



Vayechi

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Man vs. Prophecy? A New Look at the Classic Discussion of Predetermination in the Izhbitz School

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One frequently discussed topic in the writings of R. Mordechai Yosef Leiner (known as “*Mei Ha-Shilo’ah*” or “the Izhbitzer”) is the oft-repeated phrase, “All is in the hands of heaven, including the fear of heaven.”¹ Differing analyses abound in trying to square the Izhbitzer’s approach to the paradox of free will and predetermination. Philosophers, both Jewish and non-Jewish, have struggled with the concept. How is there room for mankind’s choices if God knows the past, present,

and future? Is anything in man’s control, or is he at the hands of forces greater than he? If all is predetermined, what is the value of reward and punishment? Many essays, including one by his grandson, R. Gershon Henoch of Radzyn,² attempt to explain how *Mei Ha-Shilo’ah* maintains belief in the primacy of free choice and to clarify the context of these startling statements. Indeed, R. Gershon Henoch’s [Introduction to Mei Ha-Shilo’ah](#) warns that one who is not used to the way that R. Mordechai Yosef expounded Torah ideas will find the concepts startling.

In this essay, I wish to develop an alternative understanding of this puzzling statement of the Izhbitzer, through the lens of his younger son, R. Shmuel Dov Asher Leiner, known by the title of his

¹ [Mei Ha-Shilo’ah, Vayera 3](#). *Mei Ha-Shilo’ah* articulates this principle as an inversion (and interpretation) of the talmudic statement that “all is in the hands of heaven, *except for the fear of heaven*” [Berakhot 33b](#).

² [Beit Ya’akov to Toledot 41:3](#).

posthumously published “*Ne’ot Deshe.*” *Ne’ot Deshe* contains Torah thoughts based on the same concepts of Izhbitzer philosophy, but written in a different style. Gone are the cryptic short paragraphs of his father’s *Mei Ha-Shilo’ah*, and the complicated jargon of his brother’s *Beit Ya’akov*, and his nephew’s *Sod Yesharim*. The work poses questions on *pesukim* and *midrashim*, and employs the unique Izhbitzer philosophy to iron out the uncertainties.

Ne’ot Deshe frames the interaction between the Divine plan as expressed through prophecies, on the one hand, and free choice as mankind’s struggle against, or role in, fulfilling these prophecies, on the other. Conventional wisdom would identify a contradiction between Divine knowledge of, and direction of, the world and man’s ability to choose. This paradox cuts to the very roots of human awareness and the power of each person’s choices. Do our choices matter? Are we really choosing? If God is so vast and present in the world, how can there be choice at all? When a prophet tells us about our fate, is there room to change it? How can there be? How can there be reward and punishment if we are not responsible for our choices?

Amongst the medieval commentators, there are those who focus on man’s power of choice, such as Rambam,³ and those who focus on God’s

knowledge and direction of the world, such as R. Hasdai Crescas.⁴ Rather than pit these two forces against each other, *Ne’ot Deshe* explains the phenomenon where a prophecy is revealed to mankind and man in turn contends with this prophecy, sometimes trying to implement it or sometimes trying to thwart it.⁵ Is there a way to know whether one is preventing a prophecy or causing its fruition? Part of man’s challenge is to try to understand, “What does God want me to do?”

There is one lesser-known prophecy that surrounds many episodes in the Torah. In [Bamidbar 11:24-30](#), Eldad and Meidad were two elders who did not join Moshe in the Tent of Meeting. Instead, Hashem’s spirit rested on them and they began to prophesy, “Moshe will die, and Yehoshua will bring Israel into the Land” ([Sanhedrin 17a](#)). This prophecy looms large over the Book of Bamidbar, but influences events in Shemot and Vayikra as well.

In [Bereishit 49:6](#), Ya’akov prophesied, “Let my soul not abide in their counsel, let my being not be counted in their assembly.” According to R. Shmuel Dov Asher,⁶ the counsel or “secret” (Hebrew: “*sod*”) mentioned is the one in which the ten spies whom Moshe sent to scout the land sought to block Israel’s entrance into the land, by slandering the land. They thought that if Israel

³ *Peirush Ha-Mishnayot to Pirkei Avot 3:15; Mishneh Torah, Hilkhos Teshuvah 5, 6.*

⁴ *Or Hashem 2:5*, also cited by R. Yosef Albo in *Sefer Ha-Ikkarim 4*.

