Are We As Free As We Think We Are?

Rabbi Uriel Romano - Broward Central Synagogue - Second Night, Rosh Hashanah 5786

This year, as I prepared for the Yamim Nora'im, I read a book that lingered with me in unexpected and even unsettling ways. The book is Determined, by Robert Sapolsky. Sapolsky is a neuroscientist and biologist, raised as an orthodox jew, and he makes a startling claim: human beings do not truly have free will. Every decision we believe we are making–from what we eat for breakfast, to the career we pursue, to whom we fall in love with–is not truly "chosen" at all. Rather, it is the result of an intricate web of forces beyond our control: our genes, our hormones, our neurochemistry, the circumstances of our upbringing, the culture and era into which we were born, even the split-second environmental cues right before we act. His argument is not abstract philosophy; it is grounded in biology, psychology, and neuroscience. And if we take him seriously, it shakes the very foundation of how we understand human responsibility.

Reading him, I found myself asking: Are we as free as we think we are?

Judaism has long celebrated the idea of bechira chofshit–free choice. Again and again, our texts insist that we are not trapped by fate. The Torah proclaims: "I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life, so that you and your descendants may live." (Deuteronomy 30:19).

What could be clearer than that? The Talmud famously declares: Ein mazal l'Yisrael–"Israel is not ruled by the stars" (Shabbat 156a). Destiny, astrology, constellations: they do not have the final say over our lives. We are meant to rise above them. We are guided not by the stars, but by mitzvot, by deeds that can transform not only our future but even reinterpret our past.

The very first human story in the Torah affirms this: Adam and Eve are commanded not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, and they choose otherwise. Their choice changes the course of human history. But nobody more than Maimonides said it with clearer

words: *"Free will is granted to all men. 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... 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, The Holy One, blessed be He, 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."* (Hilkhot Teshuva 5:1-2)

And yet–our tradition also whispers the opposite. Another rabbinic voice teaches: *"A person does not so much as bruise a finger on earth unless it is decreed from Heaven."* (Chullin 7b). That sounds strikingly close to determinism.

In fact, in the same Talmudic discussion that says Ein mazal l'Yisrael, other sages disagree: Yesh mazal l'Yisrael–"Israel is indeed ruled by the stars." The story is told of Rabbi Nachman bar Yitzchak. When he was a child, Chaldean astrologers told his mother he was destined to be a thief. Terrified, she kept his head covered so that he would always remember God's presence. But one day his head-covering slipped off, and he immediately felt the impulse to steal. (Shabbat 156b). Destiny, it seems, could not be denied.

Our sages even taught explicitly: success in business, length of life, and the ability to have children–matters most central to our lives–do not depend on merit, but on one's mazal (Moed Katan 28a), and "Mazal" is not "luck" but "constellations". Even the person we are going to marry says the Talmud (Sotah 2a) is already fixed 40 days before the formation of the fetus. "Everything is in the hands of heaven..." even says the Talmud (Brachot 33b)

So which is it? Are we free agents, accountable for every deed? Or are our paths charted by forces far beyond us?

This tension is not unique to Judaism. In the ancient world, most religions were rooted in a fatalistic determinism. The stars, the gods, the Fates controlled everything. Think of Greek mythology: Oedipus doomed by prophecy, no matter what choices he or his parents made. Or the Babylonians, who believed human lives were scripted in the heavens. In such a worldview, freedom was an illusion.

Judaism broke from this fatalism. Our tradition insisted: You can choose. You can act. You can change your life and the world. The mitzvot are not chains, but wings. They are how we transcend destiny.

In the medieval period, Jewish thinkers also wrestled with this. Saadia Gaon emphasized divine foreknowledge alongside human choice. Gersonides (Ralbag) tried to resolve the tension by limiting God's knowledge of future contingents, so that freedom could be preserved. Others, like Hasdai Crescas, leaned more deterministically, arguing that God's omniscience leaves little room for true freedom. And of course, Maimonides defended free will as central to Torah itself. Our tradition preserved a spectrum.

