



ISSUES IN JEWISH THOUGHT

THE MEANING OF FREEDOM

— a personal view

By Rabbi Dr Jonathan Sacks (MA Cantab)

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Jewish young people growing up at the end of the twentieth century face challenges and opportunities never before encountered. The break up of European Jewish communities and the simultaneous availability for many of academic and professional careers was swiftly followed by mass defection from Jewish faith and Jewish living as the outside world beckoned. But the optimism of the nineteenth century gave way to the grim reality of the twentieth century as war and holocaust proved that intellectual and scientific progress did not inevitably lead either to peace or to justice. As a result, post war generations have a healthy and sometimes radical cynicism towards modernity. The rise of modern Israel has complicated and deepened the dilemma for the generations of the 60's, 70's and 80's. Modern nationalism is frequently seen as morally degenerate, yet a commitment to and a feeling for Israel is normally asserted as the lowest common denominator of Jewish life.

Many young people are now being thrust into this maze with little hope of finding the way through. Their Jewish education and knowledge is normally inadequate to respond with any degree of cogency to the intellectual probing of a modern western upbringing and education in which the critical faculty is well developed and even glorified. But in many cases the home inheritance is enough to point in the direction of Jewish tradition or Israel without being able rationally to support such a life style. The resultant confusion explains an intermarriage rate of over 20% and a negation of Jewish values from all segments of the Jewish population.

For 40 years Jewish Youth Study Groups has attempted to provide for its membership a movement whereby young people could grow up within a stable and supportive Jewish environment and equip themselves with at least some clues to form a way through the maze described above. Local Study Groups with their study courses and shiurim, national events and Shabbatot and the annual Summer and Winter Schools together build a model of Jewish life both residential and non-residential through which Study Groupers can expand their Jewish horizons. Many complete this surrogate Jewish education by spending time in Israel on a Study Group Israel Summer School or a period in a yeshiva/girls college. As a further contribution to this process we are happy to offer this series of "Issues in Jewish Thought" by Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Sacks. Our author was carefully chosen as he exemplifies the path trodden by so many Study Groupers in his own life and can write with both erudition on his chosen subjects and empathy towards his readers. We are happy to acknowledge with grateful thanks the assistance of the United Synagogue Youth and Community Department and its director Mr. Jeffrey Blumenfeld. His cooperation and help in the production of this series has been invaluable. It is our hope and prayer that this series will provide for both Study Groupers and the wider Jewish public a beginning to the mystery of the life and survival of the Jew in the 20th and 21st century.

Bobby Hill
JYSG Organiser
1973-1982

Tze u'Lemad.



Joel Portnoy
JYSG Organiser
1982-

Every time we make a choice, we seem to have before us a number of open possibilities. But are they really there? Might we not be unconscious actors, carrying out to the detail a script conceived and written by God long before we were born? Might not every momentous or seemingly random decision of ours have been foreseen long ago? Could our whole sense of human freedom be nothing but an illusion?

This series of questions, oddly enough, is not forced on Judaism from the outside. In recent years we have been able, through microprocessor technology, to make machines so complex that they seem almost human in their capacity. Naturally this leads to the science-fiction sort of question: might humans not be a sort of robot, and one rapidly being overtaken by others? But believing Jews did not need this impetus to feel the force of the problem. For they had the Torah to tell them that man was, in a sense, just that: a creature made and programmed by God. And the question therefore is: Is it really possible to write freedom into the programme? And must we not at some level be deceiving ourselves when our actions can seem to surprise others, and sometimes even ourselves, but when we know that they can never surprise God?

The problem of freedom is one of those which is concerned with the **consistency** of our beliefs. We are sure, in Judaism, of two things: first, that we are all free to choose between good and evil; second, that God knows everything in advance, and that there is nothing that happens in the world without His having willed or allowed it to be. These, respectively, constitute our faith in the uniqueness of man and the greatness of God. It is possible to proceed without ever seeing that these two beliefs are incompatible with one another. But once it has been pointed out, we seem forced to admit that they cannot both be true. For they make both man and God the master over a particular area: an area where there can only be one free agent.

