

## Do I Matter?

Rabbi David E. Levy  
Yom Kippur 5777

Moses was tired. 120 years of life is hard for anyone. Yet as he stood there, and looked at the people of Israel, he had hope for the future, hope that this ragtag group of Israelites would turn into a nation. Like a proud parent he looked at them and said:

Deut. 30:19 This day, I call upon the heaven and the earth as witnesses [that I have warned] you: I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. You shall choose life, so that you and your offspring will live;

יטה עֲדָתִי בְּכֶם הַיּוֹם אַתְּ הַשְׁמִים  
אֶת-הָאָרֶץ הַחַיִם וְהַמוֹת נָתַתִי לִפְנֵיךְ  
הַבָּרָכָה וְקַלְלָה וּבְחִרְךָ בְּחוֹם לְמַעַן  
תִּחְיָה אַתָּה וִזְרֻעָה:

Moses tells the Israelites that there are choices to make as they enter the Promised Land, and these choices and every choice thereafter will have far reaching consequences. And with these words, Moses lays the foundation for our tradition's belief that we are endowed with free will, and we chart the course of our own lives.

But-as we all know, there may be only two Jews in a room but you'll get at least three opinions. So keeping in mind Moses on the one hand, let's consider the story of Joseph on the other. Remember Joseph and his multicolored coat? Remember his dreams, and how he taunted his brothers with those dreams? How they threw him in a pit and sold him as a slave? Well, when he was finally reunited with his brothers he told them: "I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed, and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was in order to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will not be plowing and reaping...So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. God made me father to Pharaoh himself, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Bereishit (Genesis) 45:4-8

In each part of the story, Joseph attributes his deliverance not to his own actions, not to his smart decision making, or innate talents, or even to luck, but rather, to G-d. To a Higher Power, an angel on his shoulder, Divine Providence, , whatever you want to call it: Joseph and his actions matter only as a part of the grand tapestry of time that G-d is weaving. So there's Moses on the one hand and Joseph on the other, Free Will and Fate. With these dueling ideals in our tradition we are left with the questions: Do we matter? Do our actions matter?

Yom Kippur demands that we take stock of our lives. When we walk into this building on this day, do we enter believing we can chart our own destiny, or do we assume that the course is already determined, planned out toward a certain fate? Are we driving the car, so to speak, or riding in a train car along fixed rails? I'd be willing to wager that so many of us walked in this morning/evening believing wholeheartedly that we are in charge of our future, and yet the greatest critic of Free Will is not the Bible--it's science.

Journalist Stephen Cave presents a cogent case in his essay: "There's no Such thing as Free Will." He writes:

"[Neuroscience research] describes the brain as a physical system like any other...that we no more will it to operate in a certain way than we will our heart to beat. The contemporary scientific image of human behavior is one of neurons firing...[which causes] our thoughts and deeds, in an unbroken chain that stretches back to our birth and beyond. In principle, we are therefore completely predictable."<sup>2</sup>

The idea that our actions are predetermined is not new. What's changed is the science that strives to understand it. Baruch Spinoza, the first secular Jew, who lived over 400 years ago wrote: "[M]en believe themselves to be free, because they are conscious of their own actions and are ignorant of the causes by which they are determined."<sup>3</sup> Or put

---

<sup>2</sup>Cave, Stephen. "There's No Such Thing as Free Will." The Atlantic. Atlantic Media Company, 1 June 2016. Web. 24 Sept. 2016.

<<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/06/theres-no-such-thing-as-free-will/480750/>>. For more indepth reading about the nature of Free Will versus the assumption of determinism, I read this book: Determinism Or Free Will Paperback by Chapman Cohen; it was helpful in better understanding this complex topic.

<sup>3</sup> Dutton, Blake. "Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy." Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. N.p., n.d. Web. 24 Sept. 2016. <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/spinoza/#SH5a>>.

more simply: just because we don't immediately understand why we acted in a particular way, there were countless factors that influenced our thinking; we just may not be aware of them. Spinoza also suggested that if we could collect enough data about ourselves, we might even be able to predict our actions, or as Stephen Cave put it: "If we could understand any individual's brain...well enough, we could, in theory, predict [their] response to any given stimulus with 100 percent accuracy."<sup>4</sup>

We now live in an era of unprecedented data gathered daily about each and every one of us. That data is used to do exactly as Spinoza suggests, and predict how we will act. Take a simple and timely example: my favorite childhood food, Pop-Tarts™. According to researchers:

"Walmart records every purchase by every customer for future analysis. Company analysts noticed that when the National Weather Service warned of a hurricane, Walmart stores in the affected area would see a surge in sales of Pop-Tarts. So store managers were told to put their Pop-Tarts near the entrance during hurricane season, and sales soared."<sup>5</sup>

Imagine how many Pop-Tarts were sold these past few days: data driving profits as people fled areas affected by Hurricane Matthew. Every click, every purchase, every keystroke, becomes a part of the 2.5 quintillion bytes of data we create every day. Companies use that data to predict and understand how and why we behave and to influence our future decisions. In some cases, it's simply to sell us a few more snack cakes or bottles of detergent.

