

From the Rabbi's Desk  
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## Mishnah with a Twist [12]

### Everything is Foreseen, Yet Freewill is Given Insights into Mishnah Avot 3:15



#### Background to Our Story

##### Free will Versus Determinism

###### ◆ AI Overview

Free will versus determinism is a core philosophical debate about whether human choices are genuinely free or predetermined by prior causes, with free will emphasizing autonomy and responsibility, while determinism posits that all events, including our actions, are the inevitable result of a chain of cause and effect. The tension arises because determinism suggests we could never have acted differently, challenging the intuitive feeling of making real choices, leading to different philosophical stances like incompatibilism (they can't coexist) and compatibilism (they can).

##### Free Will

###### ◆ AI Overview

- **Definition:** The capacity of agents to choose between different possible courses of action, making them the ultimate source of their decisions.
- **Core Idea:** You could have chosen otherwise; your choices aren't just a product of past events.
- **Implications:** Underpins concepts of moral responsibility, praise, and blame.

##### Determinism

###### ◆ AI Overview

- Definition

The belief that every event, including human actions, is necessitated by antecedent causes and conditions together with the laws of nature.

- Core Idea

Given the universe's state at any point, only one future is possible, making free will an illusion.

- Implications

Suggests our choices are predictable outcomes of genetics, environment, and past experiences, challenging personal agency.

## Key Positions in the Debate

### ◆ AI Overview

- Incompatibilism

Free will and determinism cannot both be true.

- Hard Determinism: Determinism is true, so we have no free will.
- Libertarianism (Metaphysical): We have free will, so determinism must be false.

- Compatibilism

Free will and determinism can coexist, often by redefining free will as acting according to one's desires without external coercion, even if those desires are determined.

## Why It Matters

### ◆ AI Overview

- Ethics: Determines if we are truly responsible for our actions.
- Psychology/Science: Influences how we understand motivation and behavior, with many psychological theories leaning towards deterministic explanations (e.g., behaviorism).
- Justice System: Impacts concepts of culpability and punishment.

## The Text: Mishnah Avot 3:15

הַכֹּל צָפוּי, וְהָרְשׁוּת נְתוּנָה, וּבְטוֹב הָעוֹלָם נִדוֹן. וְהַכֹּל לְפִי רַב הַמַּעֲשָׂה:

[Another teaching by Rabbi Akiva]:

Everything a person does is foreseen, yet freewill is given to every person to choose whether to do good or evil. And the world is judged with goodness; and it all depends on how many good deeds a person has done.

## Comprehension and Analysis Questions

**?** Can you explain the Mishnah in your own words?

**?** What is it challenging about the first half of our Mishnah?

**Bonus** **?** How is the second half of our Mishnah connected to the first half?



### Explaining the Mishnah - What is going on here?

#### Bartenura on Avot 3:15

Obadiah ben Abraham of Bertinoro (c. 1445 – c. 1515), known as "The Bartenura."

**"Everything is foreseen"**: Everything that a man does in the innermost rooms is revealed in front of Him [in front of God].

**Extra Bonus ?** How does Bartenura solve our mishnah's paradox?

**"and freewill is given"**: into the hand of man to do good and evil, as it is written (Deuteronomy 30:15): "See, I have given in front of you today life, etc."

**"and with goodness the world is judged"**: with the attribute of mercy. And nonetheless, not everyone is equal in this trait, since "all is in accordance to the majority of the deed:" One who does many good deeds is given much mercy, and one who does few good deeds is given a little mercy. A different explanation: "all is in accordance to the majority of the deed" - according to the majority of a person's deeds is he judged, if the majority are merits, he is exonerated; if the majority are sins, he is liable. And Rambam explained, "Everything is foreseen": Every action of people - that which he has done and that which he will do in the future - is revealed in front of Him. And do not say, "Since the Holy One, blessed be He, knows what a person will do - if so, he is compelled in his actions to be righteous or evil." As "freewill is given" into his hand to do good and evil and there is nothing there that compels him at all. And since this is so, "with goodness (or properly) the world is judged," to collect [punishment] from the evildoers and to give a good reward to the righteous ones. As since the sinner sinned willingly, it is fitting that he be punished; and since the righteous one was willingly righteous, it is fitting that he receive a reward.