Consider the beliefs in turn. Freedom, first. Almost at the beginning of the Torah we read of how Cain and Abel brought offerings to God. Abel's was accepted, Cain's was not. Cain became depressed and angry: as if nothing he could do would please God. God warned him against this feeling: "If you do good, will there not be special privileges?

And if you do not do good, sin is crouching at the door. It lusts after you, but you can dominate it." (Bereishith 4:7). We sometimes have a strong, even overpowering, desire to do wrong; but we can always resist it. We are never in its grip.

Again, towards the end of his life, Moses warns the people of the blessings they will have if they obey God, and the curses that will pursue them if they do not. Either path is within their power. The life of Torah is not beyond them: "It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who shall go up to heaven and bring it to us so that we can hear it and keep it?'" Therefore, he concludes: "See: today I have set before you a free choice, between life and good, and death and evil." (Devarim 30:12.15)

The result is that we can never blame our failures on causes outside of ourselves. We were free; therefore we are responsible. Ben Sirach warns against trying to lay the blame on our Maker: "Do not say, 'My transgression comes from God'; for He did not make what He hates . . . He did not command any man to sin, nor did He give strength to men of lies." (Ben Sirach 15:11.20)

Rambam emphatically sums up our belief in man as the master of his own choices: "Freewill is given to every human being. If he wants to turn to the way of good and be righteous, he has the power. If he wants to turn to the way of evil and be wicked, he has that power, too . . . Every person is capable of being as righteous as Moses, our teacher, or as wicked as Jeroboam; of being wise or foolish, kind or cruel, mean or generous." (Hilchot Teshuva 5:1-2).

We are free, or so we believe. But that freedom seems to be challenged in three directions.

1. GOD KNOWS IN ADVANCE

God knows what we will do before we have even decided to do it. So we say in the **Yigdal** prayer: "He watches and knows our secret thoughts; He sees the end of a thing before it has begun". God said to Jeremiah:

"Before I formed you . . . I knew you" (Jeremiah 1:5). He told Moses, before he had even set out to return to Egypt, "I know in advance that the Egyptian king will not allow you to leave, even after a show of force." (Shemot 3:19).

But if it is known in advance what we will do, then we cannot be free to do otherwise. For, suppose that we **had** done otherwise. Then God would have turned out to have made a wrong prediction. And that cannot be so. Therefore, we could not have done otherwise. Rambam puts it this way: "God either knows in advance that this particular person will be righteous or wicked, or He does not know. If He knows that he will be righteous, then it is impossible that he will not be righteous. And if you say, 'God knows that he will be righteous, and yet it is possible that he should be wicked', then God does not know the future with certainty." (Hilchot Teshuvah 5:5).

The problem is put forcibly in a midrash. According to rabbinic tradition, the Torah existed for two thousand years before the creation of the world. This is a way of saying, amongst other things, that God foresaw the events written in it. Amongst the things that the Torah legislates for is the impurities associated with death. Yet apparently death was brought into the world as a result of the sin of Adam. Was he really free to desist from eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge, and was he really responsible for his sin, when it was foreseen? "What is it like? Like a man who wished to divorce his wife. When he decided to go home, he wrote a bill of divorce; he entered his house with the divorce in his hand, and sought a pretext for giving it to her. He told his wife to mix him a drink. She did so. He took it from her and said, 'Here is your divorce.' She said, 'What sin have I committed?' He replied, 'Go from my house, because you have mixed me a lukewarm drink.' She protested, 'You already knew that I would, because you wrote the divorce and brought it with you (before you asked me for a drink).' — So Adam protested before the Holy One, blessed be He. 'Lord of the universe, two thousand years before You made the world, the Torah was with you . . . and in it is written, 'This is the law, when a man dies in a tent' (Bamidbar 19:14). Would You have written this if You had not already prepared death for mankind? Yet You have come to put the blame on me'" (Tanhuma, Vayeshev, 4).

