

Beit Midrash YeshivahAI

Free Choice among the Nations

What Is Denied, What Remains,
and How to Understand the Views



Reader's Booklet (24)

ח' מרחשוון תשפ"ז

Free Choice among the Nations

A person could hurt someone, but stops himself. He understands that the act is wrong and decides against it. This is one of the first things we mean by free choice: an evil path was open, but he did not have to take it. How, then, should we understand the statement about non-Jews that “they have no choice”? Does it mean they cannot refrain from evil? If so, how can they be commanded and punished?

The difficulty becomes sharper when we open Maimonides, Rabbi Moses ben Maimon. He goes beyond the general rule, “Every person is granted freedom.” Speaking of an Egyptian who harmed Israel, he says that had the Egyptian not wished to harm them, he was free not to. Yet letters and talks of the Lubavitcher Rebbe reserve free choice for Israel. A Simchat Torah 5736 talk even says that non-Jewish wills are easier to influence because they have no choice. Both sides require study.

This is the particular aspect of free choice addressed here: what is attributed to a person outside Israel, what is distinctive about Israel, and how this fits with command, responsibility and providence. Our main subject is a person’s capacity to choose his actions. God’s choice of a particular nation is another question; where the sources connect the two, that connection too needs explanation.

What is clear, and what remains a question?

There is explicit support for a non-Jew's capacity to refrain from sin: Maimonides' Egyptian is one example, and Chabad sources also affirm real capacity. Alongside this are denials of choice, some concerning will and decision themselves. What do those statements deny, and how does the denial explain relative ease of influencing will in the same decision in which a capacity to refrain from sin is granted? No single explicit explanation covering all the sources has been found.

Free choice is among the deepest and broadest questions in Jewish thought. Many works discuss its relation to God's knowledge, decree, human nature, reward and punishment. Here we study one specific difficulty within it: how real capacity to choose good or evil coexists with descriptions of human will as governed from above.

We will learn several distinctions: a capacity received and a decision made; willing and acting, and an act and its outcome; strong attraction and necessity; ordinary conditions and exceptional intervention. We will also see why authors define choice differently, and how each definition affects responsibility and divine governance.

This booklet stands on its own: the explanations are intended to make the argument understandable without prior familiarity. For greater depth, the companion Research Booklet presents the sources and debates at length. Its English edition translates Hebrew Research V3 in full. Notes below refer to chapters and actual pages in that English edition.

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1. What Do We Ask When We Say “Choice”?

Start with a simple example. Someone has money he stole and is required to return it. He loves money, struggles to part with it, and finally gives it back. Another person returns it easily. Both chose to return it, although their struggles differed. A strong motive does not by itself prove that the alternative disappeared.

Now ask a different question: where does a person get the capacity to want and decide? As believers, we know his faculties too are created and sustained by God. Does it follow that God decided in his place to return the money? No. Granting a capacity and determining its use are different. To say a

decision was dictated requires a further reason; the fact that the capacity came from above does not prove it.

Third, suppose he decided to return the money but could not find its owner. His decision was good, yet completing the action was beyond him. Conversely, someone may intend harm and have his plan frustrated. Success is not the only measure of what a person chose to do.

The example separates several questions: who gave the capacity, what moved the person, whether he could act otherwise, what he decided, and what actually happened. We will return to capacity versus its use when discussing the Egyptian who could refrain from harm. A book discussing “choice” may address just one of these questions. A source about the root of choice need not answer what will happen to a victim; a source about outcomes does not prove that every thought of the aggressor was dictated.

“Free” too can mean several things. There is freedom from external coercion, the ability to overcome habit and desire, and a deeper question about will not compelled at all, even by its inward nature. A person may count as choosing for responsibility without being described as possessing that level of absolute freedom. Does this explain all our sources? That remains to be tested. The distinction opens a path of study and must prove itself in each case.¹

2. A Noahide: Commanded, Choosing and Responsible

“Noahides” is the halakhic term for people outside Israel, commanded in the seven Noahide laws. This booklet also uses

1. The examples illustrate the explanation. For the questions and the distinction’s limits, see Research Booklet, ch. 1, p. 4; for testing the explanations, Research Booklet, ch. 14, pp. 20–22.

“non-Jew,” “gentile” and “the nations,” according to the discussion; here they mean people who are not Jews. These laws include prohibitions of bloodshed and theft. Our question is not whether harming others is permitted, but how to understand the capacity through which they are required to refrain.

