



The Prophecy of Israel's Enslavement  
By David Silverberg

We read in Parashat Lekh-Lekha of the *berit bein ha-betarim* (literally, the “covenant between the pieces”), the prophecy conveyed to Avraham during which the patriarch learns of the oppression and subjugation his descendants will suffer: “He [God] said to Avram: You must know that your offspring will be foreigners in a land not theirs, and they [the inhabitants of that land] will subjugate them and oppress them for four hundred years. But also the nation that they will serve I shall judge...” (Bereishit 15:13-14). Avraham is informed that his descendants will live as foreigners amongst a people that will oppress them, until God will ultimately exact retribution from the oppressing nation. The fulfillment of this prophecy, of course, occurred with *Benei Yisrael's* enslavement in Egypt; as God predicted to Avraham, the oppressors – the Egyptians – were ultimately punished for their mistreatment of the Israelites, enduring deadly plagues and the drowning of their army in the Sea of Reeds.

Maimonides discusses these verses amidst his presentation of the principle commonly known as *bechira chofshit* – free will. In several places in his writings, Maimonides elaborates on the basic tenet of man's free will to choose between good and evil, and adamantly rejects the deterministic theories prevalent in other ancient beliefs. We cite here several passages from his discussion in the *Hilkhot Teshuva* section of *Mishneh Torah*:

Do not let it cross your mind that which the fools of the nations of the world and most ignoramuses among Israel claim, that the Almighty decrees about a person when he is first created that he will be righteous or evil. This is not so; rather, every person is capable of being righteous like our teacher Moshe, or wicked like Yerovam [founder of the Northern Kingdom of Israel], wise or foolish, merciful or cruel, miserly or generous, and likewise all other qualities. There is no one forcing him, decreeing upon him, or pulling him to one of the two paths; only he, by himself and by his will, turns to whichever path he chooses...

This matter constitutes a fundamental precept, and it is the foundation of the Torah and commandments...

Had the Almighty decreed about a person that he be righteous or wicked, or had there been something that pulled a person right from his birth to one path...how would He command us through the prophets, “Do this, and do not do that”; “Improve your conduct, and do not continue your evil” – while it was already decreed from the time of birth, or his nature pulls him towards something from which he cannot move? And what place would there be for the entire Torah? With what kind of judgment and justice would He punish the wicked or grant reward to the righteous?

(Hilkhot Teshuva 5:2-4)

Maimonides cogently argues that the entire concept of a divine instruction, with the promise of reward for obedience and punishment for disobedience, is predicated upon the notion of free will. God could not command a person to act in a certain way, and most certainly could not reward or punish him for his compliance with or violation of that command, had man's conduct be predetermined. By necessity, then, the Torah – which, after all, deals primarily with the divine instruction and the consequences of Israel's loyalty or betrayal – presumes the basic tenet of *bechira chofshit*.

Maimonides returns to this theme in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (3:17):

The theory of man's perfectly free will is one of the fundamental principles of the Law of our Teacher Moses, and of those who follow the Law. According to this principle man does what is in his power to do, by his nature, his choice, and his will; and his action is not due to any faculty created for this purpose... This is the Will of God; that is to say, it is due to the eternal divine will that all living beings should move freely, and that man should have power to act according to his will or choice within the limits of his capacity.

Maimonides discusses this doctrine also in his famous introduction to his commentary to Masekhet Avot, known as *Shemona Perakim* (chapter 8).

However, as Maimonides notes later in Hilkhot Teshuva, God's prophecy to Avraham concerning his descendants' enslavement might, at first glance, disprove the doctrine of free will. In these verses God appears to preordain Israel's mistreatment at the hands of the Egyptians, such that they were impelled, by force of the divine decree, to enslave Avraham's descendants. Why, then, were they deserving of such harsh punishment, or, for that matter, any punishment at all? And how does Maimonides' firm belief in free will accommodate Egypt's seemingly predetermined cruelty towards the Israelites?