2. DIVINE PROVIDENCE

Not only does God know in advance what will happen, but in a real sense we believe that He has a hand in what happens. We call this, Divine Providence; meaning that what happens to us is not mere chance, but is the will of God. According to one view expressed in the Talmud this applies even to the tiniest of events: "A man does not bruise his finger below unless it be announced concerning him on high" (Hullin 7b). And Rambam wrote that this was at the heart of at least one of the commands of the Torah, the command to sound the alarm and proclaim a public fast when catastrophe was threatening the nation; the reason being that we were being forced to realise that the turn of events was no accident but rather God's call to us to turn to Him (Hilchot Ta'aniyot 1:1-3).

But according to this, the events that befall the people of Israel, individually and collectively, are the acts of God; in which case they cannot be made up of the acts of man. When Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the first Temple, and the Romans the second, were they really acting by their own volition, when they were seen by the prophets and the rabbis, respectively, as carrying out a punishment ordained by God?

There is a famous instance in the Torah of a clash between the will of God and that of man. God told Jonah to prophesy to Nineveh. Jonah tried to run away and boarded a ship bound for Tarshish. As we know, the attempt was doomed to failure: a storm broke; the sailors cast lots to see who should be thrown overboard; the lot fell on Jonah; he was thrown into the sea, was swallowed by a fish, and vomited out onto dry land. A series of apparent coincidences and choices which we know were nothing of the kind but rather, the working out of a predestined end. Perhaps all of life is like this: we see nothing but chance and choice, yet in reality the future is already written.

There are three options: either to say that everything is God's will and that human freedom is an illusion; or to say that we are free, and that God plays no part in history; or to try somehow to reconcile both points of view. This, according to Josephus, was a major controversy amongst the three Jewish sects towards the end of the Second Temple

period. The first approach was adopted by the Essenes, who maintained that "fate governs all things, and that nothing befalls men but what is according to its determination". Man has no freewill. The Sadducees took the second line: "They take away fate and say there is no such thing, and that the events of human affairs are not subject to it: they maintain that all our actions are in our own power." Man is free, but there is no Providence. The third is the view of the Pharisees — the forerunners of the Mishnaic sages. "When they hold that all things are done by fate, they do not take away the freedom from men of acting as they think fit." (Antiquities of the Jews, 13.5.9;18.1.3). This is roughly how Rambam understands the famous saying of Rabbi Akiva: "All is foreseen but freedom of choice is given" (Avot 3:15). The sages resisted both the idea that man's acts were predestined, and that God might not be seen at work in the affairs of the world.

Their view might seem paradoxical. Yet we often sense just this paradox at work in many famous passages in the Torah. For example, consider the choice of Jacob. Rebecca is told, before the twins are born, that "the greater will serve the younger". Yet in fact this only comes about by two instances in which Jacob takes advantage of a situation to seize the initiative: Esau is thirsty, Jacob sells him soup for the price of his birthright; he is out hunting, Jacob dresses up in his clothes and takes the blessing. Had he not done these things, would not the choice have fallen on Esau? In which case how was it that it had fallen on Jacob from before his birth?

What, again, of the story of Esther? Did God mean to let Haman proceed with the plan "to destroy, slay and exterminate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day"? Surely not. Even the most terrifying of the curses which Moses predicted ends with the promise: "And yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them, nor will I spurn them, to destroy them utterly, and to break My covenant with them" (Vayikra 26:44). But how was the decree averted? Had Esther not decided to confront the king, had she not been chosen as his wife, had Vashti not angered Ahasuerus, had he not decided to give a banquet . . . Who knows? The sequence of events seems to be just a string of human choices; but in the end we feel them to have been Divinely ordained, even though the name of God does not appear once in the book.