Maimonides speaks clearly. Laws of Repentance, chapter 5, opens: רשות לכל אדם נתונה—every person is granted freedom. A person can turn toward good or evil. One might still ask whether “every person” means only Jews here. That is why 6:5 matters so much: Maimonides explicitly discusses Egyptians who harmed Israel.

Maimonides’ point in brief: the individual Egyptian who harmed Israel could have refrained from harming them.

The individual Egyptian was not compelled to become the aggressor. Maimonides does not merely say he could think a good thought while his body had to harm. He says it was possible not to harm them. This foundation cannot be skipped when interpreting a blanket denial of choice among the nations.²

Why is command itself insufficient to prove every part of the explanation? Obligation teaches that a person is accountable for his conduct, but not yet how each author explains freedom. Some authors discuss responsibility within an order of causes, as we shall see. With Maimonides we need not stop at an inference from obligation: he expressly says the Egyptian could refrain.

Capacity to choose must also be distinguished from the standing attached to the manner of observance. In Laws of

2. Maimonides, Laws of Repentance 5:1–4; 6:5. For the individual, decree and withholding repentance, see Research Booklet, ch. 2, pp. 4–6.

Kings, Maimonides defines the righteous among the nations through observing the seven laws because God commanded them in the Torah through Moses. Someone refraining from murder out of moral conviction does not thereby acquire that same standing. But this does not mean he lacks the power to refrain, or that all responsibility disappears without awareness of the command's source. Maimonides separately discusses inadvertence, duress and ignorance of prohibition.³

Maimonides also recognizes a Noahide wishing to perform an additional mitzvah for reward within halakhic limits. How is choice granted, and what does command in the seven laws imply about other actions? Chapter 5 addresses those questions. Here, the law shows that discussing Noahides includes actions beyond the seven obligations.

3. What Does Pharaoh's Case Teach?

Knowledge, decree and hardening the heart

Pharaoh is central because several questions meet in him. God knew what he would do; a decree foretold Abraham's descendants' enslavement; later the Torah describes strengthening his heart. These are three different matters. Knowing something will happen is not by itself a command to do it. A decree about a general course does not necessarily appoint every individual who takes part. Strengthening a heart at a particular time does not prove that this was the person's condition from birth.

For an individual Egyptian, Maimonides therefore explains that no particular person was decreed to be the one causing harm. Knowledge of future enslavement does not excuse him. Nor does Maimonides promise that the entire historical course

³ Maimonides, Laws of Kings 8:10-11; 10:1-2, 9-10. Command itself, standing through observance and laws of responsibility are distinct, rather than one condition. See Research Booklet, ch. 2, pp. 4-6.

would be canceled if this Egyptian refrained. The individual decision differs from the general decree.

Nachmanides is not satisfied with this explanation. He also examines the agent's intention and additional acts. Someone acting from hatred or for plunder does not turn wickedness into a mitzvah by invoking a course decreed from above. The Egyptians are also responsible for the harm they added. The rationale is disputed, while both reject decree as a simple excuse for wickedness.⁴

Did strengthening the heart remove choice?

For Maimonides in Laws of Repentance 6:3, a person's punishment for serious voluntary sins may be prevention of the way back. This explains Pharaoh's hardening. Pharaoh first sinned of his own accord; restriction followed the sin, rather than being a non-Jew's permanent nature. Maimonides mentions Israel in Elijah's time in the same context. Punitive withholding of repentance is therefore an exception, rather than a general distinction between Jew and gentile.

Sforno and Sefer HaIkkarim emphasize another direction. Severe blows can make someone yield merely to stop the pain. Yielding need not mean genuinely recognizing his mistake. Strengthening the heart can thus enable him to endure the blows and face a decision arising from more than fear. For Sforno, had Pharaoh wanted complete repentance, strengthening would not have prevented it. HaIkkarim also emphasizes the possibility of interpreting the event differently. The explanations are close, but not identical.

A simple question clarifies the difference: does strengthening close a previously open path as punishment for the past, or

4. Nachmanides on Genesis 15:14. For comparison with Maimonides and his own Exodus 7:3 commentary, see Research Booklet, ch. 3, pp. 6-7.

remove pressure that would produce submission without repentance? These are different answers. Nachmanides on Exodus upholds two reasons, so he cannot be placed on only one side. Understanding each position does not require merging them all.⁵

Pharaoh and the decree: two explanations by the Rebbe

Now return to Pharaoh's responsibility for decreed enslavement, beyond the question of his heart's hardening after sin.

