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- Helpful, informative synopses
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- Challenging questions to consider at the end of each lesson

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We look forward to making many more rewarding learning experiences available to you in the future.

Sincerely,

Rabbi Yehoshua Werde  
Director

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# Free Choice

## Part One: Determinism

### The Choice is Yours

Torah tells us that Hashem has given us the opportunity to choose life and good or death and evil and He advises us to choose good:

*Devorim 30:15-19*

רְאֵה נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַיּוֹם אֶת הַחַיִּים וְאֶת  
הַטּוֹב וְאֶת הַמָּוֶת וְאֶת הָרָע... וּבְחַרְתָּ בְּחַיִּים...

*See, I set before you today life and goodness, death and evil....Now choose life...*

Free choice is a foundational principle that empowers us to make our own decisions and at the same time makes us accountable for what we do: To be punished if we make bad decisions, and to be rewarded for our good ones.

### The Pillar of Judaism

The concept of reward and punishment requires that man have free will, for if he is not responsible for his actions, he cannot be justly rewarded or punished for them.

The Rambam famously makes this point in Hilchos Teshuvah, where he refers to free choice as “the important foundation of Torah and Mitzvos:”

דבר זה עיקר גדול הוא והוא עמוד התורה והמצוה שנאמר ראה נתתי לפניך היום את החיים, וכתוב ראה אנכי נותן לפניכם היום, כלומר שהרשות בידכם וכל שיחפוץ האדם לעשות ממעשה בני האדם עושה בין טובים בין רעים, ומפני זה הענין נאמר מי יתן והיה לבכם זה להם, כלומר שאין הבורא כופה בני האדם ולא גוזר עליהן לעשות טובה או רעה אלא הכל מסור להם.

*This principle is a fundamental concept and a pillar [on which rests the totality] of the Torah and mitzvos as [Devorim 30:15] states: “Behold, I have set before you today life [and good, death and evil].” Similarly, [Devorim 11:26] states, “Behold, I have set before you today [the blessing and the curse],” implying that the choice is in your hands.*

*Any one of the deeds of men which a person desires to do, he may, whether good or evil. Therefore, [Devorim 5:26] states:*

*“If only their hearts would always remain this way.” From this, we can infer that the Creator does not compel or decree that people should do either good or bad. Rather, everything is left to their [own choice].*

## **Reward and Punishment**

Why do you think free choice is such an important pillar of Torah and Judaism?

The Rambam explains:

*Rambam, Laws of Teshuvah, 5:4*

אילו הא-ל היה גוזר על האדם להיות צדיק או רשע או אילו היה שם דבר שמושך את האדם בעיקר תולדתו לדרך מן הדרכים או למדע מן המדעות או לדעה מן הדעות או למעשה מן המעשים כמו שבודים מלבם הטפשים הוברי שמים היאך היה מצוה לנו על ידי הנביאים עשה כך ואל תעשה כך הטיבו דרכיכם ואל תלכו אחרי רשעכם והוא מתחלת ברייתו כבר נגזר עליו או תולדתו תמשוך אותו לדבר שאי אפשר לזוז ממנו, ומה מקום היה לכל התורה כולה ובאי זה דין ואיזה משפט נפרע מן הרשע או משלם שכר לצדיק, השופט כל הארץ לא יעשה משפט, ואל תתמה ותאמר היאך יהיה האדם עושה כל מה שיחפוץ ויהיו מעשיו מסורים לו וכי יעשה בעולם דבר שלא ברשות קונו ולא חפצו והכתוב אומר כל אשר חפץ ה' יעשה בשמים ובארץ, דע שהכל כחפצו יעשה ואף על פי שמעשינו מסורין לנו, כיצד כשם שהיוצר חפץ להיות האש והרוח עולים למעלה והמים והארץ יורדים למטה והגלגל סובב בעיגול 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 מטיבין לו ואם עשה רעה מריעין לו, הוא שהנביא אומר מידכם היתה זאת לכם, גם המה בחרו בדרכיהם, ובענין זה אמר שלמה שמח בחור בילדותך ודע כי על כל אלה יביאך האלהים במשפט, כלומר דע שיש בידך כח לעשות ועתיד אתה ליתן את הדין.

*Were Hashem to decree that an individual would be righteous or wicked or that there would be a quality which draws a person by his essential nature to any particular path [of behavior], way*

*of thinking, attributes, or deeds, as imagined by many of the fools [who believe] in astrology - how could He command us through [the words of] the prophets: “Do this,” “Do not do this,” “Improve your behavior,” or “Do not follow after your wickedness?”*

*[According to their mistaken conception,] from the beginning of man’s creation, it would be decreed upon him, or his nature would draw him, to a particular quality and he could not depart from it.*

*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? Shall the whole world’s Judge not act justly!*

*A person should not wonder: How is it possible for one to do whatever he wants and be responsible for his own deeds? - Is it possible for anything to happen in this world without the permission and desire of its Creator as [Tehillim 135:6] states: “Whatever Hashem wishes, He has done in the heavens and in the earth.”*

*One must know that everything is done in accord with His will and, nevertheless, we are responsible for our deeds.*