In other cases the stakes are higher. The biggest names in Data Analytics are companies like--Google, Facebook, Amazon, and Apple--that invest trillions of dollars collecting terabytes of data on each of us in furthering Spinoza's conclusion: that with

---

<sup>4</sup>Cave, Stephen. "There's No Such Thing as Free Will." The Atlantic. Atlantic Media Company, 1 June 2016. Web. 24 Sept. 2016.  
<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/06/theres-no-such-thing-as-free-will/480750/>.

<sup>5</sup>Bray, Hiawatha. "Book Review: 'Big Data' by Viktor Mayer-Schönberger and Kenneth Cukier - The Boston Globe." BostonGlobe.com. N.p., 05 Mar. 2013. Web. 24 Sept. 2016.

<https://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/books/2013/03/05/book-review-big-data-viktor-mayer-schonberger-and-kenneth-cukier/T6YC7rNqXHgWowaE1oD8v0/story.html>. (I cited the review, but the book is also fantastic)

enough data, we can understand anyone. Which leads to the phrase “Big Data:” a catch-all term that refers to the thousands of systems that are in place around the world seeking to turn each of us into a predictive model.

Our challenge with Big Data is to ensure that the findings do not pre-ordain our fate. Consider how Big Data is already changing the criminal justice system. Defendants in certain states and counties in the US are asked to fill out a risk assessment, to determine how likely they are to reoffend. These risk assessments are being used “...to inform decisions about who can be set free at every stage of the criminal justice system, from assigning bond amounts ...to even more fundamental decisions about defendants’ freedom.”

6

As independent public interest newsroom ProPublica reported last May, is that they are “... particularly likely to falsely flag black defendants as future criminals, wrongly labeling them this way at almost twice the rate as white defendants.”<sup>7</sup> This drove Attorney General Eric Holder to say in 2014: “Although these measures were crafted with the best of intentions, I am concerned that they...undermine our efforts to ensure ...equal justice[; and that] they may exacerbate...disparities that are already far too common in our criminal justice system and in our society.”<sup>8</sup>

There’s little harm done when companies can analyze potential buyers to sell more Pop-Tarts. But, I find it terrifying, and far more problematic that governments are using predictive data to extend or shorten someone’s jail sentence. The authors of the book “Big Data” note that “...algorithms will predict the likelihood that one will get a heart attack..., default on a mortgage..., or commit a crime....It leads to an ethical consideration of the role of free will versus the dictatorship of data.”<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup>“Machine Bias: There’s Software Used Across the Country to Predict Future Criminals. And It’s Biased Against Blacks.” Top Stories RSS. N.p., 31 May 2016. Web. 24 Sept. 2016.

<<https://www.propublica.org/article/machine-bias-risk-assessments-in-criminal-sentencing>>. Also, if you want more information about this check out Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy Hardcover – September 6, 2016 by Cathy O’Neil: She pointed me to this propublica piece.

<sup>7</sup>ibid.

<sup>8</sup> ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Mayer-Schönberger, Viktor, and Kenneth Cukier. *Big Data: A Revolution That Will Transform*

How do we deal with that ethical consideration? What is the role of free will? If we are nothing but synapses easily analyzed by algorithms, why in the world do we offer our prayers during these Days of Awe? Are we just fixed threads/immovable strands in the grand tapestry of time?

"How many will pass from the earth and how many will be created, who will enjoy tranquility and who will suffer, who will be impoverished and who will be enriched." The prayer *Unetaneh Tokef* seems to provide more evidence that all the forces beyond our control determine our future. That our choices are, ultimately, inconsequential. That my wife Kate and I couldn't do anything other than be angry and upset when she was diagnosed with breast cancer last year. That when Hurricane Matthew destroyed the Caribbean and struck our shores last week, we could do nothing but stare at the brutality of the physical world.

As we look over the past year, each one of us can identify a moment when the world was unfair and cruel, and there was nothing we could do about it.

But consider the prayer's last words: "But with Repentance, Prayer, and Righteous Giving we can transcend the harshness of the decree." That even when awful things happen, things beyond our control, even in those moments when we feel as if our actions have no effect: we must still *believe* that our choices matter, and *behave* as if they can change our fate. We must still repent, because repentance may not undo what we have done, but it still may bring us closer to the people we love. We must still pray, because prayer may not change a dreaded outcome, but prayer can strengthen our spirits to confront what we must, because prayer can help us feel less alone, more connected. We must still give, because Righteous Giving or Tzedakah may not solve all the world's problems, but it will help us ensure that we leave this world better than we found it.