The most striking instance of all is the life of Joseph. Its final outcome is announced at the very outset. He is sent two dreams by which the family is informed that they will eventually bow down to the youngest-but-one. And so it happens. But at every turn in Joseph's up-and-down life he seems to be pushed in all directions but that. At one point, for example, the brothers say, "Let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits, and we will say that a wild animal has eaten him; and we shall see what will become of his dreams". Unbeknown to them, this very attempt to put a stop to the dreams turns out to be the first stage in making them come true. Eventually, Joseph was to say to his brothers: "It was not you who sent me here, but God" (Bereishith 45:8). This is the classic statement of the paradox: in one way it was their act; in another, it was God's.

Could they, or could they not, have done otherwise?

3. FREEDOM AND DETERMINISM

There is a third direction from which man's freedom seems to be undermined. This time, it is not a reflection about God, but about man himself, that provokes it.

There are cases in which a person does something, and where it is obvious that he is not to blame, because he was not free to do otherwise. If we commit a transgression because someone is pointing a gun at us and forcing us to do it, then we call this a case of **ones** (pronounced oh-ness) — the halachic term for action under duress — and we are free of liability. Why? Because for that moment we were not a free agent. Our decision did not flow from a free choice: it had did not flow from a free choice: it had an external cause.

Such cases are rare. But might it not be that in some way all of our behaviour is like this. Our decisions flow from our character; but our character us to a large extent made up of outside influences over which we had no control: our genetic make-up, our early experiences in childhood, our environment. Freud suggested that much of our personality is already determined by events in early childhood.

Sociology, psychology, psychiatry — indeed all the scientific disciplines which have human behaviour as their subject — attempt to discover causes for our actions, with the result that we are seen as a kind of machine. Our behaviour is as much the product of outside influences as was the case when we were threatened by a gun; only, more subtly and less obviously.

The sages told two illustrative stories. One: the case of Elisha ben Abuya, known as Acher, the brilliant scholar and teacher of Rabbi Meir who became a heretic. He said of himself that at his **brit**, his father invited all the great men of Jerusalem, including R. Eliezer and R. Joshua. The two of them began discussing Torah with such fervour that "the words rejoiced as on the day they were given at Sinai, and fire danced around them . . . When my father saw this he said, 'Since the power of the Torah is so great, if my son is granted life I will dedicate him to the Torah'. and because his intention was not for the glory of God," continued Acher, "my Torah did not remain with me." (Ruth Rabbah 6:4).

The other: R. Nachman bar Yitzhak. His mother was told by astrologers, 'Your son will be a thief.' So she never let him go bareheaded, saying to him, 'Cover your head so that the fear of heaven may be upon you; and pray for mercy.' He did not know why she was saying this, but one day he was sitting and studying under a palm-tree, and his head-covering fell off. He looked up and saw the tree; temptation overcame him; he climbed up and bit off a cluster of dates. (Shabbat 156b).

The suggestion is that Acher's eventual apostasy can be traced back to the influence of his early childhood, when his father transmitted to him improper motives, and that R. Nachman was genetically predisposed to a life of crime had it not been that he was constantly guarded against it. Our characters are made by influences not of our choosing. So how can they be our fault?

THE DILEMMA

So, the problem. Shall we say that God does **not** know everything? But is this not condemned? There is a Psalm which speaks of the

wicked who say, "The Lord does not see; the God of Jacob pays no heed". The author replies: "Does He that planted the ear not hear, He that shaped the eye not see?" (Psalm 94:7,9).

Shall we say that there are constraints on the workings of Providence? Against this, God said to Moses: "Is there a limit to the power of God?" (Bamidbar 11:23).

Or shall we instead accept that man is not free? But if we do, the pillars of Judaism fall. Saadia Gaon and Rambam pointed out that there could be no room for the commandments unless there were freewill: why order, 'Do this, do not do that', if the good men do, they will do anyway, and the bad they do they could not avoid? Divine reward and punishment would also be unjust. As Saadia said: if people merely act out the roles allotted to them by God or nature, then the wicked man is as obedient as the righteous. Finally, there would be no place for **teshuvah**. An essential condition of repentance is remorse, the feeling that we were wrong to have done what we did. But if we realise that we can never help doing what we do, we can never think ourselves guilty: at most we can regard ourselves as unlucky.

