

Bechira: How Free is Free Will?¹

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As a psychologist practicing in the *frum* community for over two decades, I have frequently encountered the following serious dilemma. A major focus of psychotherapy is exploring the events in the person's past and in his current environment which brought about and continues to maintain his current difficulties. However, many *frum* patients are uncomfortable with this very process. The psychologist's attempts to understand behaviors, thoughts and feelings as resulting from various life experiences is seen as conflicting with a basic tenet of *Yiddishkeit*, that of *bechira* (free will). Since a person has free will, how can we "excuse" his behavior with psychological explanations?

It is my contention that this objection is a result of both a lack of understanding of what *bechira* really means, and (*lehavdil*) a misunderstanding of psychological concepts.

Bechira: What is it?

In order that we should merit a reward for our good behavior, *Hashem* gives us the *bechira* to do bad. This is one of the basic tenets of *hashkafa*. Many *frum* people assume that *bechira* is universal and all encompassing, i.e. that in our every action we have complete *bechira*. In fact, any suggestion that there are limitations to this freedom is seen as *apikorsus*. This, however, is not the case. To quote one of the foremost *baalei mussar* of our times, Rav Shlomo Wolbe, [zt"l]:

The great [Jewish] philosophers established bechira as the cornerstone for the whole Torah... But from this resulted a common misperception among the masses; that all people actively choose their every act and every decision. This is a grievous error. (Alei Schur, Vol. 1, p. 156)

What, then, is *bechira*? To answer this question, Rav Wolbe² refers us to Rav Eliyahu Dessler's "phenomenal essay on *bechira*." In this essay³ Rav Dessler explains that *bechira* is not a theoretical concept that can be applied to any circumstance where a person can hypothetically choose between two options. Rather, it only applies to moral conflicts where the two opposing forces are of approximately equal strength, the person is aware of the internal conflict, and he makes a conscious decision in one direction. When a person does something over which he does not experience conscious conflict, or if the compelling force on one side is significantly stronger than the other, the fact that he is theoretically able to decide either way does **not** qualify his act as an expression of *bechira*.

A Jew who is growing up in a family devoid of *Yiddishkeit* does not experience conflict over driving on Shabbos. The fact that he is physically able to refrain from driving does not qualify his act of driving as reflecting *bechira*. Likewise, a *tzaddik* does not experience conflict over driving on Shabbos. The fact that he is physically able to drive, does not mean that he was *bochr* (chose) not to drive. He never even considered the option of driving.

Rav Wolbe⁴ makes a similar point. True *bechira* requires a deliberate and thoughtful decision-making process. When a child does the right thing because of fear of punishment or even to please his parents, that is not true *bechira*.⁵ It is not surprising, therefore, that Rav Wolbe concludes that for most people exercising *bechira* is not as common an event as they might like to believe. Rav Dessler sharpens this point even further. A person could be doing many *mitzvos* and learning much Torah and still not be encountering *bechira* if what he is doing is only the result of his previous experiences and habits, without any self-generated growth (*mitzvas anashim melumada*).

Nekudas Habechira

Rav Dessler points out that while most of our actions are the result of our past experiences, actions and decisions (i.e., past acts of *bechira*), and therefore do not qualify currently as *bechira*, yet every person has a *nekudas habechira* (a point or area of *bechira*) where he does experience conflict between the *yeitzer hara* and the *yeitzer hatov*. He compares this to two countries in battle. There is a limited area that constitutes the front - where the battle takes place. The majority of the territory of each country is behind the front, and is not, at that point, involved in the battle. Likewise, the "battle" within each person. Some *aveiros* are below a person's *nekudas habechira* (i.e., currently not within the sphere of influence of the *yeitzer hara*) so that he would not even consider doing them. Other *aveiros* are above the person's *nekudas habechira* so that he wouldn't consider **not** doing them. The battle is limited to the area where the power of the *yeitzer hara* and that of the *yeitzer hatov* are comparable (i.e., *the nekudas habechira*).