And the amazing thing is this: if we believe our actions matter, they actually do.

That may sound like circular logic, but bear with me: if we are the product of all of our inputs, everything that comes at us, if we believe that our actions matter and have consequences, then that feeling, that confidence in our deeds, becomes one of those inputs.

This is best illustrated by Dr. Kathleen Vohs and Dr. Jonathan Schooler who began a series of experiments to see what would happen if people didn't believe they had free will. "On a range of measures...[they] found that "people who are induced to believe less in free will are more likely to behave immorally."<sup>10</sup>

So, when we believe our choices matter, they do.

Yet how do we arrive at that belief? In the words of Socrates: Know thyself. The ancient Sages recognized that each of us is born with natural strengths that can defy/flout even the fate assigned to us by the stars. The Babylonian Talmud, drawing on the popular astrology of the time, says, "He who is born under Mars will be a shedder of blood. [But rather than define this narrowly,] Rabbi Ashi [interpreted this to mean]: [He could be] a surgeon (or) a thief, a ritual slaughterer, or a circumciser."<sup>11</sup> Each of us is born with certain gifts and predilections; whether they're charted by the stars, I cannot tell you.

With each young person I meet, I see an innate spark, that, if fanned, if nurtured, could radiate forth into a bright flame; and when I see that spark neglected, bullied, or buried, I recognize that a young person's innate passion could just as easily fizz into dark ash. Psychologists and sociologists tell us: nature is what we begin with, but nurture can shape our path. But that can only happen if we give ourselves the time and space to act intentionally and not simply react.

I remember the first time I tried meditation. To try to sit, to notice what was going on around me without reacting to it. To ignore the impulse to focus on any particular thought, but to just allow my thoughts to float by. To resist the urge to respond, but instead to notice with boundless curiosity the world around me. Mindful meditation is one way to ensure that we make choices and don't simply act on impulse, that we create our own destiny and not resign ourselves to our fate.<sup>12</sup>

You know that feeling you get when you're driving and you feel the buzz of a text

---

<sup>10</sup>Cave, Stephen. "There's No Such Thing as Free Will." The Atlantic. Atlantic Media Company, 1 June 2016. Web. 24 Sept. 2016.

<<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/06/theres-no-such-thing-as-free-will/480750/>>.

<sup>11</sup> Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Shabbath Folio 156a

<sup>12</sup> (This talk informed my thinking)

[http://www.ted.com/talks/judson\\_brewer\\_a\\_simple\\_way\\_to\\_break\\_a\\_bad\\_habit/transcript?language=en](http://www.ted.com/talks/judson_brewer_a_simple_way_to_break_a_bad_habit/transcript?language=en)

and you just want to read it? Or that sensation when a plate of cookies is wafting its delicious aroma in front of you and you just want one more cookie--even after you've had five? Or the countless triggers we all have that push us to act reflexively? What would happen if instead of responding to that impulse, we paused, recognized it, and then allowed our curiosity to blossom? What was it that was drawing me into that argument? Was it something they said, or did it come from something in me? When we give ourselves the space for that type of clarity, we will make the decisions we want to make, not the ones that emerge instinctively, reactively.

Jewish tradition encourages us to pause, to stop and recognize the meaning and consequences of our actions, *before* we act. Everything we do--eating an apple, seeing a rainbow, visiting an old friend, even acknowledging that a loved one has died-- comes with a matching blessing from the Jewish tradition. The blessing exists not just to thank G-d but to force us to pause and turn a mindless act into an intentional act.

Take a moment to consider what we've chosen to do today/tonight. We're right here, right now. In the very act of choosing to worship with us you are defying inertia, challenging fate, refusing to accept that your destiny is already sealed in the Book of Life, and there's nothing you can do about it, so why bother anyway. Instead you have decided that that you need a spiritual tuneup along with the rest of the Jewish people, here on Yom Kippur. You've decided to make your deeds matter, this new year.

Part of why we come here, year after year, not so much out of habit but rather by conscious choice, is to affirm life, to affirm hope and possibility, in a world that often seems to be drowning in despair. Our tradition teaches life over death. It teaches blessing over curse. And it encourages each of us to grasp hold of our God-given free will so that we can make sacred choices and not simply give up, as if our actions have no meaning.

Nights/mornings like this, with all of us assembled in one place and with one purpose, I look out at all of you, the congregation of Israel, and I have an inkling of how Moses felt. He knew that the Israelites were entering the Promised Land but that it would be up to them to fulfill the Promise. Their fate was not in God's hands, not God's alone, anyway. They could no longer rely on Moses to get there. They had to make choices that

would keep their faith strong and their fate secure for generations to come. Looking out at the thousands of his people gathered on the banks of the Jordan, Moses saw it plain as day: We do matter, and our deeds can change the world, if we believe they can.