We must accept the dilemma and think it through. Somehow the three problems we raised do not compromise our freedom.

LIMITS OF CAUSALITY

Taking them in reverse order, what was apparent from the story of R. Nachman bar Yitzhak is that with sufficient determination one can overcome the most dangerous of innate characteristics. Acher was wrong to suggest that he could not help becoming a heretic. He told his disciple, Rabbi Meir, that **teshuvah** was impossible for him; yet it appears that just before he died, he did indeed repent. At most, our innate strengths and weaknesses can be used, at our choice, for either good or bad. Rav Ashi suggested, for example, that someone disposed to cruelty might become a robber or murderer; but he might equally become a **shochet** or a surgeon (Shabbat 166a). Resh Lakish, the great pupil of R. Jochanan, was a gladiator in his youth. When he became a

sage, he used his strength and courage to save the life of R. Assi. We may inherit a particular temperament; but the use to which we put it is our own choice.

What is more — Rambam argued — the most that we inherit is a **disposition**; meaning that some things come easily or naturally to us, whilst others are difficult or 'go against our nature'. Yet by constant training or effort we can acquire any ethical trait. Rambam gives precise guidance: by sustained acts of self-control, for example, the most volatile person can become patient. Often the most powerful obstacle to changing one's character is the belief that one cannot change it. This, Judaism affirms, is always self-deception: the principle of **teshuvah** is that we can all be what we wish to be, and that we can reverse the previous direction of our lives.

Of course, there are things which can make it more difficult: if we see nothing wrong in what we are doing, we will have no impetus to change. If we do wrong over and over again, it may become engrained in our character; so much so that "repentance is withheld". The most famous instance is that of Pharaoh, who five times refused to let the Israelites go after his country has been struck by plagues. Subsequently, 'God hardened his heart', meaning that he had become too habituated to refusal to be able, of his own freewill, to change his decision. But even so, we believe, "He who comes to purify himself is given help by God" (Shabbat 104a).

PARTNERSHIP: THE WORK OF GOD AND THE WORKS OF MAN

Turning to Providence, the rabbis argued that there is no simple either/or: **either** everything is the work of God **or** it is all human free choice. Instead they suggested that there is a constant interplay between our actions and the Divine response.

They explained this by a number of principles. The first emerged from a series of questions addressed by the Alexandrians to R. Joshua ben Chananiah. Amongst them: 'What should a person do to become wise?' — 'Let him engage in much study and reduce the time he

spends in business.' — But many did so and it did not work.' — 'Rather, let him pray to Him to whom wisdom belongs.' The principle which is inferred is: "The one without the other is not sufficient." (Niddah 70b). Our achievements are a combination of prayer and human effort. On the one hand we have trust in God; on the other we choose not to rely on miracles. In the **Amidah** we pray for wisdom, healing, sustenance; yet we still study, go to doctors, and work for a livelihood. This is what the rabbis meant when they said that God and man were "partners in the work of creation".

The second idea: "Good is brought about through the good, and guilt through the guilty" (Shabbat 32a). God does indeed sometimes intervene so as to bring about reward or punishment, and human beings may be unwitting agents in this process. Without being aware of it, Esther was being placed in a position to save her people, and Nebuchadnezzar to bring destruction upon Israel. This does not mean that they were **mere** 'instruments of God'. For Esther would not have been chosen had she not been righteous, nor would Nebuchadnezzar had he not been cruel. God wills it that the good should be instruments of good, and the bad, agents of bad. It is no excuse for anyone who does wrong to say, 'I was just executing God's plan.' Had he been a good person he would not have been chosen to do it.

The third is contained in the idea that "Everything is in the hands of Heaven except the fear of Heaven" (Berachot 33b). Complex chains of events in our lives may sometimes seem to have a momentum of their own, as if they were preordained. But always they can be traced back to some initial free choice on our part. "A commandment leads to another commandment, and transgression begets transgression", said Ben Assai (Avot 4:2). This idea can be found in many forms in the sayings of the rabbis: it embodies the belief that God leads a person to where he wants to go. The most famous is the case of Balaam. God told him not to go with the Moabites to curse Israel. So he refused, but the second time they came, he hesitated, and God told him to go with them (Bamidbar 22:20). If one wants to disobey a command, nothing stands in the way. Providence is God's way of **strengthening our choices**, whichever direction they take.