Then came the Renaissance and modernity, with an almost intoxicating confidence in human freedom. Enlightenment thinkers spoke as though we were masters of our destiny, liberated from superstition, from fate, from anything beyond reason. In the modern West, we inherited this pendulum swing toward radical freedom.

And then–Sapolsky arrives. Using neuroscience, psychology, evolutionary biology, and genetics, he argues that the pendulum is swinging back. That while we think we are free, our choices are far more constrained than we admit. Perhaps, he suggests, we are not free at all.

Nowhere does this question matter more than on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Our liturgy assumes freedom. "Who shall live and who shall die?" And what tips the scales? Our choices: repentance, prayer, tzedakah. The entire premise of judgment, forgiveness, and renewal depends on the belief that our choices are our own.

But we also know the other side. We know people whose lives are shaped by trauma, poverty, addiction, illness. We know that biology and circumstance deeply affect behavior. If we are brutally honest, can we say that every one of us truly stands before God as completely free?

Sapolsky pushes us to confront this. He marshals examples: How split-second brain activity can predict decisions before we are even conscious of them. How childhood trauma rewires the brain, shaping patterns that last a lifetime. How hormones and neurotransmitters alter what we call "mood" and "choice." How genes and environment interact to predispose us toward certain behaviors. He insists: freedom is smaller than we think–maybe non-existent.

But instead of despair, he offers a surprising turn. If we are not as free as we imagine, then blame must soften. If our choices are constrained, then compassion must deepen. He calls for a society less obsessed with punishment and more committed to empathy and repair. Imagine a justice system that asks not only "Who is guilty?" but "What shaped this life?" Imagine relationships in which, instead of condemning, we extend understanding.

And perhaps this is where Sapolsky's science meets Torah. Our Rabbis never said: "Since you have free will, judge harshly." They taught the opposite: Hevei dan et kol ha'adam l'kaf zechut–judge every person with the benefit of the doubt (Pirkei Avot 1:6). They taught that the gates of teshuvah are never locked.

Sapolsky may say: we are determined. The Rabbis may say: we are free. But both insist: respond with compassion.

Our liturgy offers a nuanced middle path. In Unetaneh Tokef we declare: וּתְשׁוּבָה וּתְפִלָּה וּצְדָקָה מַעֲבִירִין אֶת רֹעַ הַגְּזֵרָה - "But repentance, prayer, and tzedakah can avert the severity of the decree." This line is based on the Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 16b), which teaches: "Rabbi Yitzchak said: Four things tear up the decree against a person: charity, crying out in prayer, changing one's name, and changing one's actions."

Notice the difference. The Talmud speaks of "tearing up" the decree–changing it entirely. But our liturgy softens the claim: we cannot erase the decree, but we can mitigate it, we can lessen its harshness.

In other words: Judaism does not embrace the radical determinism of Sapolsky, nor the absolute freedom of modernity. It reminds us: you are not as free as you think, but you are not as determined as you fear. Our actions may not erase fate, but they can bend it, soften it, transform how it plays out.

So are we free? Not entirely. Are we determined? Not entirely. We live in the tension between the two.

And maybe that is the true spiritual work of these Days of Awe: to live honestly with the limits of our freedom, yet still claim the power we do have. To acknowledge that some things are shaped for us–by biology, by history, by trauma–and yet to take responsibility for the part of life that is ours to shape.

For me, reading Sapolsky has made me more compassionate–toward others and toward myself. There are times I try to change and fail. Times I set a goal and stumble. Times I repeat the same mistakes, again and again. Sapolsky reminds me: maybe change is harder than I thought. Maybe people cannot simply "will" themselves to be different. Maybe what they need is not condemnation, but understanding.

This year, as we stand together before the Judge of all the earth, may we hold these questions close: What if we are more determined than we believed? How would that change the way we see ourselves? How would it change the way we see each other?

The answer, I believe, is not despair but humility. Not nihilism but compassion. For whether we are free or determined, our task remains: to build a world of empathy, forgiveness, and repair.

Shanah Tovah u'Metukah–may it be a good and sweet year.

Rabbi Uri