



## Fate & Choice: The Chaotic Interface Between Them (part 2 of 3)

*Free will* asserts that we human beings have a range of options in any given moment and we are free to choose the one that draws us, without coercion or preordination.

*Determinism* asserts that the all-knowing Creator sees what will be before it transpires and so we are “compelled” by Divinity’s foreknowledge to choose exactly that.

We are following the Ari’s guidance for managing this paradox. He suggests the following solution:

“Free will and determinism are both true, each in its place. Where there is free choice there is no place for determinism. Where there is determinism there is no place for free choice.”

In Part 1 of this series we explored an interpretation of this advice (modeled on Quantum Mechanics). It asserts that:

Our end is determined, while the path we take to get there is amenable to choice.

The Ari’s claim that: “Where determinism rules there is no place for choice”...means that our (inevitably successful) **End** is foreseen, predetermined and ruled by fate.

His assertion that: “Where choice rules there is no place for determinism.”...means that our chosen route of reaching that finish line is up to our free will (and, of course, HaShem’s providential responses to it).

In general, this is true...yet reality is more complicated than that. If we take a closer look we’ll see that free will and determinism are intimately entwined. Although their territories do not overlap (says the Ari)..... when they converge in the human psyche their boundaries grow fuzzy and it’s nearly impossible to sort them out. Within each moment fate and choice collide and parcel out their zones of influence.

The Talmud makes two opposite assertions. It declares that Fate (which it calls, *mazal*) *does* rule...and then it takes the opposite stand, asserting that fate (*mazal*) *does not* rule...” (TB Shabbat 156a):

The rabbis conclude that there are two types of *mazal*. **HIGHER MAZAL** includes those elements of life that are predestined (for better or worse). They are intrinsic to our soul mission. Our whole purpose is enmeshed with them. No amount of prayer, merit, or effort will change them, for if they would cease, there’d be no point to our life. It is correct to say, regarding these features of life, that “Fate does rule...”

**LOWER MAZAL** includes everything else—the challenges that keep us growing and the resources that sustain us. Lower *mazal* includes all the things that **ARE** alterable

through effort, prayer and merit. Some are easily changed while others take years of exertion. Regarding lower mazal, it is correct to say that “Fate does not rule...”

The catch, however, is that, unfortunately, there are no guidelines about which features of our life are from category 1 and which are from category 2. Is this condition (for example, say, childlessness) something I can change through prayer and effort or is it something I must learn to live with?

The Talmud is not helpful here. In one place it informs us that “children, livelihood, and lifespan are completely determined by mazal,” Meaning they are fated and no amount of merit can change them. Seems clear enough. Yet in other places the Talmud makes opposite statements which show that children, livelihood and lifespan are not fated...that prayer, merit, and effort do make a difference in their regard.<sup>1</sup>

The conclusion is that there is no rule of thumb—one person's childlessness could be predestined while another's might be changeable with effort.

So how do we know whether to keep pushing, praying, and exerting or whether it's time to accept the situation and assume that it comes from higher mazal.

Pausing from theory for a moment and dealing with this more practical question:

The guideline is that If we still long for something to change (and have not burnt out trying), then we have to assume that it can be altered through prayer, effort and merit. And in that case we should keep on striving toward it though we might choose to adjust our strategy, perhaps to conserve our energy or perhaps now to give it an all out sprint.

Yet if we lose the impetus to push for something to change (or burn out from the effort), then it's probably because it comes from Higher Mazal. By backing off we accept our destiny and (hopefully, eventually) will come to embrace its hidden good.

This does not mean that our previous exertions were a mistaken waste of effort. No way.

The world is filled with lures of every sort—we are attracted to some, immune to some, and repelled by others.

Our souls are drawn to specific “attractors” that, while laboring to possess them, we “coincidentally” acquire skills, build “muscles” and actualize our potential. In this sense the means are the ends, for every exertion leaves a residue of tikun and aligns us (a little more) with our destiny (even if we don't actually succeed in acquiring the prize that was our aim).

And finally, if we do not succeed in our stated goal then, well, in retrospect, we must assume that it was higher mazal, and nothing down here could have changed it.

But, of course, its never quite as simple as that, because our personality, with its habits, fears and neuroses inevitably distorts our assessments. But still, this remains the rule of thumb.

Back to theory: This diagram depicts the subtle enmeshment of free will and determinism along the arrow of life.

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<sup>1</sup> TB Yevamot 50a; Nidda 70b; TB MK 28a; TB Brachot 31b; Pesikta Rabbatai 43:7; Bible stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs and Chana, M. Shabbat 2:6.

When magnified we see that the arrow of life is actually comprised of a series of dots with spaces between them.

The dots represent the points in our life that are pre-destined—the features that derive from higher mazal. Whatever we choose Providence will assure that we cross that point. Like a master chess player, HaShem will open some options and close down others so that we are pressed through that portal.

But how we get from one fixed point to the next...that is our choice. There are many paths from here to there.

Depending upon our attractions and aversions, visual field and blind spots, values and character flaws, strengths and neuroses we pick a path which might be scenic or unsightly, straight or crooked...but, no matter what we choose, it will ultimately, eventually, providentially bring us to our next destined milestone.

And you will notice that some of those points of higher mazal have overlapping shades of gray. This means that although we've got to touch that base, because it is a destined point on our journey...it does not necessarily need to play out on the physical plane. We could engage with that mazal in an emotional, mental or spiritual way instead, depending upon the choices we make in arriving to that point.

For example, on our collective lifeline, the prophecies all predict an awful “War of Gog and Magog” that must proceed the messianic end of days. It is possible for that to be a physical war with guns, tanks, bombs and gore. But it could also play out on the inner planes as a media war, or a psychic war, or a spiritual war.

Similarly for an individual. The Talmud brings the example of one who is born under the astrological sign of Mars which means he's destined to be a “spiller of blood.” Yet, says the Talmud, he could be... a murderer, a butcher, or a mohel (circumciser). These are three (very different) lots-in-life that emerge at the interface between choice and destiny.

In summary,

Choice and Destiny are both true, each in its place. Yet in any given moment there is a chaotic mixture of these two forces .

Higher mazal includes all that is fated in our life; lower mazal includes what can change through effort, prayer and merit. Yet there's no sure way to tell one from the other. For some folks an impoverished state could be fated. Perhaps their whole purpose in life is to proclaim their Creator's goodness despite such hardship. Since that circumstance enables their *raison d'etre*, it cannot change for without it, they would lose their purpose.

For another person that same impoverished state could be a test. Will they stay honest despite an opportunity to embezzle from their employer? Once they pass that test, the circumstance can change, because its purpose was temporary—it was lower mazal.

In the next video we will explore the question of how free choice can coexist with Divine omniscience.