

The Bechirah Point Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler (d. 1953)¹

Free will is a cornerstone of traditional Jewish belief. A defining aspect of humanity is that we choose how to behave, think and live and that the course of our lives is not predestined by God. The classic Jewish position on free will is represented by Maimonides in his *Laws of Repentance*, chapter 5 where he writes that anyone can be as righteous as Moses or as wicked as the most morally depraved characters in the Tanakh/Bible². The choice is ours and our choice is not limited by anything.³ This can be a liberating idea not to be limited by anything –past decisions, upbringing or current circumstances. This idea of unlimited free-will even has a ring of New Age to it. We create our own reality by the choices we make and those choices are never limited. If one wants to be as righteous as Moshe, go for it. The choice is ours. The dark-side of unlimited free will is that we can blame ourselves for our circumstances. Since we create our own reality, if we are sick or not succeeding at work, or not as righteous as Moshe, it is our fault because we have free-will. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for people suffering with chronic illnesses be blamed for their illness because of this notion of unlimited free-will.

Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, one of the great Mussar teachers of the 20th century, sharpens this concept of free will in a way that accounts for nature and nurture. He writes that all humans have free will only at something called a *Bechirah*/Choice point. To explain this idea he offers an example of a smoker. The smoker coughs heavily at night and cannot sleep. He promises himself that he will not smoke again the next day. The next morning he thinks, “I’ll have just one.” He knows from experience that once he smokes that first cigarette he will crave a second and will be unable to stop himself. However, he believes the thought, “I’ll have just one,” and lights up. Of course, he ends up smoking a pack and lies awake coughing at night only to repeat the whole exercise the next day. The *Bechirah* point was the moment he chose to listen to the voice that said, “I’ll have just one.”

This may be a familiar situation for many of us. We are in a *Bechirah* point when we sense a struggle between what we know is the right thing to do and what we feel we want to do. Ideally our feelings align with whatever is right, but until we reach a high level of spiritual growth, feelings are better taken as information and not as guides for action.⁴ A mundane example from my own life is my constant battle with late-night snacking. I know that if I open the bag of chips as I work at my computer after 10:00 PM I will most likely finish the bag (and this is a big bag!). I know it will be better for me to have a cup of tea or eat some soup if I am hungry. But I want chips! That is one moment of *Bechirah*/choice. Another comes earlier in the night. I know that if I stay up working past 10:00 PM I will most likely eat unhealthy food. I have a *bechirah* point between shutting off the computer and staying up late. I know which will be better but really want to write one more email, or see one more Torah commentary.

¹ This essay is based on Rabbi Dessler’s idea of The Bechirah Point, See Discourse on Free Will, Miktav M’Eliyahu, Vol. 1

² Maimonides, Laws of Teshuva, 5:2

³ In the words of Maimonides, “There is no one who compels him, sentences him, or leads him towards either of these two paths. Rather, he, on his own initiative and decision, tends to the path he chooses.” (Laws of Teshuva 5:2, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger translation)

⁴ Rabbi Moshe Chayim Luzzato writes in *The Path of the Upright* that a goal of spiritual development is to get to the point that we feel drawn to goodness and holiness like a piece of iron is drawn to a magnet.

Rabbi Dessler's innovation is that we only have real free will at one point and anything beyond or before that point is outside the realm of our free-will. In my case, once I open that bag of chips and it is past 10:00 PM I really don't have free-will to stop eating. My mind and body are so conditioned to devour that whole bag that I am really on auto-pilot at this point. If we had the awareness of what we are doing we might be able to stop, but that is just the point. When we are in the zone of conditioned or habitual behavior, we are not acting with awareness. We are robots. According to Rabbi Dessler, most of our life is lived in the zone of habit. In this way he is aligned with the most contemporary brain research.⁵

We can be habituated for good or for bad. Many young people at the high school where I work are habituated to say thank you to their teachers. They are not really making a free-will choice to thank the teacher each time. For them, the *bechirah* point is not only to say thank you but to acknowledge one thing they thought the teacher did well that day. This would take thought and push them beyond the habitual "Thank you" into appreciating the teacher in a deeper and more meaningful way. We can also be habituated to negative behaviors and thoughts. A child raised in the Mafia will not think twice about stealing gum from a candy store. However, his *Bechirah* point might be whether he will shoot his way out of a police net if he is caught. He is aware that murder is wrong and this awareness creates a *bechirah* point in his life.

