themselves.

²⁷ *Lev Avigdor – Shaar HaBechira – 45*

²⁸ *Lev Avigdor, Shaar HaBechira, siman 3*

²⁹ *Kiddushin 22b*

³⁰ *Sanhedrin 75a*

³¹ *Sanhedrin 63b–64a*