Rav Dessler⁶ illustrates this concept with the example of a person who is a long-time member of a gang heavily involved with crime. He may no longer have the *bechira* to actually stop being involved in criminal activity. He may currently be considered "compelled" to rob a bank. Yet, he may have the *bechira* not to shoot the bank guard. This, then, is his current *nekudas habechira*.

Responsibility and reward for behavior

Rav Dessler makes it clear that a person can only be held responsible for behavior over which he has *bechira* (e.g., a *tinok shenishba* is obviously not punished for *aveiros* he is totally unaware of). Likewise, the converse. True reward is only for good behavior over which there is conflict/*bechira*. (Of course, *Hashem* does reward good behavior done in non-*bechira* situations, but it is a much lower form of reward). If a person once had *bechira* over an *aveira* but, due to having become habituated to it, no longer has *bechira* to avoid it, he is then punished for having allowed himself to fall from the previous level when he still had *bechira*. The same is true for reward.

It is for this reason, says Rav Dessler, that Lot merited being saved from the destruction of S'dom for not betraying Avraham to Pharaoh (*Rashi, Bereishis, 19:29*), rather than for the seemingly much greater achievement of risking his life to protect strangers in S'dom. His *mesiras nefesh* for *hachnosas orchim* was a result of his training in the house of Avraham, and not a product of *bechira*, and therefore did not merit special reward.

Psychology and Bechira

As stated previously, some people object to the search for explanations and causes of behaviors inherent in psychotherapy. While they can accept that there can be "objective" factors that inhibit or eliminate a person's *bechira* (e.g., someone who cannot put on *tefillin* because of a missing arm, or a *tinok shenishba*), they perceive the concept of "psychic determinism" (i.e. the idea that there are psychological causes for behavior) as negating free will. "What do you mean, 'Why did he do it?' " they object, "He did it because of his *yeitzer hara*! Why are you making excuses for him?!" (It always amazes me how the same person who warns of the negative influence of the environment, or of bad friends, etc., will then reject the very notion that negative behavior can be caused by deficiencies in a person's environment).⁷

In a very insightful article entitled "Psychic Determinism and Freedom of Will,"⁸ M.F. Basch reviews some of the misperceptions that even psychologists have regarding this issue. Since psychological insights can give meaning to behaviors based on past events, some psychologists assume that a person's behavior is absolutely predetermined or predestined by past experience. If this were true, then successful therapy could only substitute new (presumably healthier) predetermining factors for old unhealthy ones. The patient would remain without free will. Basch refutes this notion that behavior is absolutely predetermined by the past, since psychology can only explain behavior after the fact, but cannot predict future behavior with any degree of certainty.

Basch asserts that psychic determinism only implies that behavior is never unmotivated or arbitrary. It always has

psychological (often unconscious) meaning based on previous subjective experiences.⁹ The person's unawareness of these meanings inhibits his free will, since he cannot act upon or modify factors that he is unaware of. By uncovering the meaning of the behavior, psychotherapy actually **expands** the area of free will.

To return to our original dilemma: The apparent contradiction between *bechira* and psychic determinism was based on the misperception that *hashkafa* dictates unlimited *bechira* while psychology rejects free will. In fact, as we have seen, *hashkafa* acknowledges that past experiences can limit *bechira* while psychology only gives meaning - after the fact - as to the path chosen. In other words, a person's psychological past does not eliminate his *bechira*, it only defines his current *nekudas habechira*.¹⁰

Chinuch implications - blueprint for change

The question of free will and psychic determinism is obviously a central issue in *chinuch*. Some people fear that acknowledging psychological causes for behavior (psychic determinism) will discourage people from attempting to improve themselves, because they now have an "excuse" to continue their undesirable behavior. This fear, however, is [usually] unfounded.