⁵ *Ne’ot Deshe, Yitro, s.v. “Va-yishma.”*

⁶ *Ne’ot Deshe, Shelah, s.v. “Va-yikra Moshe.”*

would never enter the land, Moshe would never have to die. The spies tried to fight the prophecy of Eldad and Meidad, but were unable to overcome it and suffered the consequences. Here is an example of the power of prophecy as the predetermined fate of Moshe Rabbeinu. Despite the spies' attempts to thwart the prophecy, they ultimately failed, and, in the end, Yehoshua did in fact lead Israel in. Yehoshua's challenge was to accept the prophecy, even though he had the most to lose if it would come to pass, because he alone, without his great teacher, would be required to lead the people. For this reason, Moshe changed his name from Hoshei'a to Yehoshua ([Bamidbar 13:16](#)) as an act of prayer, saying, "Hashem should save you from the plans of these spies."

Similarly, Korah, who descended from the upper class of the descendants of Levi, sought to take advantage of the prophecy of Eldad and Meidad. Feeling slighted and skipped over in the appointment of his cousins Moshe and Aharon, he sought to wrest leadership from both of them. Why did he wait until that moment to choose to rebel? R. Shmuel Dov Asher explains that since Moshe would not lead them into the land of Israel, and since they could not stop the nation from entering the land, clearly the land was more important than Moshe's leadership. A new leader was needed, and Korah would be it. However, Korah did not realize that Hashem had already

chosen Yehoshua to bring them in.⁷ Once again, we see how Korah, the spies, and even Yehoshua himself, would each struggle against the prophecy. Each of their actions, to accept the prophecy, to fight against the prophecy, or to see themselves within the prophecy, demonstrates the great paradox of free will versus predetermination.

Finally, Yitro, Moshe's father in law, gave him sage advice, to set up a system of courts so as not to exhaust himself. Why is this such a great idea? R. Shmuel Dov Asher explains that, since everyone knew that Moshe would not bring them into the land, but that it would be forty years until they would enter the land, Yitro's advice kept Moshe safe throughout the long waiting period.⁸

In the end, the prophecy came to its ultimate fruition, despite Moshe's attempt to resist it with his prayers ([Devarim 3:23-25](#)). Hashem told him that he would not enter. Yehoshua would enter and lead the people in.⁹

Our reading recasts a tradition from R. Mordekhai Yosef, which is developed by R. Shmuel Dov Asher in several locations. The challenge of free choice and a seemingly prophetic, predetermined fate forces man to question the value of the choices that he makes. If things are preordained, a person might ask, how do they know what they should choose, and how effective are their choices? R. Mordekhai Yosef explains that Moshe heard something much deeper in his father-in-law's

⁷ *Ne'ot Deshe, Korah*, s.v. "Va-yikah."

⁸ *Ne'ot Deshe, Yitro*, s.v. "Va-yishma."

⁹ *Ne'ot Deshe, VaEthanah*, s.v. "Adnut Elokim."

words than even Yitro himself realized.¹⁰ Hence the word “spoke” (*amar*, [Shemot 18:24](#)) is written with two *kamatzim*. *Ne’ot Deshe* suggests that the unusual vowelization with two *kamatzim* signals to us that one needs to pay special attention to the situation and read it appropriately.¹¹ R. Shmuel Dov Asher explains that while Yitro sought to lighten Moshe’s load and improve the answers to Israel, Moshe heard that Yitro was also giving Moshe more years to be with Israel, as he knew his expiration date.¹²

The ability to listen carefully to the Divine agenda driving the world, and to understand how to behave accordingly, is a talent which is not easily attained. Hence, Moshe prayed and added a yud to Yehoshua’s name, that he not attempt to outsmart Hashem’s plan.¹³ The spies sought to slander the land in order to thwart Eldad and Meidad’s prophecy, and Moshe prayed that Yehoshua would be wise enough to withstand the test and not seek to outsmart it. There are times when a person bends to the prophecy and other times when they are called to act. The wisdom to tell the difference is “to hear the inner voice.”

Religious thinkers have long agonized over the paradox of free choice and determination, reflected upon it, and oftentimes leaned toward

¹⁰ *Mei Ha-Shiloah, Yitro*, s.v. “*Va-yishma*.”

¹¹ *Ne’ot Deshe, ibid., Zakhor*, s.v. “*Ve-atah shema le-kol Hashem*.”

¹² This episode took place in the second year when the prophecy of Eldad and Meidad was already known.

one side of the paradox versus the other. With our reading of this concept, the choices Man makes reacting to predetermined prophecies illustrates the nuance and complication surrounding the dance between these two fundamental beliefs of Judaism.

Should the Davening of the Tenth of Tevet Take Sides in a Talmudic Debate?