The Rebbe's explanations too require two paths to be distinguished. Likkutei Sichot XXVII examines the individual Egyptian versus Pharaoh. The individual could avoid becoming the agent. Concerning Pharaoh, the explanation accepts that political enslavement needs to take place through him, and centers his punishment on wickedness of heart. This does not command him to enslave, or make every other Egyptian's harm inevitable.

In another explanation, the Pesach Sheni 5744 talk, the starting point changes: a decree of calamity may change. Enslavement is therefore not assumed to be unavoidable. Performance itself remains dependent on Pharaoh's will. The first separates necessary performance from evil intention; the second allows the decree itself to change. Keeping the premises separate makes both answers clearer.⁶

5. Maimonides, Laws of Repentance 6:3; Nachmanides on Exodus 7:3; Sefer HaIkkarim 4:25; Sforno on Exodus 7:3-4. For the different mechanisms, see Research Booklet, ch. 3, pp. 6-7.

6. Likkutei Sichot XXVII, Kedoshim II, pp. 149-157, especially 153-155: an edited text approved by the Rebbe. Hitvaaduyot 5744 III, Pesach Sheni, pp. 1701-1706: an unedited transcript, not approved in that manner. For both explanations and limits, see Research Booklet, ch. 11, p. 17.

4. Does Everyone Define Freedom Alike?

So far we have mainly asked whether a person can refrain from an act. A deeper question is what makes the act “his.” Is doing it willingly enough, or must we also ask what brought him to want it? Here authors differ; there is no reason to assume one shared definition.

Rabbi Saadia Gaon, in *Emunot VeDeot*, emphasizes that the Creator gives power and capacity, yet the person chooses his deeds. His example includes non-Jewish kings and their armies: giving capacity to Sennacherib and Nebuchadnezzar does not make their killing and robbery coerced. The capacity for evil was granted; the decision to use it badly is attributed to them. Their responsibility therefore remains.⁷

Duties of the Heart, by Rabbenu Bachya ibn Paquda, presents the difficulty between actions seemingly entrusted to people and God’s rule, without supplying a simple philosophy that erases the tension. In guidance for service, a person acts as responsible for his conduct and trusts the Creator’s governance. The Gate of Trust sharpens a useful distinction: choosing and consenting to God’s service are entrusted to the person; completing the act also depends on causes outside him. Trust does not mean expecting God to decide in his place whether to serve Him.

Rabbi Hasdai Crescas, in *Or Hashem*, takes another approach. He examines will and responsibility within a causal order: how can an act belong to someone’s will even if that will is determined within the whole set of causes, and how does this differ from an act experienced as coerced? He does not begin by requiring will to be detached from every prior cause. He

7. R. Saadia Gaon, *Emunot VeDeot*, treatise 4, chapter 5, R. Judah ibn Tibbon’s translation. Compare Research Booklet, ch. 3, pp. 6–7.

distinguishes willing action from action under a felt compulsion. Command, pleasure and will also form part of his discussion of motivating causes.

This is not identical to Maimonides' account of freedom, and is no special theory about non-Jews. It teaches us to ask what responsibility proves: "there are reward and punishment" alone does not require every author to explain freedom alike. Yet Crescas' position cannot simply be inserted into a Rebbe talk because it might offer a possible solution. Interpreting an author requires studying his own words.⁸

5. The Root of Choice and Capacity Granted through Command

What freedom is attributed to Israel?

We have seen Maimonides affirm a capacity to refrain and other authors define freedom differently. Now we turn to Chabad language and the root of willing. In a letter from 5711, the Rebbe defines free choice in an especially strong sense: freedom from a compelling force, even one from within. Nature, intellect, will and desire all enter the question. This goes beyond the feeling "I did what I wanted," asking how far the will itself is unforced.

The Rebbe says completely free choice belongs to the Creator, whom nothing compels. Israel is described as having a special connection to that choice through the soul's root. In another letter, he uses the example of a son connected to his father's essence. The comparison explains choice's source; it does not make a person unlimited, all-knowing or in control of everything that happens to him.

⁸. Duties of the Heart, Gate of the Service of God 8; Gate of Trust 4, fourth division. Crescas, Or Hashem, treatise 2, principle 5, chapters 3–6. For the detailed comparison, see Research Booklet, ch. 4, pp. 7–8.

Return to the Egyptian: Maimonides already attributed to him a possibility of refraining from harm. Asking about its root adds a question about an already affirmed capacity. Describing the distinctive root of Jewish choice does not alone explain cancellation of the Egyptian's ability to refrain. At this point, the letter about the nations also offers a positive explanation.