The Bechirah point is that place where our habits of mind and heart or irrational cravings for everything from food to sex meet with what we know is the right thing to do.

Stop for a minute and think of examples of one or two *Bechirah* points from your own life.

The *Bechirah* point is fluid. The more we choose in the direction of what we know to be right, the easier it gets to make similar choices. We thus create new good habits and move more of our behavior within the realm of positive habituation. Our *Bechirah* point is pushed further in the direction of refined behavior. According to Rav Dessler, this movement *is* spiritual growth.

In considering our example, above, we can notice that choosing not to smoke that first cigarette will be a difficult *Bechirah*. But after making this *Bechirah* for many months, the next *Bechirah* point may be about exercise or diet. By this point, former smoker will be treating himself as the Divine soul he truly is.

As we make more positive choices we reveal more and more of our divine soul⁶. By making these positive choices at our *Bechirah* Points we actually grow and become more spiritually actualized beings. In other words, we become more holy.

The opposite is also true. When we make choices in the direction of habit and urges we become more and more numb to what we know is the right thing to do in that particular situation. More of our behavior comes under the dominion of negative habits. In my own example, the more I stay up late and eat chips, the easier it becomes the next time to do the same thing. I don't even have a struggle going on. I automatically crack open the bag without even thinking about it anymore. Many of us probably have experienced this type of negative habituation around food.

⁵ Find reference (Daniel Kahneman, Thinking Fast, Thinking Slow; Your Brain at Work, David Rock)

⁶ I first heard this idea from Rabbi David Lapin at the Mussar Institute Kallah, October 2010

The Rabbis of the *Mishna* captured this dynamic when they said, “A mitzvah leads to another mitzvah and a wrongdoing leads to another wrongdoing” and “The second time a person does a wrongdoing, it is no longer a wrongdoing in his mind anymore.”

The power of the *Bechirah* Point perspective is that it gives us a concrete practice for spiritual growth. We can manipulate the relative power of our *yetzer harah* and our *yetzer tov* through our choices. The more one chooses in the direction of his urges, the stronger the *yetzer harah* gets in that area of life and the weaker a hold the *yetzer tov* has here. The more we choose in the direction of good, clear, balanced thinking, the more we strengthen our *yetzer tov*⁷. By tracking our *Bechirah* points – those points where we have awareness of a tension between the force of habit and what we know is right – we can chart our growing edge. The *Bechirah* points are those places where we can pursue our soul curriculum. No matter how we’ve been educated and habituated, we always have the choice to be mindful of our *Bechirah* Points.

Questions for Consideration

What is your opinion about free will? Is it closer to that of Maimonides or Rabbi Dessler?

When is a time you felt like you grew higher or lower spiritually because of choices you made?

What might it be that gets people to believe things that they objectively know are not true, like the smoker in the example above?

What are one or two *Bechirah* points you experienced recently?

⁷ Paraphrased from *Aley Shur* II, p. 40, Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe

Learn the Sources

The Bechirah Point Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler (d. 1953)

Free will is a cornerstone of traditional Jewish belief. A defining aspect of humanity is that we choose how to behave, think and live and that the course of our lives is not predestined by God. The classic Jewish position on free will is represented by Maimonides in his Laws of Repentance, chapter 5 where he writes that anyone can be as righteous as Moses or as wicked as the most morally depraved characters in the Tanakh/Bible. The choice is ours and our choice is never limited.

Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler (d. 1953), one of the great Mussar teachers of the 20th century, sharpens this concept of free will in a way that accounts for nature and nurture. He writes that all humans have free will only at something called a Bechirah/Choice point. To explain this idea he offers an example of a smoker. The smoker coughs heavily at night and cannot sleep. He promises himself that he will not smoke again the next day. The next morning he thinks, "I'll have just one." He knows from experience that once he smokes that first cigarette he craves a second and cannot stop. However, he believes the thought, "I'll have just one," and lights up. Of course, he ends up smoking a pack and lies awake coughing that night only to repeat the whole exercise the next day. The Bechirah point was the moment he chose to listen to the voice that said, "I'll have just one." According to Rabbi Dessler, the truth is that he can never stop at one. He has a choice between truth and falsehood. Rabbi Dessler analogizes this moment to the front on a battlefield where two armies stand in opposition. One army is on territory that represents truth and the other on territory representing falsehood. According to Rabbi Dessler:

Everyone has free choice—at the point where truth meets falsehood. In other words Bechirah takes place at that point where the truth as the person sees it confronts the illusion produced in him by the power of falsehood⁸. But the majority of a person's actions are undertaken without any clash between truth and falsehood taking place. Many of a person's actions may happen to coincide with what is objectively right because he has been brought up that way and it does not occur to him to do otherwise, and many bad and false decisions may be taken simply because the person does not realize that they are bad. In such cases no valid Bechirah, or choice, has been made...