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Jewish liturgy is not just a vehicle or tool used in prayer; it also conveys the changing philosophy, history, and life perspectives of Judaism as it changes and evolves over the centuries. Yet, few of those who use the liturgy even notice the implications of their prayer-words beyond the localized prayer-request at a given moment. I have noted in the past how thoughtful Jews should consider the meaning of their prayers and the implied philosophical perspectives.¹ In one particularly apropos and timely instance, the liturgy of the fast of the tenth of Tevet both

¹³ *Ne’ot Deshe, Shelah*, s.v. “*Va-yikra Moshe le-Hoshei’a bin Nun Yehoshua*.”

¹ See for example Yaakov Jaffe “[‘Upon the Wings of Eagles’ and ‘Under the Wings of the Shekhinah’: Poetry, Conversion and the Memorial Prayer](#),” *Hakirah* 17 (2014): 191-204, and “[Did a Piyut Change the Halachah? The Curious Question of Circumcision on Rosh Hashanah](#),” *Hakirah* 22 (2017): 125-150.

establishes a key historical fact related to the fast while also taking an important philosophical stand on the issues of the day, in ways that the average reader might miss.

Judaism is full of long-lasting unresolved controversies, and whenever the liturgy takes a stand on a controversial issue, we are forced to ask whether the liturgy's text proves the issue has been settled and determined in a particular direction. If a Jew determines that the dominant traditional Jewish view goes against the liturgy, does that mean that the liturgy should be changed? As I have written in the past, it is dangerous to insert specific philosophic perspectives into the liturgy of the *siddur* at the expense of others.² When a particular view becomes cemented as part of the liturgy, it takes on greater status than it might have when investigated purely from the perspective of the traditional earlier sources. Thus, Jews should carefully consider the liturgy for the tenth of Tevet and its implications for our understanding of Jewish history and Jewish philosophy.

² <https://thelehrhaus.com/scholarship/get-your-hashkafa-out-of-my-chumash/> and <https://thelehrhaus.com/scholarship/are-modern-orthodox-jews-more-comfortable-with-mysticism-or-anthropomorphism/>.

³ The Talmud debates two views as to the exact date of the fast – the tenth or the fifth of the month. It is somewhat perplexing that the Rabbis would debate such a simple question as to the date of a major religious observance! *Minhat Hinukh* (301) suggests, on this basis, that the original

Traditional perspectives on the fast of Tevet

Jews have fasted on the month of Tevet for millennia, dating back to even before the second temple period (Zechariah Chapters 7-8). The reasons for fasting in the tenth month are explained in a *beraita*, dating back to just after the destruction of the second temple period (*Rosh Hashanah* 18b). The *beraita* explains that the fast is either in recognition of the onset of the Babylonian siege on Jerusalem in this month (as per Ezekiel 24:1-2), or in recognition of the fact that the news of the destruction arrived to the Jews already in Babylonia for exile in this month two years afterward (as per Ezekiel 33:21).³

As Jews continued their centuries-long journey through exile, new reasons were added and appended to this fast on the tenth of Tevet. The major 14th century Halachic work, the *Tur (Orah Hayyim* 580), citing the ninth century Geonic work *Halakhot Gedolot* (18), contains a lengthy list of additional fast day observances, including a reason to fast on the eighth and ninth of Tevet,

tradition was to fast for one day in the tenth month, with the exact date open to the individual person. One could also suggest – see discussion in Ritva to *Mishnah Ta'anit* – that the fasts commemorating the destruction of the first temple were not in effect throughout the second temple period, and were newly reestablished (with some controversy as to exact date) upon the destruction of the second temple.

It is self-evident that the Tenth of Tevet does not carry greater significance than the date of any other fast, as I have argued [elsewhere](#).

which have since been folded into our current fast day of the tenth of Tevet.

The eighth of Tevet is a fast day to commemorate a sad event in our nation's history, the translation of the Torah into Greek – the Septuagint – at the hands of King Ptolemy of Egypt in the middle of the Greek Period. One might posit that the translation of the Torah can be problematic for one of three reasons, although *Tur* does not specify which is the reason to fast – (a) the idea of the inadequacy of translation, that some terms might not be translated correctly,⁴ (b) the possible misuse of scripture by adherents of other religions – particularly the early Christians, and (c) the transformation of the Torah from being a special treasure of the Jews to instead being something available to all of humanity.⁵

Regarding the ninth of Tevet, *Tur* cites a perplexing tradition that there is a fast on that day for reasons unknown or unrevealed. Many interpretations have been given for the selection of this date as a fast day, ranging from the somber, poignant fast for the death of Ezra the scribe,⁶ to the more anxious though presently relevant reason that the date coincides with the birth of a major figure in Christianity. Sid Leiman has given significant

attention to this question, concluding that the fast day probably relates to a figure related to the development in early Christianity and not to Ezra.⁷

