

Parallel Thinking Part 28: Neuroscience and Free Will II

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The human brain is a phenomenal organ. Our brains are multi-tasking biological computers able to regulate our body functions while simultaneously calculating, processing and responding to the world around us.

From a Jewish perspective, conscious free will is therefore not merely the ability to make decisions, but the ability to deploy our *neshamah* to act against our animalistic nature when confronted with various urges.

Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler (d. 1953) offers a very cogent approach to free will. He explains that each one of us has a *nekudat habechirah* – a point of free will which represents an area of experience in which we have the capacity to control ourselves. This point of free will is unique to each person. The more spiritually refined a person becomes, the more that point of free will shifts upwards. In contrast, the more someone indulges in negative or immoral behaviour, the less control they have.

For a choice to be a genuine ‘free will decision’, it must have both a moral or spiritual element to it and be something which is within the individual’s control. As such, this fleeting experience is difficult to capture. Yet we have all ‘been there’. When confronted by the lure of something we know to be wrong, we vacillate, wrestling with conflicting thoughts of self-justification for indulging ourselves, versus trying to escape the clutches of an act we know to be wrong. We have the power to escape, but do we really want to? Our *neshamah* tugs in one direction while our physicality tugs in the other.

Whatever the result of our struggle, our *nekudat habechirah* – the point of free will – will never be quite the same again.

Neuroscientists roughly divide the brain into two sections; the reptilian brain and the cortex:

The reptilian brain contains the more basic, atavistic parts which are also found in animals. It regulates the vital bodily functions such as heart rate, blood pressure and core temperature and governs emotions and the response to external threats, as well as memory.

The cortex processes the information from our senses and controls our muscles. The front part of the cortex (the prefrontal cortex) governs executive functions and moderates the body’s response to emotional stimuli.

Although there is an intimate connection between these two parts, the human cortex evolved far more rapidly than the animal cortex.

When God created man, He formed a creature with similar physical features to an animal, together with the same instincts and drives to eat, reproduce and protect themselves against predators and other threats.

However, God also invested within each person a *neshamah*, a divine soul capable of raising mankind above raw, animalistic urges (Bereishit 2:7). While it is complex to directly associate something spiritual with something physical, the relationship between the older reptilian brain and the prefrontal cortex mirrors the relationship between our basic animalistic drives for instant, physical gratification, and the Divine aspirations of our *neshamah*. The *neshamah* therefore moderates and suppresses the individual’s response to those desires.

