

Free Will or Biological Determinism?

Rabbi A. Brian Stoller

Parashat Sh'mot 5784 / January 5, 2024

In our Tuesday night Intro to the Jewish Classics course, we've been learning about rabbinic midrash. For those of you who haven't been in the class—and it's not too late to start coming—midrash is a form of creative interpretation that fills in gaps in the biblical story.

One of the most glaring gaps in the Torah comes in this week's parashah, Sh'mot, at the beginning of *Exodus*. Here's the scene:

A baby boy is born to Hebrew parents who are enslaved in Egypt. To save her child from pharaoh's decree that all newborn Israelite boys must be killed, the mother puts her son in a wicker basket and sets it afloat on the Nile.

The pharaoh's daughter comes upon the basket while she's bathing in the river. She opens it, finds a baby inside, and decides to adopt the child and raise him as her own son.

And then, all we're told is that "Sometime after that, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his kinsfolk and witnessed their labors." (*Ex. 2:11*)

Whoa, that's a big jump! What about Moses's childhood in the pharaoh's palace?

Here's where midrash comes in.

The Sages tell us that Moses was a precocious little prince who would sometimes take the crown off the pharaoh's head and put it on his own. He also became kind of the conscience of the palace, telling pharaoh that even slaves need one day a week to rest. And Moses walked the walk, too, often going out to the fields and helping the slaves with their work.¹

Beyond this, the midrash doesn't say much about what it was like for Moses growing up as a prince of Egypt. But fortunately, in the 1950s, the great quasi-midrashist Cecil B. DeMille picked up that baton in his epic film—my favorite movie of all time—*The Ten Commandments*.

The first two hours of the four-hour movie is about Moses's life as an Egyptian royal, and it's fantastic.

In DeMille's telling, Prince Moses is the toast of Egypt. The pharaoh likes him better than he likes his own son, the ornery and sinister Ramses (played by Yul Brynner). Early on, crowds of people welcome Moses home as a conquering hero. He has big muscles and fantastic clothes, and the beautiful princess is madly in love with him. Even the Hebrew slaves love him; because, in addition to being mighty, brilliant, and brave, he's also a righteous and compassionate proto-abolitionist.

In short, Moses's early years were, well, pretty awesome. Watching the movie over and over again as I did when I was a kid, I always wondered why he decided to give it all up just because he found out he was born a Hebrew.

Even Moses's adopted mother, the pharaoh's daughter, told him to forget about it and go back to his sweet life in the palace. After all, she said to him that one day he'll be pharaoh and can free the slaves.

I thought she made pretty good sense, but Moses wouldn't have it. He insisted on trading in the power and the clothes and the girl for the brick pits and the taskmaster's whip. And the rest, as they say, is history.

So, why *did* Moses make this choice?

We'd probably say: He knew it was the right thing to do; it would have been easier to stay, but he resisted the temptation and chose the moral route. It was a great triumph of Moses's free will over his baser instincts.

Jewish tradition certainly supports that view. The idea that God created human beings with free will is a fundamental tenet of Jewish theology. It's what makes humans different from every other creature in the world. While other living things' actions are instinctual and involuntary, only human beings have the ability to *choose* what we are going to do.

But if this is taken for granted in Jewish thought, it is the subject of controversy in the realm of science.

This past week, I started a really interesting book by a prominent Stanford University biologist named Robert M. Sapolsky called *Determined: A Science of Life Without Free Will*. I'm only about a quarter of the way through it; but, so far, I'm finding it fascinating.

Sapolsky's thesis is that free will is a myth. In truth, he says: "All we are is the history of our biology, over which we had no control, and of its interaction with environments, over which we also had no control, creating who we are in the moment."²

Everything we do, he argues, is the result of something that happened one second before in our brain, and one second before that, and one second before that, and one hour or year before that, and centuries and millennia before that, all the way back to the beginning of human evolution.

It's a seamless, uninterrupted process, and "there's no point in the sequence where you can insert a freedom of will that will be *in* that biological world but not *of* it."³

Consequently, he maintains that "while it sure may seem at times that we are free to do as we intend, we are never free to *intend* what we intend." This is because intention itself is the product of some particular brain activity that was *determined* by all those innumerable factors that led up to the present moment.

In short, free will supposes some essential “me” that can make decisions apart from my biology. But Sapolsky argues that because our biology is the sum total of who we are, there is no essential, non-biological “me” to make those decisions. Consequently, there is no such thing as free will.