How would you define the "Falsehood" Rav Dessler is talking about in your own words?

What might be a "false decision?"

Can you think of an example from your own life of this type of "objectively right" or "false" decision.

Why might these type of choices not be "valid" bechirah?

Rabbi Dessler is saying something fairly radical. Not all our actions are actually free will decisions. Much of what we do is determined by the values instilled in us by our families, schools and cultures.

⁸ "Falsehood" is the illusion produced by a combination of irrational wants and desires and habituation.

For example, one may have been brought up in an environment of Torah, among people who devote themselves to good deeds. In this case his *bechirah* point will not be whether or not to commit an actual sin but whether to do a *mitzva* with more or less devotion and *kavana*/intention. Another may be brought up among evildoers of the lowest grade, among thieves and robbers. For him, whether or not to steal does not present any *bechirah* at all; his *bechirah* point might be on the question of shooting his way out when discovered...this is where for him the forces of...truth and untruth, are evenly balanced.

We grow spiritually through our bechirah/choices:

It must be realized that this *bechirah* point does not remain static in any given individual. With each good *bechirah* successfully carried out, the person rises higher in spiritual level: that is, things that were previously in the line of battle are now in the area controlled by the *yetzer tov* (good, clear thinking)...giving in to the *yetzer ha'rah* (impulse for immediate gratification) pushes back the frontier of the good, and an act which previously cost one a struggle with one's conscience will now be done without *bechirah* at all.

Additional Questions for Consideration

What experience do you have with this phenomena of good choices becoming easier the more you make these choices and vice versa?

What is your opinion about free will? Is it closer to that of Maimonides or Rabbi Dessler?

What might it be that gets people to believe things that they objectively know are not true, like the smoker in the example above?

When is a time you felt like you grew higher or lower spiritually because of choices you made?

What are one or two *Bechirah* points you experienced recently?

What do you think of Rav Dessler's claim that we rise or fall in our spiritual level through our *Bechirah* points?

For Further Study Bechirah – Free Will

The following sources from the Torah, Talmud, Maimonides (d. 1204, Egypt) and Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler (d. 1953, Israel) explore different aspects of free will. These selections can be studied on their own or as a unit.

Shabbat 156a

“One who is born under Mars will be a blood shedder. Rabbi Ashi said, [he may be] a surgeon, a thief, a butcher or a Mohel.”

האי מאן דבמאדים יהי גבר אשיד דמא אמר רבי אשי אי אומנא אי גנבא אי טבחא אי מוהלא

Questions for consideration:

The rabbis seem to consider our basic temperament to be set at birth by, among other things, the astrological signs under which we are born. What do you think of this idea that our basic characteristics, such as being “hot blooded” or “calm” is not a matter of choice, but is something we are born with that does not change?

Rabbi Ashi explains that, despite being stuck with our basic characteristics we can choose how to use them. Do you find this to be an expansive or a limiting sense of free will?

How would you define your own temperament and what are the choices you have made to channel that temperament in positive or negative directions?

If temperament is a given, what is the role of *middot*?

Mishna Avot 4:2

Ben Azzai says... a *mitzvah* leads to another *mitzvah* and a wrongdoing leads to another wrongdoing

מִצְוָה גּוֹרֶרֶת מִצְוָה, וְעֲבֵרָה גּוֹרֶרֶת עֲבֵרָה.

Talmud Bavli Yuma 86b

When a person transgresses the same thing twice he considers it as if it is no longer a transgression

אמר רב הונא כיון שעבר אדם עבירה ושנה בה הותרה לו

Question for Consideration:

What psychological and spiritual dynamics at play in each of these rabbinic observations about human behavior?

What personal experience do you have with either a mitzvah leading to another mitzvah or rationalizing wrongdoing once you've done the same thing more than once?