Two explanations of reward and punishment among the nations

In letter 5871, the Rebbe offers two explanations. On the first, reward and punishment among the nations are a שם המושאל—a borrowed designation, taken from one context and used with another meaning. They operate as cause and effect. The example of a small child putting a finger into boiling water shows how pain can follow without being punishment in the ordinary sense. We must pause over what it explains: a consequence following an act. The example alone does not establish whether the preceding act was compelled.

The Rebbe himself notes a difficulty with this explanation from Maimonides. Having studied the Egyptian, we can see why a consequence example cannot settle everything: an explicit possibility of refraining still stands before us. We therefore retain the first explanation and its stated difficulty, then study the second separately, concerning the capacity command grants.

On the second explanation, the command in the Noahide laws itself enables both paths. It raises Noahides above their nature and makes room for choice in the commanded matters. A real capacity is granted. Receiving it through command does not mean the content of every decision is chosen in their place.

Two distinctions matter here. First, “borrowed designation” describes reward and punishment in the first explanation. It

must not silently be transferred to choice in the second, as though that choice too were imaginary.

Second, the letter offers two explanations; it does not say the first applies to everything outside the seven commandments and the second inside them. One may examine such a combination as a proposal, but must not print it as the division the Rebbe wrote.⁹

The Shemini 5747 talk describes real choice for Noahides concerning their seven commandments. This is an important positive affirmation. It confirms capacity here; it makes no determination about other domains in this passage. “Capacity is affirmed here” differs decisively from “capacity everywhere else has been disproved.”

Capacity from its root, decision by the person

Likkutei Torah, by the Alter Rebbe, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, author of Tanya, describes a high root for the capacity of choice; its descent into the body and animal soul also allows choosing evil. Connection to a higher root thus does not make every decision necessarily good. Power comes from above; a person can use it in different directions.

In Kevod Malkhutkha, a discourse from 5660 by Rabbi Shalom Dovber of Lubavitch, the Rebbe Rashab, choice is described at the level of intellect, where another understanding is possible. Alongside it is the soul’s hidden inclination toward good. This can illuminate why inclination need not be compulsion, but establishes no rule that every hidden cause leaves freedom. The question is whether the other possibility remains, beyond whether one knows all one’s motives.

⁹. Igrot Kodesh IV, letter 1089, 6 Tammuz 5711; XVI, letter 5871, 25 MarCheshvan 5718, pp. 92–93. For both explanations, scope and the Rebbe’s stated difficulty, see Research Booklet, ch. 10, pp. 15–16.

Sefer HaSichot 5749 describes Jewish human choice as resembling God's choice. Against that background, the talk compares an act undertaken from one's own judgment with an act motivated by command. Where command motivates, independence is less conspicuous; this is the context of "as though compelling." The talk also recognizes choosing evil, so it does not mean the possibility of transgression disappeared. Someone faithfully fulfilling God's command remains a person with choice.¹⁰

6. The Chooser, the Victim and Providence

So far we have asked what is in the agent's hands. When someone harms another, a further question arises: was what happened to the victim outside providence? Simply answering "it was all the aggressor's choice" might place the victim's fate outside God's governance. Answering "everything was decreed" might erase the aggressor's responsibility. The sources require the two questions to be held separately.

Tanya's Iggeret HaKodesh 25 describes the victim's decree alongside the evil of the aggressor's choice. These are two questions about one event: what the aggressor chose to do to another, and how what happened to the other belongs within God's governance. The aggressor is responsible for evil even as part of a decreed event. Responsibility must not be restricted in advance to thought alone: it does not follow that the body inevitably performed the act without choice.

Conversely, the victim is not asked to think his life has been removed from the Creator's domain. Sefer HaChinukh, discussing the prohibition of revenge, guides the victim to

¹⁰ Likkutei Torah, Emor 38b; Sefer HaMaamarim 5660, Kevod Malkhutkha, pp. 15–16; Hitvaaduyot 5747 III, Shemini, pp. 175–176; Sefer HaSichot 5749 II, pp. 537–538, note 35. For distinctions among sources and comparisons, see Research Booklet, ch. 10, pp. 15–16.

relate the event to divine governance. This gives no license to harm and cancels no duty to repair it.