The liturgical perspective on the fast of Tevet

Our liturgy for the tenth of Tevet both accepts the *Halakhot Gedolot* and the *Tur's* argument that we ought mark all of these tragic events through fasting and goes further, positing the innovation that the fast of the tenth of Tevet marks the events of all three days. One cannot overstress how stark the contrast is between the Talmud and the liturgy: to the Talmud, our reason for fasting is solely to recall overwhelming national tragedy of the exile and the destruction of the first temple, while the liturgy includes other reasons to mourn and fast, including the death of one of the 48 prophets and the translation of the Torah into the vernacular. While the translation of the Torah may have been seen as a tragedy, it pales in comparison to the tragedy of the political defeat, the destruction of the temple, and the loss of countless lives at war.

The tenth/eleventh century *selihot* for the tenth of Tevet are clear that the current practice of the tenth of Tevet subsumes all of these reasons under

⁴ In a very limited context, see *Megillah* 18a for this argument. It is formulated more fully in *Sofrim* 1:7.

⁵ See *Hagigah* 13a, although some limit this to only the Oral Law and not the Written Law (see Maharatz Chajes to *Sotah* 35b).

⁶ Assuming that Malachi was Ezra's pen name, the death of Ezra would also be the date of the cessation of prophecy as well, see *Megillah* 15a.

⁷ Sid Leiman "The Scroll of Fasts: The Ninth of Tebeth," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* Vol. 74, No. 2 (Oct. 1983): 174-195.

the fast. They read as follows:

On the eighth day He darkened⁸ it
for me on both left and right,
And for the three of them I
established a fast
The Greek King forced me to
translate the Law into Greek
On my back the plowers plowed,
making their furrows long.
I was denounced on the ninth with
embarrassment and ignominy
The cloak of splendor and clarity⁹
was removed from me
He, [the enemy,] ripped apart on
that day the one who gives good
words,
The one is Ezra the Scribe.¹⁰

⁸ Translating based on the late 19th century *Iyun Tefilah* commentary by Aryeh Leib ben Shlomoh Gordon, from the root d.ʿ.ḵ, “to darken” a rare root that appears nine times in Tanakh, mostly in Proverbs (13:9, 20:20, 24:20) and Job (6:7 18:5-6, 21:17). Use of the word darkening is appropriate given both the season of the fast in the Northern Hemisphere at the darkest time of the year, and also the depiction of the translation of the Torah as a day that brought darkness to the world. Some contemporary *siddurim* translate “crushed” from the more common Biblical root d.k.a. although the word in question “*di`akhani*” is clearly not derived from that root.

⁹ Tz.f.r. related to the Aramaic word for morning, “*tzafra*.”

¹⁰ See Abraham Rosenfeld, *The Authorized Selichot for the Whole Year* (London, 1969), 342-343. The *selihah* is found in the standard *Artscroll Siddur* on page 848-849. The translation above is my translation.

The inclusion of the translation of the Torah and the death of Ezra as reasons to fast on the tenth of Tevet are both of considerable controversy, given that neither is unanimous in the traditional sources. Regarding the fast on the ninth of Tevet for the death of Ezra, we might ask three basic questions: First, are we certain that Ezra died on the ninth of Tevet, given that there is no Biblical or Midrashic evidence of this date of death? Second, even if he died on the ninth, why is his death singled out as worthy of fasting, despite there not being public fasts for the deaths of other major figures whose *yarzheits* are known: from the Bible (Aaron, Miriam, Moses), from the traditions of the *Tur* (Joshua, Eli, Samuel, the *Zekeinim*, the 10 Martyrs), or those whose deaths are known from the Midrash (David, Isaac, Jacob and possibly¹¹ Rachel)?¹² Third, though *Magen Avraham* and *Taz*

These two stanzas each feature four rhyming lines, with the first three of each stanza following an alphabetic acrostic, and the fourth line consisting of a scriptural verse: Psalms 129:3 for the first, and Ezra 7:6 for the second, adapted to fit the rhyme of the stanza. Most *siddurim* fail to note that Ezra 7:6 is cited in the second verse; without appreciating the quote the sentence structure of the stanza is hard to understand.

¹¹ Rashi (Genesis 33:17, 35:16, 37:34, and 48:17) is clearly of the view that Rachel died in the spring, although many contemporary Jews are of the view that she died in the fall. None fast for the day of her death, though, to either view.