What impact do these psycho-spiritual "truths" have on free will?

Maimonides, Laws of Teshuva, Chapter 5⁹

1. Free will is granted to all people. If one desires to turn himself to the path of good and be righteous, the choice is his. Should he desire to turn to the path of evil and be wicked, the choice is his...

2. A person should not entertain the thesis held by the fools among the gentiles and the majority of the undeveloped among Israel that, at the time of a man's creation, God decrees whether he will be righteous or wicked.

This is untrue. Each person is fit to be righteous like Moses, our teacher, or wicked, like Jeroboam. [Similarly,] he may be wise or foolish, merciful or cruel, miserly or generous, or [acquire] any other character traits. There is no one who compels him, sentences him, or leads him towards either of these two paths. Rather, he, on his own initiative and decision, tends to the path he chooses.

Questions for Consideration:

What do you think of Maimonides' assertion that there is no compulsion to be either "merciful or cruel, etc."?

Why do you think many people believed God decrees if people are righteous or wicked? What would be the equivalent belief today?

Do you think there are any limits on human free will and choice?

⁹ Rabbi Eliyahu Touger translation

Deuteronomy 30: 19 – 20

I call on heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life – so you and your offspring may live – by loving the Holy One your God, heeding God's commands, and holding fast to God. For thereby you shall have life and shall long endure upon the soil that the Holy One swore to your ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them.

Questions for consideration:

What do you think of the prescription that "choosing life" means "loving the Holy One your God, etc."?

Why would anyone choose death and curse?

Imagine using "Choose life" as your criteria for decision making when faced with a tough choice. Would that help?

Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler on "Choose life"

Strive for Truth vol. 2, p. 56-7¹⁰

I have put before you life and death,
The blessing and the curse:
Choose life, so that you may live.
-Deuteronomy 30:19-20

"Life and death: comprise all that a person is "given" – all the facets of a person's character, his inborn traits and tendencies, his upbringing and environment; all those factors which determine what he calls, "life," what presents itself to him as "good" and "true"; and equally what he calls "death," evil" and "falsehood." All these things "I have put before you," literally: "I have given before you: ; these are the "given" of the human situation; they exist independently of any action on our part, like all the other features of our environment.

But – "you shall choose life." "Choosing life," choosing truth and reality, is something which only the human being himself can do, and which he does without being affected by any outside factor whatsoever.

Questions for Consideration:

According to R. Dessler, in your own words, what are the "givens" of the human condition and over what do we have choice?

How do you think the "givens" impact the choices we have, if at all?

What would it mean for you to commit to choosing "reality" on a regular basis?

¹⁰ Strive for Truth is the English translation of the first part of Rabbi Dessler's major work, *Miktaf M'Eliyahu*. The translation is by Rabbi Aryeh Carmell

Bechirah Point Practices

I. Torah Learning

Options for further text study include any of the materials in this curricular not already learned in the *Va'ad* meeting. One may also want to read the full excerpt on the *Bechirah* Point from Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler in Strive For Truth (copies included in the curriculum).

II. Cheshbon HaNefesh

Journaling¹¹

Record any *Bechirah*/choice points you notice during the day. Try to flesh out the issues that pulled at you in this *Bechirah*/choice point. Note any patterns in the type of incidents that create *Bechirah*/choice points for you. What are these *Bechirah*/choice points teaching you?

Rebbe Nachman's Hitbodedut

Hitbodedut literally means solitude or isolation. It can also refer to meditation. *Hitbodedut*, or time to oneself, is an essential part of any spiritual practice. Rebbe Nachman's *Hitbodedut* is a particular practice of speaking out one's thoughts to God in a spontaneous way in one's native language. Rebbe Nachman advised his followers to practice *Hitbodedut* daily as a form of *Cheshbon Hanefesh*. *Hitbodedut* can be done for any amount of time. It is important to find a place and time for the *Hitbodedut* in which you will not be interrupted and can be guaranteed privacy. Rebbe Nachman extolled the virtues of doing *Hitbodedut* in nature, but any private place works. *Hitbodedut* is a powerful practice for developing one's relationship with God. It can also be an alternative *Cheshbon Hanefesh* practice for those who find journaling very difficult. *Use the same directions as above for journaling, just in Hitbodedut practice you will speak your thoughts instead of writing.*

III. Sichat Chaverim Chevruta

Set up a 20-30 minute period of time to talk with your partner as least once between meetings. During this meeting you will split the time evenly. Choose one person to talk first. During the first person's time the listener's job is to give full attention to the speaker and ask questions that will help the speaker understand his or her situation better. Do not give any advice or try to solve a problem.