There is also a practical obligation: a thief may not say, “You were meant to lose the money, so I need not return it.” Likkutei Sichot VII explains that temporary loss does not prove permanent loss was decreed. Returning the money may itself be how the suffering ends. Providence does not justify continuing the wrong; restitution and making amends remain obligatory.¹¹

Another source sharpens the problem. Or HaChaim, Rabbi Chaim ben Attar’s Torah commentary, explains Reuben’s proposal to cast Joseph into the pit as rescue from people with choice. Danger from a choosing person differs from danger from an animal; the wording suggests someone can harm even a person not sentenced to death. How does that fit Iggeret HaKodesh 25, where what reaches the victim is decreed from above? In a 5714 letter, the Rebbe first allows a difference between Or HaChaim and the Alter Rebbe, then proposes reconciliation: danger from a chooser resembles entering a dangerous place, requiring greater merit for rescue while judgment remains from above. The Rebbe adds that applying this to Or HaChaim’s wording is strained.

The disagreement is therefore not declared wholly gone; a reconciliation with an explicit limit was found. Nor is a person with choice promised independent control of another’s fate. How much danger he creates and what judgment will be passed on the victim remain related, but distinct.¹²

11. Tanya, Iggeret HaKodesh 25; Sefer HaChinukh 241; Likkutei Sichot VII, Vayikra II, pp. 9–19, especially 14–18. For the aggressor’s choice, victim’s judgment and repairing harm, see Research Booklet, ch. 5, pp. 8–10.

12. Or HaChaim on Genesis 37:21; Igrot Kodesh IX, letter 2832, 26 Tammuz 5714; Likkutei Sichot III, Vayechi, pp. 837–839. For the Zohar commentaries and reconciliation’s limit, see Research Booklet, ch. 5, pp. 8–10.

7. A King, Policy and Exceptional Intervention

Some sources distinguish a private individual from a king in office, rather than Jew from gentile. Malbim interprets “A king’s heart is in God’s hand” concerning public governance. The private person’s heart is his own, whereas in public affairs the king’s heart is directed from above. This goes beyond frustrating an outcome after the king has decided: the influence also concerns his heart.

This may explain some statements about Pharaoh or rulers, but its limit is clear. That passage does not describe every private non-Jew. Nor does every public decision leave the domain of commandments: a policy decision may include murder or theft. Public governance then again meets responsibility for sin.¹³

Exceptional intervention offers another explanation. Kedushat Levi, by Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, describes a miracle within Ahasuerus’s thought; its Yitro passage calls removal of the Egyptians’ choice a wonder. Midbar Shur, by Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaKohen Kook, treats canceling choice as an especially extraordinary miracle because of the great value of the order changed. The possibility of intervention does not require every ordinary non-Jewish decision to be compelled.

Here too we must identify the change. Circumstances awakening a different will do not yet prove refusal became impossible. A source explicitly saying choice was removed makes a stronger claim, requiring us to ask what grounds punishment. “Miracle” alone does not explain exactly what

¹³. Malbim on Proverbs 21:1; on a Jewish king and Saul, Hitvaaduyot 5746 II, pp. 838–839. See Research Booklet, ch. 6, pp. 10–11.

happened. It may describe a wondrous event without settling whether capacity, inclination or outcome changed.¹⁴

8. What Was Found in Bnei Yissaschar's Writings?

Now consider an attribution of complete denial, sometimes assigned to Rabbi Tzvi Elimelech of Dinov, author of Bnei Yissaschar. After distinguishing roles, questions and ordinary conditions from miracle, we ask what his writings actually say. The inquiry found no source substantiating a sweeping attribution. Important positive affirmations were found, so the attribution cannot remain an agreed fact.

Bnei Yissaschar, Sivan 2:12, describes humanity as having choice, unlike mountains. Tishrei 4:22 also cites Rabbi Moses Hagiz's explanation that God's knowledge does not compel Pharaoh. The context preserves his responsibility, explaining that knowledge and choice are different.

A still more striking finding is in his VeHayah Berakhah, discussing interrupting prayer because of danger. A non-Jewish king is distinguished from a snake precisely because the king has choice, and it is free. Even doubtful danger from him therefore requires different treatment. This is a practical case in which non-Jewish choice directly concerns the worshipper's life.¹⁵

Conversely, it has not been proved that no other passage or further distinction can ever be found in his writings. Not all books were read continuously. The precise conclusion is that

14. Kedushat Levi, Fourth Sanctification for Purim; Yitro 10; Midbar Shur, discourse 16. For miracle in thought, changed outcome and canceled choice, see Research Booklet, chs. 6 and 8, pp. 10–11; pp. 12–13.