Maimonides addresses this difficulty together with a similar question that emerges from God's prediction to Moshe shortly before his death: "Behold, you will lie with your fathers, and this nation will then go astray after the foreign gods of the land into which it is coming..." (Devarim 31:16). Here, too, God foretells iniquity, seemingly in direct contradiction to the doctrine of free will. Maimonides provides the following solution to both difficulties:

...because He did not decree on a certain, particular person that he will be the one who goes astray. Rather, had any one of those who went astray to worship idols wished not to worship, he would not have worshipped. The Creator informed him only of how the world will run. What does this resemble? [It resembles] one who says, "This nation will contain both righteous and wicked people." It cannot be said about the wicked person that it has already been decreed that he will be wicked, just because He informed Moshe that there will be wicked people among Israel... The same is true about the Egyptians. Had any one of those who oppressed and mistreated Israel not wanted to mistreat them, he would have been entitled [not to], for He did not decree on a specific person, but rather informed him [Avraham] that his descendants will, in the future, be subjugated in a land that is not theirs.

(Hilkhot Teshuva 6:5)

According to Maimonides, God's prophecy to Avraham predetermined only the eventual enslavement of his progeny; God did not ordain that specific individuals would commit crimes against *Benei Yisrael*. The doctrine of free will means that no individual is coerced by any external force on his psyche to act a certain way; the Almighty's predetermination that a nation will someday enslave the Israelites in a foreign land is not at all inconsistent with this precept. Likewise, God informed Moshe only that many among *Benei Yisrael* will embrace idolatry after his death; this is not equivalent to determining that a given individual will worship idols.

## **Free Will & Divine Knowledge**

In order to understand Maimonides' comments more clearly, let us turn our attention to a question raised by several later writers concerning the necessity for this entire discussion. One chapter earlier in Hilkhot Teshuva (5:5), Maimonides addresses the famous philosophical anomaly often referred to as *bechira ve-yedi'a* – the conflict between divine foreknowledge and free will. If God knows in advance whether one will act rightly or wrongly, then how can the individual be said to act with free will? Isn't his decision preordained by divine knowledge?

Maimonides applies to this question the description in the Book of Iyov (11:9), “Its measure is longer than the earth, and wider than the sea,” adding that “several major principles and tall mountains hinge on it.” Despite this somewhat daunting introduction, he proceeds to present a fairly straightforward solution to this dilemma:

We have already explained in the second chapter of *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* that the Almighty does not “know” in the sense of knowledge that is outside of Him, like human beings, who are separate from their knowledge. Rather, He, may His Name be exalted, and His knowledge are one, and the human mind cannot properly grasp this concept. And just as a person is incapable of grasping and understanding the true [essence] of the Creator, as it says (Shemot 33:20), “For a person cannot see Me and live,” so is a person incapable of grasping and understanding the knowledge of the Creator... Since this is the case, we are incapable of knowing how the Almighty can know all creatures and actions, but we know without a doubt that man’s actions are in his hands, and the Almighty does not pull him or decree that he act in such-and-such way.

Maimonides argues that the Almighty’s “knowledge” differs fundamentally from human knowledge; just as the limitations of the human intellect prevent us from fully understanding the divine essence, so are we unable to comprehend the concept of divine knowledge. This assumption negates the entire question as to the compatibility of free will with God’s infinite knowledge of the future. We in any event cannot understand the notion of divine knowledge, so we have no reason to assume that it interferes with man’s free will. Any discussion concerning divine knowledge presumes a basic understanding of divine knowledge; since such understanding is beyond our reach, we cannot ever begin to address the relationship between God’s foreknowledge and man’s free will. Maimonides returns to this issue in the *Guide* (3:20), where he elaborates on the philosophical distinction between divine and human knowledge.

At first glance, it appears that this discussion already presents us with an explanation for why the Egyptians could be considered as having acted freely despite God’s foreknowledge of their crimes. Seemingly, Israel’s suffering in Egypt is but one instance of the perennial issue of *bechira ve-yedi’a*, the conflict between divine foreknowledge and free will. Why, then, did Maimonides, in the next chapter, raise the specific question concerning the prophecy to Avraham foretelling the Egyptian bondage? Isn’t this problem naturally solved by his previous discussion, where he presents his approach for dealing with the general issue of *bechira ve-yedi’a*?