**Extra Bonus ?** Why do you think (according to the Rambam's interpretation), a person may wish to say: "Since the Holy One, blessed be He, knows what a person will do - if so, he is compelled in his actions to be righteous or evil"?

**"all is in accordance to the majority of the deed"**: According to what a person repeats and is constant in the doing of good, his reward will be multiplied. As one who distributes a hundred gold coins to charity [giving out one coin at a time] is not similar to one who gives them out [all] at one time. And the textual variant of Rambam is, "all is in accordance to the majority of the deed"; and not "as per the deed."

**Bonus ?** What is Bartenura's insight here?

## English Explanation of Pirkei Avot

By Joshua Kulp. A contemporary user-friendly explanation of the Mishnah.

This is another statement by Rabbi Akiva. Note how in this extremely short mishnah, Rabbi Akiva succeeds in teaching some of the most basic theological principles of Judaism. It is testimony not only to the depth of Rabbi Akiva in particular and the Mishnah in general, but to their poetic abilities as well.

Everything is foreseen yet freedom of choice is granted: this is one of the most deliciously paradoxical statements of the rabbis. It captures in just four (Hebrew) words, much of the spirit of Jewish thought. Since God is all-powerful, God must know everything, including the future. However, if our actions were totally due to fate, we would not be morally responsible for our actions. In order to hold ourselves responsible for what we do, we must assume that we have free choice. Judaism is therefore a religion based on these two beliefs: God is the all-powerful, master of the universe and yet human beings have moral responsibility.

And the world is judged with goodness: this is a follow-up statement to the previous one. The freedom of choice granted to human beings is in some senses frightening. If human beings

have choice then they are responsible for their choices, and at the end of the day, most of us don't stack up to what we should be. Therefore Rabbi Akiva assures us that God judges with goodness, meaning mercifully. He allows repentance to remedy our submissions to the evil inclination.

And everything is in accordance with the preponderance of works: a person is judged based on the majority of that person's actions. This may also relate to the previous statement. Although God judges mercifully, one should not think that one's performance of the commandments are not of consequence. God judges a person not based on any single deed, but on a character that has been built up throughout his lifetime. People who have built up a lifetime of good deeds will be justly rewarded.

Another interpretation of this last statement is that it does not have to do with God's judgement. Rather it teaches that a person's character is developed throughout his lifetime by the performance of works. For example, one charitable gift does not make a person have a charitable nature. However, a person who gives frequently will be described and act as a generally charitable person. Note that in Judaism a person is mostly judged based on his actions; he is what he does. While belief is important, it is not the essential aspect of a person's character. Furthermore, character is shaped through action.

**?** "Another interpretation of this last statement is that it does not have to do with God's judgement. Rather it teaches that a person's character is developed throughout his lifetime by the performance of works." Why do you think this alternative interpretation is valuable?

### **"The Twist" – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from This Text.**

- !** Let God do what He has to do; and you do what you have to do!



The paradox presented in our Mishnah had puzzled philosophers since immemorial times. Everything is foreseen yet freedom of choice is granted. Since God is all-powerful, God must know everything, including the future. However, if our actions were totally due to fate, we would not be morally responsible for our actions. In order to hold ourselves responsible for what we do, we must assume that we have free choice.

Rabbi Akiva teaches us that Judaism is therefore a faith system based on these two seemingly contradictory beliefs: God is the all-powerful, master of the universe and yet human beings have moral responsibility.

The second half of our Mishnah tells us that God judges the world with mercy, yet His judgment depends on our behavior; and reminds us that while we may not

understand how God runs His world, we can fulfill our responsibility to increase goodness through our actions and choices.