15. Bnei Yissaschar, Sivan 2:12; Tishrei 4:22; VeHayah Berakhah, Berakhot 5:1, beginning “even a snake,” p. 82 in the newer edition. For additional sources and search limits, see Research Booklet, ch. 7, pp. 11–12.

complete denial was unverified, while the texts found explicitly affirm choice. This differs entirely from saying, “He holds they have no choice; we only need to explain how.”

Likewise, “the nations are under nature” need not mean every decision is compelled. For Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague, Maharal, and following him Bnei Yissaschar’s author in Agra DeKallah, the subject also concerns preparation, disposition and inclination toward accepting Torah. Profound temperamental differences can exist without denying every possibility of acting otherwise. A stronger conclusion needs the author’s wording and argument, rather than the word “nature” alone.

9. Service, Nature and the Soul’s Root

Other works outside Chabad also connect choice with service, nature or the soul’s root. We will study four, asking in each what is distinctive about Israel and what is said about decision-making capacity.

Breslov: choice and the scope of service

In Likkutei Moharan by Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, part II (“Tinyana”), teaching 54, a Jew has choice in everything because every act involves divine service. Even traveling somewhere may be part of that service. The teaching says that among “others” there are things in which they are compelled. The stated difference is partial: particular things, rather than a whole life without choice.

The connection with service illuminates an important point. Where even an everyday act has religious significance, the domain in which a person must decide how to act expands. This does not establish control of every bodily event, or that will alone overcomes duress. Actions and service are the subject.

“Others” is naturally interpreted through the contrast with Israel, but the word is not itself “the nations”; the precise wording must not bear more than has been proved.

II:110 describes someone troubled by habits formed in childhood. He imagines he cannot change. The response rejects that feeling and emphasizes that choice is in a person’s hands. Habit can hinder and mislead without becoming duress. Yet “every person” here must not immediately erase teaching 54’s distinction. Audiences and questions may differ; both teachings must be retained and their relation studied.¹⁶

Does a lower soul-root mean no choice?

Rabbi Moses Chaim Luzzatto, Ramchal, defines knowing and willing choice in *Derekh Hashem*. Discussing Israel and the nations, he describes different levels and roots; yet he recognizes a person from another nation uprooting himself and joining by choice. The context is conversion. Difference of level does not erase the choice the source attributes to him.

Nefesh HaChaim, by Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, discusses a Jew’s power to affect the worlds through his actions. “Worlds” here means levels of spiritual reality in which human action has effects. This goes beyond whether someone can refrain from stealing. A source reserving such influence for Israel addresses an act’s power in the worlds; here it makes no determination about others’ moral decision.

Three things must therefore be distinguished: the soul’s level, action’s power in spiritual reality, and the possibility of choosing an act. They may be related, but are not synonyms.

¹⁶. Likkutei Moharan II:54, 110; Likkutei Etzot, Fear and Service 32. For service’s scope, “others” and the habit argument’s limits, see Research Booklet, ch. 8, pp. 12–13.

Reading every difference of level as denial of all capacity would clash with affirmations of choice in the same works.¹⁷

Mei HaShiloach, by Rabbi Mordechai Yosef of Izbica, also describes false freedom: someone wishing to indulge every desire may be enslaved to desire precisely because his intellect does not govern it. This forcefully depicts the will's condition. Without evidence it must not become a statement that no alternative decision is possible. The same Torah portion, and Tetzaveh, also emphasize that God's will must not excuse abandoning service and reverence. Knowing that everything connects to God's will should deepen reverence, rather than empty responsibility.¹⁸

10. Why Is a Non-Jew Easier to Influence?

We now reach the harder part to reconcile. In the Simchat Torah 5736 talk, the Rebbe compares difficulty in influencing Jewish politicians with relative ease concerning non-Jews, saying in this context that “they have no choice.” The Yiddish transcript describes an attempt to return territories after the Six-Day War, which the Arab side refused to accept. The discussion concerns the refusal itself and whether that side would agree to accept the territories. It is therefore insufficient to put the entire difference in the outcome following a decision: will and decision themselves are also involved.¹⁹

Why consult an earlier letter from Elul 5708 here? It reserves for a Jew the possibility of changing his role in relation to the

17. Derekh Hashem 1:3; 2:4; Nefesh HaChaim 1:3–8, especially 4 and 7. For level, conversion, power in the worlds and choice, see Research Booklet, ch. 9, pp. 14–15.

18. Mei HaShiloach, Beshalach, beginning “They shall return and encamp” and “The Lord will fight for you”; Tetzaveh, “You shall make an altar for burning incense.” For context and limits, see Research Booklet, ch. 8, pp. 12–13.