What more, Maimonides actually enlists his theory regarding *bechira ve-yedi’a* in the context of his discussion of the Egyptians’ mistreatment of *Benei Yisrael*, and *Benei Yisrael*’s idolatry. After posing his explanation that the prophecies to Avraham and Moshe involved no decree upon individual Egyptians or Israelites, Maimonides concludes, “And we already mentioned that man lacks the capacity to know how the Almighty knows future events.” It appears that Maimonides felt compelled to return to this point – our inability to fully understand the nature of divine knowledge – to resolve the doctrine of free will with the prophecies of the Egyptian bondage and Israel’s idolatrous worship. If, indeed, this point is necessary to resolve these difficulties, then why does Maimonides introduce a separate discussion of these problems in the first place? If they are in any event resolved only through Maimonides’ argument with regard to *bechira ve-yedi’a*, then why does he allocate an independent discussion for these particular problems?

The *Lechem Mishneh*, among the classic commentaries to *Mishneh Torah* printed in standard editions, raises this question and suggests, simply enough, that Maimonides here seeks to provide a “more satisfying answer.” True, the question surrounding the prophecies to Avraham and Moshe is negated by Maimonides’ theory regarding *bechira ve-yedi’a*, but he nevertheless discussed this question separately because it can be resolved with a more compelling explanation.

Others, however, explain Maimonides’ discussion more convincingly. (This approach appears – in various nuances and forms – in several sources; see *Arba’a Turei Even*, cited in Rabbi Yosef Kapach’s commentary to *Mishneh Torah*, and Rabbi Menachem Karkovsky’s *Avodat Ha-melekh*.)

In chapter 5 of *Hilkhot Teshuva*, Maimonides addresses the compatibility of free will with general divine foreknowledge; here, in chapter 6, Maimonides grapples with the instances where God specifically declares that a group of people will act a certain way. The problem that arises from the Almighty's advanced knowledge can be easily dismissed by denying man's ability to grasp the nature of divine knowledge. In the prophecies to Avraham and Moshe, however, God appears to ordain that these events should occur. The problem with which Maimonides grapples involves not the Almighty's foreknowledge of the Egyptian bondage and Israel's idolatry, but the impression given by these prophecies that He will see to it that these developments will unfold.

To help clarify this distinction, let us consider the examples of God's prophecy to Noach of the impending deluge, or to Avraham concerning the destruction of the city of Sedom. In these prophecies, God obviously does not speak as an objective, outside forecaster conveying information concerning an event that He predicts will occur. Rather, He informs Noach that He will bring a flood upon the earth, and tells Avraham that He will overturn Sedom. The difficulty Maimonides confronted regarding the prophecies of the Egyptian bondage and Israel's paganism is that these might appear, on the surface, to belong to the same category, as prophecies of events that God will Himself bring about. Thus, irrespective of the issue of *bechira ve-yedi'a*, these prophecies seem to signify the possibility of God compelling a group of people to do evil.

Maimonides therefore explains that God "did not decree on a certain, particular person that he will be the one who goes astray. Rather, had any one of those who went astray to worship idols wished not to worship, he would not have worshipped. The Creator informed him only of how the world will run." These prophecies should not be read as a divine decree, as God's intervention in world affairs, as in the prophecy to Noach concerning the flood. Rather, He simply informed the prophet "how the world will run"; meaning, He merely conveys information about future events. This in no way suggests that He will actively bring about those events. What remains, therefore, is only the perennial dilemma of *bechira ve-yedi'a*, which Maimonides had already addressed in the previous chapter. He therefore concludes, "And we already mentioned that man lacks the capacity to know how the Almighty knows future events."

In summary, the prophecy to Avraham concerning his descendants' suffering could, potentially, pose a challenge to the doctrine of free will on two counts: 1) by virtue of the general philosophical anomaly of how divine foreknowledge allows for free will; 2) given the implication that God specifically ordained that Egypt will oppress *Benei Yisrael*, and that *Benei Yisrael* will worship idols. Maimonides addresses the first issue in his earlier discussion, in chapter 5 of *Hilkhot Teshuva*, where he presents his general theory of *bechira ve-yedi'a*. In chapter 6, he turns his attention to the second question, and clarifies that in these prophecies God merely foretells future events, and does not intervene with free will to make these events happen.