*Notes about Journaling practice:

- The first stage of *Mussar* practice is building awareness and greater sensitivity to our inner worlds and the world around us. Regular journaling is a time-tested method for building this sensitivity. The practice is called *Cheshbon Hanefesh* journaling because *Cheshbon Hanefesh*, literally "Soul Accounting," means keeping track of your soul growth. The *Yetzer HaRah* makes us forget those small, but significant moments of growth that happen all the time.
- Journaling sessions can be as short as one or two minutes and as long as you want. The key is finding a regular time for the journaling that fits into your life. For example, some people journal when turning the computer on. Others keep a journal on their night table and write before going to sleep. Connect the journaling to an activity that you know you do everyday. If

¹¹ Cheshbon Hanefesh journaling as a practice was developed by Dr. Alan Morinis. See his Climbing Jacob's Ladder (Broadway Books, 2002 pgs. 107 -112). The original practice of recording one's progress with a middah in chart form was developed by Rabbi Menachem Mendel Leffin, Cheshbon Hanefesh (1810)

you are really having a hard time, just try writing the words “*Bechirah* Point” at the top of the page each day¹². This will get you in the practice of opening the journal and putting the pen to the page.

Fill in dates for your practice period in the top row. Check each day you do the practice. This form can be printed on card stock paper and folded over into a tent to put on a desktop or dresser for easy viewing.

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Chevruta													

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Bechirah Point Practices

I. Torah Learning (See the practice sheet for suggested texts)

II. Cheshbon HaNefesh

Journaling¹³

Record any *Bechirah*/choice points you notice during the day. Try to flesh out the issues that pulled at you in this *Bechirah*/choice point. Note any patterns in the type of incidents that create *Bechirah*/choice points for you. What are these *Bechirah*/choice points teaching you?

Rebbe Nachman’s Hitbodedut

Speak out loud to God any experiences you had with *Bechirah* points during the day. Find a quiet, private place to do *Hitbodedut*. Use the journaling questions above for guidance.

III. Sichat Chaverim Chevruta

Set up a 20-30 minute period of time to talk with your partner as least once between meetings. During this meeting you will split the time evenly. Choose one person to talk first. During the first person’s time the listener’s job is to give full attention to the speaker and ask probing questions that will help the speaker understand his or her situation better. Do not give any advice or try to solve a problem.

¹² This method was developed by Boston-based Mussar Facilitator, Lisa Goodman.

¹³ Cheshbon Hanefesh journaling as a practice was developed by Dr. Alan Morinis. See his *Climbing Jacob’s Ladder* (Broadway Books, 2002 pgs. 107 -112). The original practice of recording one’s progress with a middah in chart form was developed by Rabbi Menachem Mendel Leffin, *Cheshbon Hanefesh* (1810)

Bechirah Point – A Mindfulness Perspective

Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg

When I have brought mindfulness with a perspective of *hitlamdut* into the full experience of this moment often an opening occurs. No longer am I reflexively reacting to a situation as I have done a million times. I am approaching it anew with fresh eyes and a sense of new possibilities. There is more freedom. Choices present themselves to me. I see that I can respond in one way or another and I understand or intuit which choices are in alignment with my intentions, which are wholesome, which lead to the alleviation of suffering and which lead in the opposite direction. These choices are the *behirot*, the choices and this is the crossroads, the *bechirah* point, where I can act freely, intentionally and in relationship with self, other and the Divine.

Both in mindfulness and *middot* work there is a profound goal to increase human freedom. We train for this liberation so that we can fulfill our human purpose as reflections of the Divine. We cultivate freedom of mind and heart so that we can manifest what is already present with us – our soul traits, our generosity, love and compassion, our joy and creativity. This is the crossing of the Red Sea and the slow walk toward the Promised Land, which occurs many times in our day and in our lives. We support each other in this holy project as we walk along. We cannot force ourselves to be good! It just doesn't work. Only through the steady practice again and again of seeing what is true, without agenda or condemnation, but with compassion and patience, do we allow the Sea to part, revealing where we have freedom to choose and the knowledge and strength to choose wisely.