19. Sichot Kodesh 5736 I, pp. 133–134, Yiddish transcript; Hebrew version of the Simchat Torah 5736 talk, pp. 187–190. Both are unedited and differ in presentation order. For comparison, see Research Booklet, ch. 13, pp. 19–20.

higher intention. Other creatures are described as “His charge ... preserved their spirit”: their course is kept within the assigned role. The same wording recurs in the Yiddish 5736 transcript near the statement denying choice. This points toward governance and role, but does not by itself explain what is denied in each decision or how that fits the capacity to refrain from sin. The letter also qualifies our knowledge and refers to Iggeret HaKodesh 25; it gives no Jew sovereignty over another’s fate.²⁰

The 12 Tammuz 5728 talk makes the difficulty sharp: the persecutors are said to lack choice, yet in the same description they sense and decide to fight. “No choice” therefore does not mean no thought or decision psychologically. Conversely, deciding does not prove freedom in chapter 5’s deeper sense: even someone under strong influence can feel he is deciding.

Later in that talk, a Jewish guard helps Admur HaRayatz, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak of Lubavitch, during his imprisonment.

Precisely the guard’s having choice adds to the wonder. This tests an initially simple-looking explanation: perhaps non-Jews are easier to influence because only outward help is sought, while Jews are asked for inward repentance. The guard shows that a Jew too can give outward help without comprehensive repentance being described. Different tasks matter, but do not alone explain the difference between people.

The Shabbat Noach 5731 talk also describes a path of influence from the heavenly ministers—the appointed spiritual powers—to the nations’ assistance below. Practical effort remains obligatory. Knowing a path of influence adds explanation, but how it fits the choice granted within a command still needs

²⁰. Igrot Kodesh II, letter 405, Elul 5708. For capacity’s source in relation to role and providence, see Research Booklet, ch. 10, pp. 15–16.

clarification. The description promises no fulfillment of every particular request.²¹

When the same decision is political and forbidden

Take our own illustration: a non-Jewish ruler considering ordering the killing of innocent people. One decision has two aspects: a political decision and a decision to violate the prohibition of bloodshed. According to the explanation that command grants choice, he can really refrain from sin. If influence from above merely changes his considerations and makes reconsideration easier, the alternative may remain open. Ease of influence does not by itself contradict choice.

The difficulty arises when the difference between him and a Jew is explained specifically by “he has no choice”: what is denied, and why does that denial make influencing his will easier? If an alternative is blocked in this case, what changed, and what grounds responsibility? If the alternative remains, in what sense was choice denied? Decision versus outcome does not suffice here, because decision itself is our subject. These questions remain. They do not prove that a non-Jew has no choice at all or that every influence is coercion.

What might explain the difference in the same decision? Three possibilities:

- Influence changes motives while leaving an alternative.
- Exceptional intervention limits the possibility at a particular time.
- The capacity’s root explains a different manner of intervention.

21. 12 Tammuz 5728, sections 13–14 and 47–49; Noach 5731, sections 8–14. For persecutors, guard and assistance, see Research Booklet, ch. 12, pp. 18–19.

Each must show its fit with the source being discussed. “There are degrees” alone still does not explain how degrees operate in the same act.

This is the difficulty the study leaves open. It requires neither denying all non-Jewish choice nor declaring every statement reconciled. There is strong grounding for choice and responsibility, actual sources for Israel’s distinctiveness and for God’s governance of will itself; their detailed connection remains unproven as one explanation operating in every case.

11. What Is Clear and What Remains Open?

Return to the person at the beginning, facing an opportunity to harm and refraining. On Maimonides’ account, there is no reason to describe his restraint as an illusion. The Egyptian example expressly teaches that he could avoid harm. Chabad sources too offer a positive explanation: command enables both paths for Noahides; the Shemini 5747 talk calls choice in this domain real.

If he acted from conscience without recognizing the command’s source, his capacity must not be confused with his standing among the righteous of the nations. If he performed an additional mitzvah beyond his obligation, the will recognized by halakhah must not be dismissed; conversely, we have no complete explanation here of capacity’s source in every possible domain.

Pharaoh teaches exceptions and distinct questions: responsibility for an earlier will, repentance blocked as punishment, strengthening that enables a decision beyond fear, and individual agent versus ruler. An answer for one condition must not become every non-Jew’s nature in every act.

Yet Chassidic teaching deeply distinguishes the root of Jewish choice. Preserving Noahide responsibility does not require erasing it. A difference in root can coexist with real capacity granted through command. What we lack is one explicit explanation showing how that difference operates in every talk about ease of influence, especially where the same decision concerns mitzvah and sin.