While a person is initially attracted to a forbidden object or act, once he has transgressed, he regrets not having withstood the test (e.g. see *Birkas Peretz* from the Steipler, *Bereishis* 25:34). It is not the continuing attractiveness of the *aveira* that is the major cause of avoiding change. It is, rather, repeated unsuccessful attempts at trying to change - due, in part, to not sufficiently understanding the causes of the problem behavior (and therefore, not being cognizant of his current *nekudas habechira*) - which discourages a person from future attempts. (See *Sichos Mussar*, Sec. 1, p. 41.)¹¹

"Michael," a Yeshiva dropout, was telling me about on upsetting experience: "I was shooting pool at three in the morning when I suddenly asked myself: 'What am I doing here? Am I enjoying myself? I am having a grand old time being miserable!'" Unfortunately, being unaware of his nekudas habechira, he decided to start coming to davening every day. Since this was way above his nekudas habechira, it only lasted for three days. His failure to keep his commitment further convinced him that he was a "hopeless case." ¹²

Man: Not a prisoner of his past

Does psychic determinism mean that a person is a prisoner of his past and cannot change? Of course not! Sometimes the realization that what one is doing is wrong, and a sincere determination to change, is sufficient.¹³ Often, however, there are factors in a person's life that make such a dramatic and sudden change beyond his current level of *bechira*. These obstacles may have their roots in the person's past or may reflect inadequacies in his current environment. By recognizing these obstacles he can begin the process of rehabilitation. This may include trying to change a negative environment or dealing with negative feelings that inhibit change, as long as he focuses his efforts on the area within his current *nekudas habechira*. Then, every time he exercises his *bechira*, it affects his *nekudas habechira*. In our earlier example, if the bank robber refrains from shooting the bank guard, this will raise his *nekudas habechira* to a higher level. Over time and step by step, he can reach the highest levels. The biggest *yeitzer hara* may, in fact, be to focus on what is currently unattainable, and/or to be satisfied with what has long ago been attained.

This process of gradual improvement means that the person may continue with some aspects of his negative behavior until such time as he gets it all within his *nekudas habechira*. This does not mean that we are condoning the behavior.¹⁴ We are just being realistic as to how quickly that person can change that particular behavior. A person recovering from a disabling stroke has to go through a long process of rehabilitation. While his goal is to walk normally, he can only achieve this goal one step at a time. To avoid becoming discouraged, he needs to feel a sense of accomplishment for every small step. We need not worry that this sense of accomplishment will reduce his motivation to strive for more improvement or that our words of encouragement will be interpreted as acceptance of his current level of functioning.

The nature of a person is to strive for more when he feels proud of his progress.¹⁵

So while some people believe that the concept of psychic determinism undermines *chinuch*, in fact it is [often] just the opposite.

We have established a fundamental principle in the *chinuch* of others and of ourselves: One should relate to every person as if he has no *bechira*, and as if he is "compelled" by his nature, education, habits and emotional needs. (Rav Shlomo Wolbe, *Alei Schur*, Vol. 1, p. 156)

Why is this a crucial principle in *chinuch*? Because we often find ourselves working on behaviors that are currently unchangeable (i.e. not within the person's current *nekudas habechira*) instead of focusing on behaviors that are currently changeable. In addition, if we ignore those specific factors that, in fact, make change so difficult for a particular person, how successful are we likely to be?¹⁶

One should set goals that are beyond his grasp but within his reach. Once he has secured that practice in his grasp, his reach will have become extended, and he will be on his way to continued, incremental growth.

¹From the *Jewish Observer*, April 1996, pp. 17 - 21, with minor modifications and some additions [in brackets].

²*Alei Schur*, Vol. 2, p. 40.

³*Michtav MeEliyahu*, Vol. 1, pp. 111-116.

⁴*Alei Schur*, Vol. 1, p. 155

⁵[The well-known Israeli *mechanech*, Rav Yechiel Yacobson, asserts that over-controlling children's behavior deprives them of a *chinuch* for *bechira*.]

⁶*Michtav MeEliyahu*, Vol. 1, p. 114.

⁷*Chazal*, in contrast, have no problem with this concept. The last *Mishna* in *Succa* relates that the *mishmar* of Bilga was penalized because of the negative behavior of the daughter of one of its members. The *Gemora* explains that she could not have behaved in this manner if not for the deficiencies in the *chinuch* provided by her father. Likewise, *Chazal* attribute the selling of Yosef by his brothers to Yaakov's showing favoritism toward Yosef (*Shabbos*, 10b).

⁸*International Review of Psychoanalysis*, 1978, 5, pp.257-264.