## **Nachmanides and the Ra'avad**

The Ra'avad, in his critique of *Mishneh Torah*, very sharply criticizes Maimonides' explanation of these prophecies, going so far as to write, "I swear that I am close to saying that these are childish words." He then raises the following argument against Maimonides' explanation:

The Creator will say to those who stray [after idolatry]: "Why have you gone astray? I did not single you out by name that you would say that I decreed upon you [that you should worship idols]!" Those who stray will then say to Him: "So to whom does Your decree apply – to those who did not stray? Then behold, Your decree was not fulfilled!"

Nachmanides, in his commentary to *Bereishit*, raises this same objection in more straightforward terms:

Even if He decreed that that one among all the nations will mistreat them in such-and-such manner, and one goes ahead first and fulfills the Almighty's decree, he has earned a *mitzva*. What is the reason in what he [Maimonides] said? When a king commands that the people of such-and-such region do a certain action, one who lazily casts the matter on others is a criminal and sinner, and one who does it will earn favor from him!

Nachmanides and the Ra'avad argue that according to Maimonides' theory, that God decreed *Benei Yisrael's* enslavement in general terms, without necessarily casting this responsibility upon Egypt, then all the more so should Egypt be commended for rising to the occasion and fulfilling the divine decree. As the Ra'avad writes, those who worshipped idols could plead their case before God by claiming that they simply worked towards the realization of His prophecy to Moshe; God cannot accuse them of betrayal, since it was through them that His decree was fulfilled.

Nachmanides and the Ra'avad therefore suggest a different explanation to justify the punishment suffered by the Egyptians for their oppression of *Benei Yisrael*, namely, that it far exceeded the mandate to subjugate Avraham's descendants. The drowning of newborns and other atrocities committed by the Egyptians were never included in the divine decree of bondage, and for this they were punished. The Ra'avad also suggested that Pharaoh and the Egyptians would have escaped punishment had they heeded Moshe's initial demand that they free the Hebrew slaves. It was Pharaoh's arrogant defiance and scornful attitude towards God's demands that brought calamity and destruction upon his country. Others, including Rabbi Chayim Ben-Atar, in his *Or Ha-chayim*, claim that the Egyptians deserved punishment because they oppressed *Benei Yisrael* not with the altruistic goal of fulfilling the divine decree, but out of hatred and contempt.

All these approaches share the assumption that it was theoretically possible for the Egyptians to enslave and oppress *Benei Yisrael* and not only escape punishment, but also be credited with fulfilling the divine will. According to these writers, it was the Egyptians' excess or malice that angered the Almighty, not the actual enslavement of *Benei Yisrael*, for which they would have otherwise accrued merit for fulfilling God's wish.

We can point to two compelling reasons why Maimonides would not accept such a theory – one textual, and the other conceptual. Firstly, God foretells the Egyptians' punishment already here, upon informing Avraham of his descendants' bondage. If the Egyptians are ultimately punished not for the actual enslavement, but rather for their excessive cruelty or malicious intent, why is their punishment mentioned here, where God speaks only of the bondage itself? These verses clearly imply that God will exact retribution from Israel's oppressors because of their enslavement, and not due to some external factor.

Secondly, these writers appear to have perceived God's prediction to Avraham as a command, presuming that once God disclosed this information about his descendants' slavery, it becomes a divine command. Indeed, Nachmanides explicitly draws the comparison between God's prophecy to Avraham and a king who issues an order that a certain task be performed. As the *Meshekh Chokhma* and others note, Maimonides rejected this basic assumption, and distinguished between divine predictions and divine instruction. That the Almighty informed Avraham of his descendants' oppression in no way serves as an invitation or command to other nations to subjugate Israel. This clear distinction easily deflects the argument advanced by Nachmanides and the Ra'avad, as to why a nation would deserve punishment for fulfilling God's decree that Israel be enslaved. God never issued such a decree; He merely informed Avraham that this will occur at the some point in the future.