FOREKNOWLEDGE AND FREEDOM

The thorniest problem remains: if God knows in advance what we will do, can we do otherwise? In answering this, the great philosophers of Judaism were divided.

Saadia Gaon and Judah Halevi argued that God's knowledge was not the **cause** of anything, the reverse is the case: our doing something **now** causes God to have known it **in the past**. This is a paradoxical idea — in a way that these writers did not comment on — for we normally assume that a cause always **precedes** its effect, or that we can only bring about the future, never the past. In fact, though, this approach is fundamentally important, because it establishes that the problem turns upon the concept of **time**: in what way is our existence in time related to God's knowledge which is beyond time? an analogy: we are spectators at a football match. We do not know what the result will be. In the last minute, someone scores the winning goal. Throughout, the players were acting freely and we were in suspense. Later that evening we watch the same match on television. We know what is going to happen; we come to the last minute and we know precisely how the ball is going to go into the net. Are the players now unfree? Is our foreknowledge controlling the events? Obviously not. It is just that now in a different time-dimension to the players on the screen. Transfer that to the way in which God watches us, and we have a sense of what Saadia was trying to say.

Rambam had a different suggestion. Divine knowledge is completely unlike human knowledge. He says that it is impossible to state this precisely. But roughly speaking: we know things from the outside; but God knows from the inside. (Hilchot Teshuvah 5:5; Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah 2:10). Someone trying to understand the workings of a machine will have to watch it in action, take it apart, and gradually piece together a sense of how it functions. But the inventor of the machine knows how it works not by examining it, but through the thought which he had before he made it. For the inventor, knowledge precedes the existence of the machine; for the observer, the machine comes first, and he must work from it to understanding. We are like observers; God is like an inventor. We do not know what others, (or

even we) will do until they have done it. But God knows, because He made us. He knows, not through observation, but 'from the inside'. This does not conflict with our free choice. On the contrary: it is precisely our free choices that God knows. (Guide for the Perplexed, 3:21). It is difficult to give an analogy for this. Perhaps the nearest is the way that a parent can sometimes know exactly how his or her child will react to a situation — not through detached prediction but by a kind of intuitive imaginative projection.

Judaism refused to take an easy way out. Man is free — but not at the cost of banishing God from the world. God sees and shapes our destiny — but not at the cost of making us pre-programmed robots. There is tension between these ideas — but not contradiction. We can lose our freedom easily enough, or in the other direction, lose our sense of God. In the struggle not to do either, we discover the great partnership of faith: our choice, and God's response.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Maimonides' accounts of freewill can be found in the eighth of his 'Eight Chapters' which form an introduction to his commentary to the tenth chapter of the tractate Sanhedrin (translated in A. Cohen, **The Teachings of Maimonides**, Ktav, pp. 213-219); and in chapters five and six of **Hilchot Teshuvah**, in the Mishne Torah. This last has been translated by Moses Hyamson. The fifth chapter can also be found in Agnon, **The Days of Awe**, pp. 115-119. Other important material can be found in Saadia's *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, book 4; Ha Levi, **The Kuzari**, 5:20; and Maimonides, **Guide for the Perplexed**, 3:19-21 (see the suggested reading for 'Faith and Reason' for details of translations). One thinker, Hasdai Crescas, moved very close to the position of determinism in his work, **Or Adonai**. For an account of his views, see Husik, **A History of Medieval Jewish Philosophy**, Jewish Publication Society of America, pp. 388-405. An overall summary of the variety of Jewish thinking on the subject can be found under the heading **Free Will**, in **Encyclopaedia Judaica**, vol. 7, pp. 125-131.



Other pamphlets in this series:

- Pamphlet 1 — Faith and Reason
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