⁹Some clinicians who see how "compelled" certain people seem to be to engage in an aberrant behavior, conclude that they must be genetically predisposed to do so, or that they are suffering from a "chemical imbalance." The scientific evidence for these assumptions are totally lacking or, at best, very tenuous. Tragically, these speculations are often accepted as fact even in the *frum* community. The person may, in fact, be compelled to act in an aberrant manner, but for psychological reasons related to his past experiences (and therefore changeable) rather than for genetic reasons. Different schools of psychology may emphasize different factors regarding the manner in which past events "compel" behavior. Some psychologists emphasize the emotional impact of events, while cognitive psychologists emphasize the impact of events on a person's thought process. In either case, it limits the range of *bechira*.

¹⁰Rav Dessler mentions various factors that can limit a person's free will in any given situation (e.g., limited *chinuch* opportunities) but doesn't specifically address emotional factors. However, in response to my inquiry, one of Rav Dessler's primary *talmidim* assured me in writing that Rav Dessler didn't distinguish between "objective" and emotional factors that can limit *bechira*.

¹¹Some have objected to the concept of a person being psychologically compelled to behave in a particular manner by proclaiming "*ein lecha davar ha'omed bifnei haratzon*" - ("when there is a will, there is a way"). However, this is not a *meimer* *Chazal*. Rather, it is a popular saying based on the *Zohar* (see *Michlol Ma'amarei Chazal*, vol. 1, p. 101) that states that whatever a person achieves is due to his motivation. This does not imply that "When there is a will, there is a way." Besides, common experience shows that there is often a "will" and yet no "way" (unless one uses the tautology that the fact that there was no "way" proves that there is no "will" - in effect, making the statement meaningless). A more reasonable definition for this saying would be that a highly motivated person would not be held back from trying a difficult task by fear of failure (see *Yalkut Lekarch Tov, Bereishis* p. 71). [This, of course, will make a person more likely to succeed. Rav Matisyahu Salomon, citing the *Chovas Halevovos*, explains that the meaning of *bechira* is that a person can **will** to do whatever he chooses without any interfering outside forces impacting on his will... but in no way can one say that it is in his hands to **do** whatever he wishes (*Matnas Chaim, Mamorim*, p. 18).]

¹² [See *Gra* on *Mishlei* 19:3 "*Eveles odom tesalef darko, ve'al Hashem yezaf lebo*." See also *Alei Schur*, Vol. 2, p. 217.]

¹³ A sudden change in direction is possible if, for example, the person has not been habituated in the *aveira*, and if the negative behavior is not a manifestation of deeper psychological problems. Likewise, the *Michtav MeEliyahu* (Vol. 2, p. 67) suggests that times of crises or special times of the year (e.g. *Rosh Hashana*) can facilitate a "*bechira klalis*" - i.e., the ability to make sudden and substantial changes in a person's spiritual status. The difficulty of maintaining suddenly acquired spiritual levels is another matter, as emphasized by Rav Chaim Shmuelewitz, (*Sichos Mussar*, Section I, p. 90).

¹⁴ [See Rav Matisyahu Salomon, *With Hearts Full of Faith* (Mesorah, 2002), where he distinguishes between "**compromise**, which is absolutely forbidden, and **gradualism**, which is acceptable and unavoidable." pp. 264-266. See also *Michtav MeEliyahu*, Vol. 1, p. 258-259.]

¹⁵ [See Rav Matisyahu Salomon, *Matnas Chaim, Kinyonim*, Vol. 1, p. 239, and *Sefer Ohel Rochel* from Rav Shmuel Auerbach, (in

the name of the *Gra*) p. 154. regarding the importance of being *sameach bechelko* even regarding *ruchniouis* achievements.] **16)** "In order to improve and correct himself, a person first has to understand himself... to know what is causing his stumbling and his difficulties" (Rav Yechezkel Levenstein, cited in the *Yalkut Lekach Tov, Bereishis*, p. 276). Perhaps this is what *Rashi* (*Chayei Sarah*, 24:14 & 44) means that *hochacha* (as in *tochacha*) always implies *birur davar* (see also Rabbi Abraham Hassan, *JO*, Nov. '95).

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