*How is this [apparent contradiction] resolved? Just*

*as the Creator desired that [the elements of] fire and wind rise upward and [those of] water and earth descend downward, that the heavenly spheres revolve in a circular orbit, and all the other creations of the world follow the nature which He desired for them, so too, He desired that man have free choice and be responsible for his deeds, without being pulled or forced. Rather, he, on his own initiative, with the knowledge which Hashem has granted him, will do anything that man is able to do.*

*Therefore, he is judged according to his deeds. If he does good, he is treated with beneficence. If he does bad, he is treated harshly. This is implied by the prophets' statements: "This has been the doing of your hands" [Malachi 1:9]; "They also have chosen their own paths" [Yeshayahu 66:3].*

*This concept was also implied by Shlomo Hamelech in his statement [Koheles 11:9]: "Young man, rejoice in your youth... But, know that for all these things Hashem will bring you to judgment," i.e., know that you have the potential to do, but in the future, you will have to account for your deeds.*

### **The Case for Determinism**

The argument for determinism is based on the following logic:

- 1) No action is free if it must occur.

- 2) Human actions result from wants, wishes, desires, motivations, feelings, etc.
- 3) Human wants, wishes, desires, motivations, feelings, etc. are caused in turn by specific preexisting conditions that ensure their occurrence.
- 4) So it must be that human actions are not free.

Another way of presenting this argument:

Every decision I make is either motivated by reason, or is not. If it is motivated by reason, then it was predetermined by logic and not by my choice, and if it wasn't motivated by reason, then it was selected at random and does not reflect on my free will to choose.

### **Is there even such a thing as free choice?**

The classical arguments in philosophy against determinism and for the existence of free choice, question the first point made by the determinists:

- 1) Just because something has a cause, does not mean it is forced and is not a free choice.
- 2) In order to remove the element of free choice, the choice must be based on something external to the person. However, many choices are made because that is what the person wants, not because of any external reason.

A way to determine this is to keep asking the question “why do you want it?” until you get to the source of the want and can determine if it is something you truly want or whether you want it for a reason of sorts.

To ascertain this, several factors need to be in place:

- 1) One option cannot outweigh the other option (were it not for your choosing)
- 2) The reason for choosing it must be because of you and not because of the thing you are choosing.
- 3) Your choice cannot be based on your feelings, logic, and even your wants and pleasures, it must be a raw reflection of you!

## 1) The options must be equal

*The Rebbe, Igros Kodosh Vol. 3 letter 439*

אמיתית ענין הבחירה היינו שמצד סכום כל הענינים הן ולאן שקולים אצלו. לדוגמא: אדם גוע ברעב שיש לפניו כבשן אש בווער ושולחן ערוך מעדני מלכים יכול או להשקיש רעבוננו או להשליך עצמו בכבשן האש. אבל אין זה ענין בחירה אמיתית שמגיע ע"ז שכר ועונש.

*The ultimate concept of choice is when, after all the reckoning, yes and no are the same to him. For example: A starving person who has before him a fiery furnace and a table laden with royal delicacies. He can choose to satisfy his hunger or to throw himself into the fiery furnace. This is not a true choice which is deserving of reward or punishment.*

## 2) The choice must come from you and cannot be because of any advantage in the thing you choose:

*The Rebbe, Lekutei Sichos Vol. 31, Pg. 11*

ידוע שאמיתית ענין הבחירה הוא כשהדבר נבחר רק ברצון הבוחר ולא מחמת איזו מעלה בדבר הנבחר. כי כאשר רוצה דבר מפני מעלתו

של הדבר ההוא, אין לקראה בחירה (חפשית), שהרי אז ההכרעה היא לא מצד בחירת הבוחר, אלא מצד מעלת הדבר הנבחר.

*It is known that the concept of choice is when the choice is only because of the will of the person choosing and not because of any advantage in that which is being chosen. This is because when you want something because of the advantages of that thing—you cannot call it (free) choice, since the resolution is not made because of the chooser's choice, but because of the advantages of the thing being chosen.*

### **3) Your choice cannot be based on your feelings, logic, and even your wants and pleasures, it must be a raw reflection of you!**

*The Rebbe, Maamarim Melukatim, vol. 3, pg. 71*

כאשר שכלו מחייב שדבר זה ראוי לבחור בו, וגם כשהוא רוצה באיזה דבר (רצון שלמעלה מהשכל), הרי הוא מוכרח בזה ואין זה בחירה חפשית, ואמיתית ענין הבחירה הוא כשהבחירה שלו היא לא מצד השכל וגם לא מצד הרצון, אלא שכך בוחר בבחירתו החפשית.

*When logic dictates that this is something worthy of choosing, and even when he wants something (at the level of the will which transcends intellect), he is forced by [the logic or will] and it is not free choice. The true concept of choice is when his choice is not because of intellect, and not even because of will, but because that is what he chooses with his free*

*choice.*

The problem with free choice is that it is difficult to tell when the choice is a reflection of emotion, reason, natural instincts etc. and when it comes from the essence of one's being.

The only situation in which you can tell whether a decision was made using free choice and not for some alternative reason, is when the options are absolutely equal and the only way to differentiate between them is by random selection. In such a situation, if the person is nevertheless particular about one option and not the other because that is the essence of who he is, then we know that it is of his free choosing.