¹² Though we do fast on the occasion of the assassination of Gedaliah, we fast less for the loss of Gedaliah and for his piety, than for the larger geo-political implications of the assassination in how it ended the last chance for Jewish self-government in Israel during the Babylonian period and finalized the exile of the last remaining Jews in Israel following the destruction of the first temple.

(ironically, citing the aforementioned *selihot*) are of the view that the fast of the ninth is for the memory of Ezra, *Tur*, and *Halakhot Gedolot* seem to believe the fast was established for an unknown, and therefore likely different reason; so why should we follow the view that the fast is for Ezra rather than following the other traditions of whom the fast is for?

Maintaining the liturgy as is, forces a Jew to answer all of these questions in a specific way, which might make many feel uncomfortable. The liturgy maintains that indeed there was a centuries long oral, unrecorded tradition that Ezra died in this month, that his death is more fitting of fasting than other Jewish leaders, and that this is the correct tradition of who died on the ninth of Tevet. But these positions are not universally agreed upon, so why is it that our prayers force us to choose that position?

The questions regarding the fast for the translation of the Torah to Greek are even more substantial. Judaism endorses the translation of the Torah into other languages: Joshua apparently did so (*Sotah* 32a), as did the *Meturgeman* who translated Torah reading as part of the regular service (*Megillah* 23b-25b). Rashi even interprets the Talmud as sharing the view that weekly Torah reading in synagogue can be conducted in the

vernacular translation (*Megillah* 17b)! Though other faiths might frown more generally on the project of translation of scripture, Judaism does not. Yes, this translation may have been used or misused more by our antagonists of other faiths, but the general project of translation is not the worst thing in Judaism.

Concerning the specific translation into Greek, the major Talmudic source regarding the translation (*Megillah* 9a) tells the story of the translation without any indication that the translation was negative.¹³ To the contrary, Rabbi Yehudah indicates that the inspired nature of the translation gives it greater standing, more so than any other translation, as only the Greek Torah can be used for ritual and not other translations! Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel (*Megillah* 9b) is of the view that even the Torah itself predicts, and provides special greater standing towards, the Greek translation. It is hard to imagine that the translation of the Torah into the Divinely predicted and preordained Greek translation was so drastic a moment of tragedy that it would necessarily trigger a public fast. Finally, the 72 elders (*zekeinim*) who complete the translation do not appear to have been compelled or forced¹⁴ to complete the translation, and do not refuse to translate on the grounds that doing so would be a major tragedy.¹⁵

¹³ *Tanhuma Shemot* and *Avot De-Rebbi Natan* also fail to provide any negative feelings about the story. Negative depictions first begin in the later *Masekhet Sofrim* 1:7.

¹⁴ The Talmud's verb "*kines*," he gathered elders, turns into the far stronger "*insani*," forced me, in the *selihot*.

¹⁵ The late 19th century *Iyun Tefilah* commentary by Aryeh Leib ben Shlomoh Gordon argues, in his commentary to this *selihah*, that indeed, the argument follows from the fact that we fast that elders should have refused to translate the Torah, given how great a tragedy it was.

Even if we were to establish that the Greek translation was a tragedy, we still might ask two additional questions: First, what does it mean to say this translation took place on the eighth of Tevet? Did it take only one day? And how do we know that the eight of Tevet was the day the translation took place? Finally, even were it a tragedy to have taken place on the eighth of Tevet, does this become a sufficient reason to fast?

Here, too, maintaining the liturgy as is requires us to answer all these questions in a particular way: Despite the Talmud's sense, we must see the translation to Greek as a tragedy; we must believe that there was a centuries long oral, unrecorded tradition that the translation did happen on this day; and we must think that the translation of the Torah is such a tragedy that it should be included as part of a fast day. But again, is this perspective universal within Rabbinic Judaism?

Conclusion

I am a traditionalist by nature, and thus am loath to change any part of the *selihot* of the tenth of Tevet. Yet, I wonder to myself whether our liturgy is appropriate, and whether it forces us to accept, pray, or mourn from a perspective that we might not agree to. In essence, both the question of whether translation is a reason to mourn, and the question of whether the end of the era that was Ezra's death is a reason to mourn, are questions of the balance of tradition and innovation, the old and the new. In our case, somewhat ironically, we find an early medieval innovation to widen the scope of the fast of the tenth of Tevet, which has been cemented in the liturgy. And thus I continue

to wonder: does true traditionalism mean continuing to accept our liturgy as printed in the *siddur*, or would it instead counsel a return to the Talmud texts and its original perspectives on the nature of the fast, and its positive viewpoint on the Greek translation specifically, and on all translations more generally?

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