If Sapolsky is right, it means that Moses didn’t *choose*, per se, to give up his princely life and cast his lot with the Hebrew slaves. Rather, his brain—formed as it was by the complex interactions between his genes, his environment, and the broader forces of human culture and evolution—*determined* that he would do so.

All this begs the question: Would Moses have become Moshe Rabbeinu, the liberator and the lawgiver, had he not been raised as a prince of Egypt?

Based on Sapolsky, we’d have to infer that the answer is no.

Sapolsky explains that our ability to make executive decisions that go against our baser fears and desires is located in the prefrontal cortex of the brain (the PFC).

Citing an array of scientific studies, he says, “the kind of childhood you had shapes the construction of the PFC at the time and the sort of PFC you’ll have in adulthood.”⁴

Environmental factors like childhood abuse, low socioeconomic status, living in a neighborhood plagued by poverty and crime, and other forms of family and/or communal dysfunction or disadvantage stunt the formation of the prefrontal cortex, which in turn impacts a person’s behavior throughout their life.

Sapolsky points to data showing that “Low economic status for a pregnant woman or her living in a high-crime neighborhood both predict less cortical development at the time of the baby’s birth. Even back when the child was still in utero.”

He concludes that “It takes a certain kind of audacity and indifference to look at findings like these and still insist that how readily someone does the harder things in life justifies blame, punishment, praise, or reward. Just ask those fetuses in the womb of a low-socioeconomic-status woman, already paying a neurobiological price.”⁵

Moses grew in the womb of a slave, in what we have to assume were the worst possible conditions, but his gray matter was subsequently taking shape while he was being raised as a royal prince. This environment surely had a major impact on the formation of his prefrontal cortex and thus on the decisions he made and the life he lived.

Now, as I tell my son all the time: I was never good at science, so I have no idea if Sapolsky is right. He himself acknowledges that there are many scientists who disagree with him about free will.

But let's assume that he *is* right. What does that mean for us?

There is no question that subscribing to this view of the human being comes with significant implications.

For one, Sapolsky argues that, because a person's behavior is a function of biology rather than free will, it is immoral to punish someone for committing a crime, just as it would be immoral to punish them for having brown hair. Consequently, his theory of human behavior would seem to necessitate a complete rethinking of our concept of criminal justice.

Maybe that's a good thing. Perhaps biology and compassion should play more of a role in our justice system.

On a more mundane level, Sapolsky's theory of behavior would suggest that if you struggle to lose weight because you just can't bring yourself to exercise or give up junk food, don't be hard on yourself about it. After all, as he puts it, "it's impossible to successfully will yourself to have more willpower. And...it isn't a great idea to run the world on the belief that people can and should."⁶

Maybe taking this view seriously could help humanity conquer anxiety and stress, which would definitely be a good thing.

Still, even if Sapolsky's theory represents the best possible understanding of modern science, it is important to remember not to confuse scientific knowledge with the totality of truth.

Where biological science may conclude that free will doesn't exist, Jewish religion concludes that it *does*.

And if science holds this view because it can't locate any human essence apart from a person's biology, religion holds *its* view because it locates the essence of the human being in what it calls the "*soul*."

I "believe science," as my Facebook feed has admonished to do. And yet, against the scientific evidence, I also believe in the soul and in free will as a matter of faith.

I believe in them because they tell me that I am greater than the sum of my biological parts. I believe in them because they make me want to continually be better and give me the confidence that I *can* be. I believe in them because they teach me that what I do in my life matters beyond the horizon of my own time on this earth and beyond the memories of those who knew me.

I embrace the knowledge that science affords me, and I also embrace the meaning that religion creates for me.

And I'm comfortable with that because these two disciplines are not mutually exclusive. They are two discrete languages that we humans have developed to speak about the infinitely complex phenomena of our existence.

Sometimes where one language comes up short, the other can be useful. In some contexts, one is more appropriate than the other. But both are indispensable because each one offers the possibility of unique insights into our nature, our relationships, and our place in the world that the other language can't.

Embracing the explanatory benefits of both science and religion is duo-lingo at its finest. So, I think we should all try to become conversant in both.

As a good *Ten Commandments* fan, I say: "So let it be written. So let it be done."

1 See Exodus Rabbah 1:27-28

2 Sapolsky, 85

3 Ibid., 46

4 Ibid., 114

5 Ibid., 117

6 Ibid., 124