### **Rigging The Lottery**

In the following quote from a Maamer, the Rebbe compares free choice to a lottery in which all options have an equal chance at every level. However, what makes free choice different to a lottery is that there even when all options are the same, there is still a difference to the chooser at the level of the essence of their being:

*The Rebbe, Maamarim Melukatim, vol. 3, pg. 71*

בבחירה ישנם שני הענינים. הדרגא הנפש שלמעלה משכל שלגבה שני הדברים הם בשוה - דרגת הגורל, וזה שהוא בוחר כמו שרוצה (הגם ששני הדברים הם שוים (לגבי)) הוא בא מעצם הנפש. וע"י הבחירה, ההמשכה מהעצם להדרגא דגורל (הדרגא שלגבה שני הדברים הם בשוה), גם הגורל (הגם שמצד עצמו אפשר להיות בשני האופנים) הוא כפי הבחירה.

*In free choice there are two components. The level within the person that transcends intellect in*

*relation to which both options are equal - the level of the “lottery”, and the fact that he chooses as he wishes (even though the two things are the same (in relation to him)) this comes from the essence of the soul.*

*Through the choosing, he draws down from the essence to the level of the lottery (the level at which both things are considered equally), so that even the lottery (although as far as it is concerned both options are possible) is consistent with the choosing.*

I.e., in free choosing there is a state at which all options are alike and the only possibility appears to be random selection. Only at such a level, the person’s essential choosing—his “free choice”—becomes applicable.

### **Every Will Contains a Hidden Reason**

To further understand the connection and difference between something you want (your Ratzon) and your capacity for free choice:

In a series of maamorim (a hemshech) devoted to the subject of free choice, the Rebbe Rashab explains that behind every want is a hidden reason that is often too abstract and fuzzy to be articulated clearly, but has enough reason to give you the conviction to want what you want and not something else:

*Rebbe Rashab, Sefer Hamaamorim 5660, pg. 9*

העקשות כאשר אדם מתעקש באיזה ענין שרוצה כך וכך דוקא וכמה שיסבירו לו ע"פ השכל שצריך להיות באופן אחר לא יועיל כלל וירצה

דוקא באופן זה ולא באו"א ולכאו' זהו רק מצד תוקף הרצון לבד אמנם בהכרח לומר שיש בזה ג"כ טעם והו"ע טעם כמום לרצון שהרי אנו רואין שיכול להיות שבמשך זמן יחלף רצונו ואם נא' שבתחלה הי' הדבר אצלו בבחי' רצון לבד היינו מצד המדות טבעיים א"כ איך יתחלף במשך הזמן כי הרי הדבר האהוב והשנאוי מצד הטבע ממש לא יתחלף לעולם כו' אלא בהכרח לומר שגם מתחלה הי' בזה איזה טעם אלא שהוא טעם כמום

ונעלם שאינו בגילוי גם לעצמו היינו שאינו בבחי' גילוי טעם ושכל אצלו כ"א וואס ער האט א גישמאק אין דער זאך כשיהי' באופן כך וכך דוקא ומשו"ז הוא רוצה באופן כך וכך דוקא הרי שגם בהרצון שלמע' מטו"ד יש בזה בהי' השכל וטעם כמום בהעלם

*With regard to the stubbornness when a person is persistent about something they want to be just so, and as much as you explain to them that logically it should be otherwise, it doesn't help at all and they continue to want it no other way. Seemingly, this is merely a result of a strong will; however, there must also be reason for it. This is the hidden reason behind one's will. As we see, one's will can change over time, and if it were originally to be purely a want (ratzon), i.e., a result of his natural instinct, if so, how could it possibly change over time? For something that you like or dislike in your nature would remain the same and couldn't possibly change forever. Rather, it must be, that even initially there was reason to it, albeit a hidden abstract reason which is not known even to the person himself, i.e., it is not revealed to him as*

*reason and intellect, only as something that he enjoys.*

This seems to contradict what the Rebbe explained earlier that even your wants can get in the way of free choice?

The question is: What is the hidden reason behind the want? Sometimes, the reason is a reflection of your nature and instincts, your predetermined hard-wiring that you have no control over, and sometimes it is a reflection of you. Only when it is a reflection of your essence, then it is considered free choice.

### **When is there ever free choice?**

*The Rebbe, Igros Kodesh, vol. 4 letter 1089*

ומובן הדבר כי בחירה הפשית לגמרי אינה אלא בבורא עצמו, שהוא אין דבר מכריחו ח"ו, ולכן בחירתו הפשית, משא"כ בכל הנבראים שאי אפשר שיהיו חפשים לגמרי, כיון שסו"ס טבעם או שכלם או רצונם ותאותם מכריחים אותם לעשות פעולה זו ולא הפכה. וגם אם ההכרח בא מבפנים, הרי גם אז אין הבחירה הפשית. וכיון שאין בחירה הפשית שייכת אלא במהות ועצמות א"ס ב"ה שהוא תכלית השלימות, הרי גם למטה אין לזה מקום אלא באדם הנעשה בצלמנו כדמותנו, אשר אתם דוקא קרואים אדם. -

*It is understood that absolute free choice only exists for the Creator Himself, Who nothing can force, therefore, His choices are free.*

*However, for all created beings, it is impossible for them to be absolutely free, since, at the end of the day, their nature, or their intellect, or their will, or*

*their desires force them to do a specific act and not the opposite.*

*And even when the coercion stems from within, the choice is still not free.*

*Therefore, since free choice is only applicable in the infinite light of Hashem's Atzmus, blessed is He, who is the epitome of completion, In the nether realms too it has no place aside for in man who is created "in Our form like Our image," and specifically "you" [Yidden] are called Adam—man.*

The Rebbe explains that absolute freedom only exists in the realm of Hashem's Essence where there are absolutely no limitations.