What is denied and what remains therefore depends on the source's question. Capacity and responsibility remain where affirmed; choice's root is distinctive where described; providence over the victim stays intact; and a special restriction requires its limits and responsibility's basis to be examined. No short statement replaces these distinctions.²²

The inquiry thus does not end by denying moral choice to the nations. It teaches how to study a statement about choice: identify its subject, domain, meaning of freedom, and ordinary or exceptional setting. This preserves the demand for human action and the Torah's depth about capacity's root and God's governance, without supplying an unstated link ourselves.

Let each answer address its own question

Someone says, "That is my habit; I cannot do otherwise."

The immediate question is whether habit closed the possibility or merely made it harder and less visible. Breslov's teaching on changing oneself addresses precisely this mistake. The deeper question about the root of will is not thereby solved. We can understand why habit does not excuse conduct without claiming already to know how all choice derives from its root.

Someone decided to help, but the plan failed. For example, he decided to return money but could not find its owner, as in

²². For test cases and the overall conclusion, see Research Booklet, chs. 15 and 16, pp. 22–23; pp. 23–24.

chapter 1. Choice versus completion is very useful here. Circumstances preventing success do not empty the decision. But had the description said his very wanting was compelled, saying that outcomes are providential would not suffice. We would have to examine willing itself. A simple case thus shows why an answer right in one domain may not suffice in another.

A ruler says, “I only fulfilled a role in history.” As in the Pharaoh explanations, what he chose and what was necessary still require examination. If the decision harmed others, responsibility for the act remains a question even when the decision-maker is a ruler.

Map of the Explanations

Seven proposals with differing weight and scope, following Research Booklet, ch. 14, pp. 20–22. Chapters 8–9’s examinations of authors are integrated into chapter 11’s conclusion.

1 • Root and degree of freedom

Choice’s source is described distinctively in Israel. This explains levels of language; how it changes influence in the same act must still be shown.

2 • Choice through command

Command enables both paths in the seven laws. This affirms real capacity; it does not prove denial of every domain outside the seven.

3 • Act and outcome

The aggressor’s evil choice and providence over the victim are distinct. This helps greatly, but alone does not explain statements about will and decision.

4 • The king in office

For Malbim, public governance is distinctive. This role-based distinction does not describe every private non-Jew, or itself resolve a forbidden public decision.

5 · Type of task

Seeking outward help differs from demanding inward repentance. Yet a Jew too may help outwardly; this is insufficient to explain the difference between people.

6 · Exceptional intervention

The strongest local proposal, still unproven as comprehensive. Sources also describe miracles in thought and withheld repentance. Ask what changed and why responsibility remains; an exception must not become the permanent condition.

7 · Several explanations

Authors ask different questions and sometimes disagree. Retaining differences prevents forced reconciliation, yet leaves difficulty when statements concern the same decision.

The remaining question

How does real choice in a commanded matter fit relative ease of influencing a non-Jew's will in the very same forbidden decision? That connection still requires explicit explanation.

Further Study in the Sources

Eight central units for direct study. Further sources and full discussion appear in Research Booklet, ch. 20, pp. 49–50.

Sanhedrin 56b–57b. Noahide command and responsibility. The discussion establishes accountability for action; alone it is no philosophical definition of willing.

Maimonides, Laws of Repentance 5–6. Human freedom, the individual Egyptian and possible withholding of repentance. Notice 6:3 versus 6:5.

Nachmanides on Genesis 15:14; Exodus 7:3. Responsibility within decree and two reasons for hardening the heart. Ask what each assumes and adds.

Sefer HaIkkarim 4:25; Sforno on Exodus 7:3–4. How strengthening may enable a decision beyond mere submission to fear, and how the accounts differ.

Tanya, Iggeret HaKodesh 25. The aggressor's evil choice and the victim's decree are studied together. Providence is no exemption from responsibility.

Likkutei Moharan II:54, 110. Service and choice, alongside rejection of the feeling that habit cancels the capacity to change.

Igrot Kodesh IV, letter 1089; XVI, letter 5871, pp. 92–93. Freedom's root and two explanations of reward and punishment among the nations. Focus on what command grants and what the letter does not determine about other domains.

Sichot Kodesh 5736 I, pp. 133–134; Hebrew Simchat Torah 5736 talk, pp. 187–190. The political context of “they have no choice” and differing difficulty of influencing will. Here the relation among the distinctions studied needs examination.