However, since the essence of our souls are one with Hashem's Essence, we too have the potential to access this freedom.

When do we have opportunity to exercise this freedom?

## **Free Choice only in matters of Torah and Mitzvos**

*Talmud Brochos 33b*

הכל בידי שמים חוץ מיראת שמים

*Everything is in the hands of Heaven except for the fear of Heaven.*

Yiddishkeit is essentially deterministic in all matters except for matters pertaining to Torah and Mitzvos.

Chassidus explains that only Yidden have free choice, since the essence of their soul is rooted in Atzmus (the only absolutely free chooser); however, this is only in matters pertaining to their connection to Hashem, i.e., whether to do a mitzvah or to refrain from doing an aveirah.

Following this logic, there can be no free choice to do an aveirah since you cannot connect to the source of your neshomah in Atzmus and the place of free choice without doing the mitzvah.

If someone ended up doing the aveirah or not doing the mitzvah, they succumbed to their desires, tendencies, wants etc, and decided not to activate their free choice to do the mitzvah. While the reward for doing the mitzvah is for choosing to do it utilizing your power to choose freely, the punishment for an aveirah is not because you chose to do it, but because you had the choice to do the mitzvah and decided not to activate the capacity for free choice in your neshomah, but instead followed the coercion of the evil inclination.

## **Free Choice = Choosing You**

What is free choice?

Free choice is when you choose without external conviction. Only when the choice reflects who you are—then it comes from your essence.

What does this mean?

When you choose to get out of bed in the morning, there is a reason that motivated it, whether it is to go to work to make a living, or because you've slept enough and are not tired anymore. It is not a free choice, it a decision made by a reason or temptation of sorts.

The most common situation that qualifies as free choice is when you are tempted (or have reason) to do one thing (an aveirah) and have no compulsion to do the other (the mitzvah), only that the mitzvah (your connection to Hashem) is who you are and you choose it because it is who you are—i.e., an absolutely free choice.

When you are tempted to do an aveirah or not to do a mitzvah in private where nobody will know (so there are no social compulsions) and you choose not to do the aveirah or to do the mitzvah because that is who you are, then there is no reason for your actions other than the fact that you are a part of G-d, and the mitzvah is your connection to the essence of who you are. This is the only situation of true free choice that exists in the human realm.

### **If so, do non-Jews have free choice?**

*The Rebbe, Igros Kodesh, vol.16, letter 5871*

ענין השכר ועונש באוה"ע יש לבאר בשנים: א) שכר ועונש בנדון שלהם אינו אלא שם המושאל משכר ועונש דישראל, אבל אמתתם הוא באופן דסיבה ומסובב, וע"ד תינוק קטן התוחב אצבעו במים רותחים. ב) שבאותם הענינים שנצטוו עליהם, ז.א. מצות בני נח (ביחד עם) הציווי עצמו נותן האפשרות לשני הדרכים, ז.א. מגביה אותם מטבע שלהם ומעמידם באופן שיש מקום לבחירה, וכמובן ממאמר המשנה דשכר מצוה מצוה עצמה, דזה עצמו שהחכם גדול מצוה לאיש הפשוט איזה ענין, מקשרו עם החכם גדול, והרי כל ענין קשור מביא לנקודה משותפת בין המקושרים.

*The concept of reward and punishment with regards to non-Jews can be explained in two ways: 1) Reward and punishment for them is*

*only a borrowed term from the Jewish concept of reward and punishment. However [reward and punishment] really just work in a manner of consequence, similar to a child who sticks his finger into boiling water. 2) In matters that they are commanded about, i.e., the mitzvos of the sons of Noach, the instruction itself provides the possibility for two choices, i.e., it raises them to transcend their nature and puts them into a situation in which there is place for free choice, and as is understood from the statement of the Mishnah, the reward for a Mitzvah is the Mitzvah itself. The mere fact that a great and wise man instructs such a thing to a simple person, connects him with the wise man, and every connection creates common ground between those who are connected...*

How does reward and punishment work for non-Jews (if they don't really have free choice)?

The Rebbe provides two possibilities:

1) They don't have free choice and they aren't rewarded or punished. Everything that happens to them is merely a consequence of their actions.

2) They have free choice, the same free choice that Jews have for Torah and mitzvos, and they only have this choice in their mitzvos that they are obliged to fulfil. This can be understood from the Rambam who writes that every Jew has an obligation to convince non-Jews to keep their mitzvos "because they were given at Har Sinai." In other words, they

don't have their own connection to Hashem through their Mitzvos (since they were commanded at Har Sinai to do their Mitzvos when Hashem addressed the Yidden) and their connection to Hashem is therefore through the Yidden's connection to Hashem. Their free choice and concept of reward and punishment is also a Jewish concept that they can tap into when they fulfil their mitzvot because Hashem commanded them to the Yidden at Har Sinai.

There are other instances when there is no free choice. For there to be free choice, there must be uncertainty. For this reason, Tzaddikim have no opportunity to actualize their power of free choice (this doesn't mean they aren't capable of free choice, only that they never have occasion to do so) since they are always clear on what Hashem wants them to do at all times.

### **Will we have free choice when Moshiach comes?**

This is also why, when Moshiach comes, there will be no room for anyone to utilize their ability for free choice, since everything will be clear and there will be no room for doubt:

*Ramban, Devorim 30:6*

בימות המשיח תהיה הבחירה בטוב להם טבע... לא יהיה באדם חפץ  
אבל יעשה בטבעו המעשה הראוי

*In the times of Moshiach, choosing good will come naturally to them ... Man will not suffer from temptation; rather, he will do the correct thing by nature.*

## Summary

While free choice is a pillar of the Jewish belief system upon which the potential for reward and punishment relies, the view of Chassidus is deterministic in the sense that almost every choice is predetermined by some preexisting cause. The only exception is when a Jew chooses to perform a mitzvah or avoids doing an aveirah against all odds. This is because then the reason why you chose the mitzvah is because the essence of your soul is one with Atzmus and only Atzmus is truly free.

## Part Two: Hashem's Foreknowledge

Perhaps one of the most perplexing philosophical dilemmas is: How can I have a free choice if Hashem already knows what I'm going to choose?

This paradox is outlined in Pirkei Avos:

*Pirkei Avos, 3:15*

הכל צפוי, והרשות נתונה...

*All is foreseen, yet free will is given...*

While there are many approaches taken to answering this question, for the most part, the answer remains beyond the reach of human comprehension. With that in mind, we will now explore several approaches to dealing with this question:

### **Approach #1: The question is not “how can we choose?”, the question should be “how does Hashem know?”**

The most classical source for the question is the Rambam who poses the question in the following manner:

שמא תאמר והלא הקב"ה יודע כל מה שיהיה וקודם שיהיה ידע שזה יהיה צדיק או רשע או לא ידע, אם ידע שהוא יהיה צדיק אי אפשר שלא יהיה צדיק ואם תאמר שידע שיהיה צדיק ואפשר שיהיה רשע הרי לא ידע הדבר על בוריו, דע שתשובת שאלה זו ארוכה מארץ מדה ורחבה מני ים וכמה עיקרים גדולים והררים רמים תלויים בה אבל צריך אתה לידע ולהבין בדבר זה שאני אומר, כבר בארנו בפ' שני מהלכות יסודי התורה שהקב"ה אינו יודע מדיעה שהיא חוץ ממנו כבני אדם שהם ודעתם שנים, אלא הוא יתעלה שמו ודעתו אחד ואין דעתו של אדם יכולה להשיג דבר זה על בוריו וכשם שאין כח באדם להשיג ולמצוא אמתת הבורא שנאמר כי לא יראני האדם וחי אין כח באדם להשיג ולמצוא דעתו של בורא, הוא שהנביא אמר כי לא מחשבתי מחשבותיכם ולא דרכיכם דרכי, וכיון שכן הוא אין בנו כח לידע היאך ידע הקב"ה כל הברואים והמעשים

*One might ask: Since The Holy One, blessed be He, knows everything that will occur before it comes to pass, does He or does He not know whether a person will be righteous or wicked?*

*If He knows that he will be righteous, [it appears] impossible for him not to be righteous. However, if one would say that despite His knowledge that he would be righteous, it is possible for him to be wicked, then His knowledge would be incomplete.*

*Know that the resolution to this question [can be described as]: "Its measure is longer than the earth and broader than the sea." Many great and fundamental principles and lofty concepts are*

*dependent upon it. However, the statements that I will make must be known and understood [as a basis for the comprehension of this matter].*

*As explained in the second chapter of Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah, The Holy One, blessed be He, does not know with a knowledge that is external from Him as do men, whose knowledge and selves are two [different entities]. Rather, He, may His name be praised, and His knowledge are one.*

*Human knowledge cannot comprehend this concept in its entirety for just as it is beyond the potential of man to comprehend and conceive the essential nature of the Creator, as [Exodus 33:20] states: “No man will perceive, Me and live,” so, too, it is beyond man’s potential to comprehend and conceive the Creator’s knowledge. This was the intent of the prophet’s [Isaiah 55:8] statements: “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor your ways, My ways.”*

*Accordingly, we do not have the potential to conceive how The Holy One, blessed be He, knows all the creations and their deeds.*

The Rambam’s position is that the question is not “how do I still have free choice if Hashem already knows what I will choose?” The question is: “how does Hashem know what I will choose before I have chosen it?”

The question of how Hashem knows, the Rambam explains, is beyond our comprehension. We simply do not have the mental capacity know.

In this sense, the Rambam leaves the question open without answer.

The Raavad, in his remarks on the Rambam, is not satisfied with the Rambam's approach of leaving the questions without an answer. Instead, he proposes a simple solution to provide a rationale to the answer to the question and satisfy our curiosity:

## **Approach #2: As the star gazer knows what will happen before it happens**

*Hasagos HaRaavad, to Rambam ibid.*

לא נהג זה המחבר מנהג החכמים שאין אדם מתחיל בדבר ולא ידע להשלימו והוא החל בשאלות קושיות והניח הדבר בקושיא והחזירו לאמונה וטוב היה לו להניח הדבר בתמימות התמימים ולא יעורר לבם ויניח דעתם בספק ואולי שעה אחת יבא הרהור בלבם על זה, ואע"פ שאין תשובה נצחת על זה טוב הוא לסמוך לו קצת תשובה ואומר, אם היו צדקת האדם ורשעתו תלויים בגזירת הבורא ית' היינו אומרים שידיעתו היא גזירתו והיתה לנו השאלה קשה מאד ועכשיו שהבורא הסיר זו הממשלה מידו ומסרה ביד האדם עצמו אין ידיעתו גזירה אבל היא כידיעת האצטגנינים שיודעים מכח אחר מה יהיו דרכיו של זה והדבר ידוע שכל מקרה האדם קטן וגדול מסרו הבורא בכח המזלות אלא שנתן בו השכל להיותו מחזיקו לצאת מתחת המזל והוא הכח הנתון באדם להיותו טוב או רע והבורא יודע כח המזל ורגעיו אם יש כח בשכל להוציאו לזה מידו אם לא וזו הידיעה אינה גזירה...

*This author (the Rambam) did not follow the*

*custom of the sages not to start something without knowing how to complete it. He begins with difficult questions leaving it unresolved and recommends faith (in place of reason). He would have been better off to leave the matter to the simplicity of simpletons without arousing their hearts and leaving their minds in doubt that perhaps one day a thought will enter their hearts about this.*

*Although there is no conclusive answer for this, it is better to rely on a partial answer and say: If man's righteousness and wickedness were dependant upon a decree of the Creator, Blessed is He, we would say that His knowledge is His decree and we would have an extremely perplexing question. However, how that the Creation removed this dominion from His hand and handed it to man himself, His knowledge is not a decree, but as the knowledge of stargazers that know from elsewhere what will be the ways of so and so.*

*It is known that all that transpires to man, small or great, the Creator entrusted to the force of the constellations, but also gave it intellect to enable it to leave the influence of the constellation. This is the ability given to man to be good or evil, and the Creator knows the force of the constellation and its moments, if the mind has the ability to remove him from its grip or not. This knowledge is not a*

*decree...*

The Raavad presents an analogy for us to somewhat relate to Hashem's foreknowledge, without denying our ability to choose freely. His argument is: The star gazer might know what we will choose, but that does not make the decision for us, we still have the freedom to choose.

The reason why the Raavad doesn't call this a conclusive answer is because it doesn't explain to us rationally how they can coexist, it only provides an analogy to show that they can without explaining how.

Ultimately, we cannot know how Hashem knows what we will choose (as the Rambam put it), just as we don't know how stargazers can tell the future.

Why does the Rambam raise this massive question and then tell us that the answer is beyond the reach of our comprehension? And why does the Raavad criticize the Rambam for asking the question and shrug it off with an analogy that doesn't fully answer the question?

The Rebbe explains the logic behind this difference in approach between the Rambam and Raavad to this question:

### **Why are the Rambam and Ravaad in disagreement?**

The Rebbe explains that there is a fundamental difference in opinion between the Rambam and the Raavad as to whether we are obliged to try to understand things about Hashem that we will never be able to fully wrap our brain around.

The Rambam raises the question because he believes there is a mitzvah to try to the best of our ability to seek to understand

even that which lies beyond our comprehension (such as how Hashem knows what will be before it happens).

The Raavad disagrees with the Rambam and maintains that there is no mitzvah to try to understand that which we ultimately will never be able to understand. To the Raavad, questions such as understanding Hashem's foreknowledge is a futile waste of time and only works to confuse people and raise doubts in their minds. He therefore offers an analogy in an attempt to get people to dismiss the question so that people will not ponder its perplexity too deeply. The purpose of his answer is to distract us from the question.

Elsewhere, the Rebbe explains that Hashem knows what will be at different levels. At the level that transcends the Tzimtzum, there we have no idea how Hashem's knowledge works. However, within the realm of time and creation, the analogy of the star gazer can help us understand how Hashem knows what will be without constricting our ability to choose.

### **Approach #3: The foreknowledge is a result of the choice, not its cause**

*The Rebbe, Igros Kodesh vol. 3 pg. 31*

הבחירה היא הסיבה והידיעה המסובב והוא ממש כמו הידיעה הבאה אחר הבחירה שפשיטא שאין סותרים זה את זה מפני שהבחירה היתה חפשית כי לא הושפעה מהידיעה ואדרבה הידיעה תלויה בתוצאות הבחירה וזהו אופן כביכול ידיעת הקב"ה וכמאמר רז"ל ירושלמי ר"ה פ"א ה"ג שם סוף יומא הקב"ה רואה את הנולד ואם תאמר כיון שהבחירה היא חפשית לגמרי א"כ איך אפשר לדעת מקודם במה יבחר על זה תירץ הרמב"ם שם שאין ידיעת הקב"ה כידעיתנו ואין בנו כח לידיע איך ידע הקב"ה

*Free choice is the cause and foreknowledge is the effect and it is just like knowledge that follows a choice that obviously don't contradict each other since the choice was free because it was not influenced by the knowledge and to the contrary, the knowledge depends on the outcome of the choice.*

*This is the way, so to speak, in which Hashem knows [what will be] and as the statement of the Yerushalmi (Rosh Hashanah 1:3 and at the end of Yuma) Hashem see that which will be born.*

*And if you say: Since the choice is absolutely free, therefore, how is it possible to know in advance what will be chosen? To this the Rambam (ibid.) answered that Hashem's knowledge is not like our knowledge and we lack the ability to know how Hashem knows.*

#### **Approach #4: Hashem's foreknowledge is abstract**

*The Rebbe, Igros Kodesh vol. 3 pg. 49*

*איך אפשר שידיעת הבורא המהווה והמקיים את כל הנבראים בכל רגע לא תשפיע עליהם כלל והלא מחשבתו של הקב"ה בוראת עולמות ולמעלה אין כח חסר פועל וע"ז בא התירוץ שידיעה זו היא בדרך מקיף כו' וכמשנ"ת בדא"ה*

*How is it possible that the Creator's knowledge,*

*that creates and keeps all the creations in existence at every moment, will not have any influence over them at all? Doesn't Hashem's thoughts create worlds? and above, potential doesn't lack actualization!?! And the answer to this is that this knowledge is in an all encompassing (superficial) manner, as explained in Chassidus.*

According to this answer, Hashem's knowledge remains in the abstract (makif) so that it doesn't inhibit our freedom to choose.

### **Approach #5: "Is known" doesn't mean that "you know"**

*Rebbe Rashab, Sefer Hamaamarim 5672 vol. 2, pg. 1123*

ענין ידיעה ובחירה שהידיעה אינה מכרחת הבחירה...יש יודע ויודע, דיודע הוא בבחי' התלבשות שמוכרח להיות כן, ויודע הוא במדר' הגבוהות ביותר שאין הדבר מוכרח

*The idea of foreknowledge and free choice in which the foreknowledge does not force the choice...there is [a scenario in which a person is a] knower and there is a [scenario in which a matter is] known. A knower in a state of being invested [into a specific outcome] that it will certainly be that way, whereas when something is known in the loftiest of realms then the outcome is not certain.*

The Rebbe Rashab explains that the fact that what you will choose is known does not affect your choice unless it is you

who knows.

### **Tzaddik Verasha Lo Ka'amar: Hashem (knows but) doesn't say**

Chassidus often illustrates the explanation of this idea by citing the following Gemorah, explaining that everything is predestined and communicated to the angel what will be with every person, except for righteousness or wickedness which remains undecided until the person chooses. Chassidus points out that while Hashem knows what will be, He does not communicate it because then it moves from just being known, to becoming something that was communicated. Once destiny is communicated, free choice is removed. Notice the language of the Talmud in the following anecdote “Lo Ka'amar” that it is not “mentioned” or “communicated” (not to say that Hashem doesn't know [chas vesholom])

*Talmud, Nidah 16b*

דריש ר' חנינא בר פפא: אותו מלאך הממונה על ההריון לילה שמו, ונוטל טפה ומעמידה לפני הקב"ה, ואומר לפניו: רבש"ע, טפה זו מה תהא עליה? גבור או חלש, חכם או טיפש, עשיר או עני? ואילו רשע או צדיק - לא קאמר, כדר' חנינא; דא"ר חנינא: הכל בידי שמים - חוץ מיראת שמים, שנאמר (דברים י') ועתה ישראל מה ה' אלהיך שואל מעמך כי אם ליראה וגו'.

*R' Chanina bar Pappa expounded: The angel appointed to oversee the conception is named Lailah, [This angel] takes a drop and sets it before the Holy One, Blessed is He, and says before Him: Master of the Universe! - This drop, what is its destiny? Mighty or weak? Intelligent or foolish?*

*Wealthy or poor? But [the angel] doesn't mention wicked or righteous. This accords with R' Chanina's [principle]; for R' Chanina stated: Everything is in the hands of Heaven except for the fear of heaven as it states: And now, Israel, what does Hashem you G\_d ask of you, but to fear [Him] etc.*

### **Hashgocha Protis and Free Choice?**

Hashgocha protis (divine providence) means that every detail is divinely ordained, free choice means that some decisions are left up to us. How can these two principles coexist?

### **Approach #1: Hashgocha=According to Hashem's wishes, not in Hashem's control (Hashem wants man to be in control)**

One approach the Rebbe takes to resolving this conflict takes a deeper look at the concept of hashgocha protis(see Lekutei Sichos vol. 5 Lech Lecha):

Traditionally we understand hashgocha protis to mean that every little thing that happens is because Hashem made it happen.

Why does Hashem make things happen the way they happen? Why does Hashem even care about the little details?

The answer is that hashgocha protis really means that the world was created to facilitate the performance of Torah and Mitzvos and it cannot budge from its purpose.

Now, since Torah and Mitzvos were designed to be performed by way of the person's free choice, and hashgocha protis means that the world operates in a way that makes the

performance of Torah and Mitzvos possible, the principle of hashgocha protis itself requires that man have free choice with regard to Torah and Mitzvos.

In other words, the details of the way in which the world operates are determined by Hashem to facilitate man's performance of a mitzvah, whereas the choice to perform the mitzvah is left to man.

## **Approach #2: Hashem is capable of the impossible**

In a Hadran (siyum) on the Rambam, the Rebbe once explained that Hashem is capable of impossibilities (nimnah Hanimnaos), therefore, while it may be puzzling to us, it is not a problem for Hashem:

*The Rebbe Toras Menachem 5746, v. 2 pg. 731*

אינו מובן: הן אמת שגם הבחירה שיש לאדם היא מצד רצון הקב"ה, מ"מ, לאחר שניתנה בחירה לאדם לעשות כל מה שחפץ, נמצא לכאורה, שכעת יכול לעשות מה שהוא (האדם) רוצה שלא ברשות קונו וכיצד יתכן דבר כזה - היפך ענין אחדותו ית'!?

ויש לומר הביאור בזה: מכיון שהוא ית' נמנע הנמנעות - הרי לא שייך לגביו שום הגבלות ח"ו, כולל גם "הגבלות" אלו שמצד י"ג עיקרי הדת. ודבר זה מובן בפשטות אפילו בלי אמונה, דמכיון שהוא "אויבערשטער", היינו, למעלה משכל האדם, הרי לא יתכן ששכל האדם "יפסוק" עליו ית', שביחס לענינים מסויימים מוכרח להיות כפי הבנתו!! ובמילא: מה שכל הנבראים אין להם כח הבחירה, ופועלים בכל הפרטים רק כפי רצונו ית' (אף שזהו מיסודי הדת, ואלו האומרים שיש מהנמצאים שיכול לעשות כרצונו הו"ע של ע"ז וכפירה באחדותו ית') - אין זה שהדבר מוכרח כן, רק שכך עלה ברצונו ית'; משא"כ

בנוגע לאדם, שרצונו וחפצו של הקב"ה הוא שיהי' לו בחירה חפשית -  
הרי פשיטא שביכלתו ית' לעשות כל מה שירצה, ואין מי שיעכב על  
ידו ח"ו

*It is not understood: Although it is true that man's free choice is because Hashem wills it so, nevertheless, once man is granted free choice to do anything he wishes, it seemingly turns out that he can now do what he wants without his Creator's permission. How could such a thing be? -- The opposite of the concept of Hashem's Oneness?!*

*We can explain the answer to this: Since Hashem is capable of the impossible - no limitations can be attributed to Him Chas Veshalom, even such "limitations" as the thirteen principles of faith.*

*This is understood even without having to arrive at faith, since He is "The One Above," i.e., higher than man's intellect, man's intellect therefore has no ability to place "decrees" upon Him, blessed is He, that when it comes to certain things [Hashem] is forced to be the way [man] understands!!*

*It follows therefore that the fact that other creations don't have the ability to choose and are subservient in all ways to the will of Hashem (even though it is one of the foundations of our faith, and those who say that there are creatures that can do as they wish are guilty of idol worship and denying*

*Hashem's Oneness), it doesn't mean that it must be that way. It only means that this is what entered Hashem's will; which is not the case for man who Hashem wanted to have free choice. Obviously he has the ability to do anything he wishes, and nothing can stop him, chas veshalom.*

The Rebbe reminds us that ultimately we cannot limit Hashem to our understanding because Hashem is capable of the impossible. Therefore, if it doesn't make sense how we can have free choice and have everything guided by Hashem's will at the same time, that's our problem, not Hashem's.

The same approach can be applied to the issue of free choice. Even if to us it may seem impossible that Hashem can know what we will choose in advance of us choosing it and still allow us to exercise free choice, Hashem is capable of impossibilities.

### **Concluding Question:**

Based on what you have learned, how would you now answer the question: How can we have real free choice if Hashem already knows what we will choose?

### **Take-Aways**

- » Free choice is a foundation of Judaism
- Reward and punishment depend on the existence of free choice
- » Emotions, intellect, wills, and desires can be coercing forces that are not reflective of man's free choice
- » Only Hashem is truly unlimited and has the power to

choose freely

- » In matters of Mitzvos a person can exercise free choice when his choice is motivated by his essential connection to Hashem
- » Hashem's foreknowledge of everything that will be does not do away with man's free will to choose since:
  - » Rambam: The question is not how we still have free choice, the question is how Hashem knows in advance (and that we don't quite understand)
  - » Raavad: Just as a star gazer knows what will be and that doesn't stop people from making choices
  - » Hashem's knowledge is a product of your choice not the cause for your choice
  - » Hashem's knowledge is in an abstract realm (makif)
  - » Foreknowledge is only a problem when the person choosing knows, whereas Hashem's knowledge is not communicated (tzaddik verasha lo ka'amar)
- » Hashgocha protis is not in contradiction to man's free choice because:
  - » The whole idea of hashghocha protis is for the world to facilitate the performance of Torah and Mitzvos and Hashem wants Torah and Mitzvos to be performed specifically through man's free choosing.
  - » Hashem is capable of the impossible.