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Michelle Okun

Trinity College, michelle.okun@trincoll.edu

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A Discussion of the Theological Implications of Free Will
In the Biblical Story of the Exodus
From Egypt

Michelle Okun

Jewish Studies Thesis

Professor Seth Sanders

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Introduction

Humans have always been acutely aware of their place in time and space, wondering what control they have over their lives. We ask questions such as: what do I, as an individual, control in my life? To what extent does a supreme being know what I will do? Jews and Jewish philosophers have grappled with these questions for centuries, looking to the Torah for advice and clues. Human intellect greatly influences how we view ourselves and our experiences in the context of our relationship with God. Human intellect and how it is acquired emerges first in the Genesis story, after man and woman have been created. The following passage is considered important by Maimonides and Philo of Judeas when interpreting free will and its relation to punishment because it raises questions about divine providence and free will:

But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" And he said, "I heard the sound of thee in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent beguiled me, and I ate..." To the woman he said, "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." And to Adam he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

Genesis 3:9-13, 16-19

However, during the time period in which the Torah was written, these words did not spark discussions over free will to our knowledge, seeing there are no written records. God was viewed as perfect and free of sin, and both these passages were interpreted through that point of view. The medieval time period lent itself to new discoveries relating to the study of the mind and consciousness. Part of this conversation revolved around the human mind and its relation to God. The Torah was beginning to be analyzed and questioned from a philosophical point of view. There were no major arguments over the meaning of the following passage until people saw that it appeared to violate their previous notions about the nature of free will:

And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host; and the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD." And they did so. When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, the mind of Pharaoh and his servants was changed toward the people, and they said, "What is this we have done, that we have let Israel go from serving us?" So he made ready his chariot and took his army with him, and took six hundred picked chariots and all the other chariots of Egypt with officers over all of them. And the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt and he pursued the people of Israel as they went forth defiantly.

Exodus 14: 4-8

According to medieval philosophy, God had complete freedom and was capable of doing anything He felt was necessary as long as He didn't intentionally cause someone to sin. Sinning was supposed to be an act man was held responsible for and in this passage it appeared God was the one to blame. If God was in fact guilty it would bring about the collapse of an entire faith. Philo of Alexandria, Saadia Gaon, and Moses Maimonides took principles they held to be true and worked to defend God, prove the continued

existence of free will, and the ability for divine providence to exist without interfering with free will.

Another factor has to be taken into account, “if we view the Bible only as a literary document, limited in its historical and cultural scope, the "problem" of hardening Pharaoh's heart may be "our" problem (i.e., the modern reader) but not the Bible's. In the story of the exodus from Egypt God seems to control the free will of Pharaoh. That is, to examine the hardening of Pharaoh's heart as an ethical dilemma is a question of constructive but not biblical theology” (Magid, *Pharaoh's Hardened Heart: Cruel and Unusual Punishment and Covenantal Ethics*, 2). An extensive modern dialogue surrounds this philosophically problematic text. The problem of sin is looked at from a variety of angles with Philo of Alexandria, Saadia Gaon, and Moses Maimonides -- each analyzed the problems of free will, divine providence, and man’s relationship to God as expressed in the story of Creation and the story of the Exodus from Egypt.

Philo

A. Introduction

Philo of Alexandria lived from 15 BCE until 45 CE and his writings are known as Alexandrian Judaism. “He wrote a great deal: biblical exegeses, commentaries on certain biblical tales, a treatise about the Essenes, and also purely philosophical works” (Sirat, *A history of Jewish philosophy in the middle ages*, 6). Philo had assimilated into Christian culture and was greatly influenced by Hellenism and his philosophy reflects Greek influence, especially that of Plato. Philo’s view of the creation of the universe and how it impacts Adam and Eve in Genesis is heavily influenced by Plato and his theory of Creation ex nihilo (Frank, Leaman, and Manekin, *The Jewish Philosophy*

Reader, 3). His approach to theology holds that things were supposed to happen a certain way and through that Philo explored man's relationship with God in the creation story and hardening of Pharaoh's heart to better understand his own place in the world. He felt that man possesses free will because he has the ability to choose between good and evil (Yonge, *The works of Philo Judaeus, the contemporary of Josephus*, 67). Through knowledge, one would know the difference between good and evil and be educated enough to make a decision about it. External forces influence man's desire to do good deeds and man engages in an inner struggle to decide on a course of action. It is always up to the individual man to decide what he wants to do.

B. Creation and the Mind

As the creator of the world, God was the original cause and everything that occurred subsequently came from Him. According to this chain, there were five full days of creation that occurred prior to the sixth day, the day of man's creation. As a result, man was far down the chain of causality, and anything he did could not be directly attributed to God, man had to take responsibility. If God created us and we had no knowledge of good and evil, how could we as humans be held responsible for the fall? The answer lies in our ability from the very beginning to believe God is a just God. A just God would not control someone's actions and then punish them for doing His will. In the context of creation, God would not punish Adam and Eve for eating the fruit of knowledge if he controlled their actions, for God is perfect and incapable of sin.

Mankind had a soul from the very beginning; for Philo the soul represented the mind. Once man had eaten from the tree and formally received knowledge, the mind was

opened to its full capacity for knowledge. According to Philo, “for the other living creatures in whose souls the mind, the element set apart for liberty, has no place, have been committed under yoke and bridle to the service of men, as slaves to masters” (Yonge, *The works of Philo Judaeus, the contemporary of Josephus*, 352). Mankind has a special type of soul and therefore a special type of knowledge. Man has been set apart and given free rein of the creatures of the world.

What special abilities does man’s mind hold that sets him apart? “The special prerogative which man has received is mind, habituated to apprehend the natures of both all material objects and of things in general. For mind is the sight of the soul” (Lewy, *Philosophical writings Philo: selections edited by Hans Lewy*, 29). Our mind is one of a kind and allows us to express things on a God-like level. This is what allows us to understand our place in time, our daily tasks, and questions as lofty as our purpose here on earth. Man has the capacity to make decisions for himself. However to what extent are our decisions our own? If man is capable of evil, Philo believes it cannot possibly be derived from our connection with God. God cannot control our everyday actions or decisions because He would be colluding in sin, which is impossible. Humans are so far down the chain of causality that none of our actions can be blamed on God, so we must take full responsibility for our actions. In terms of intellect, humans are not on the same level as God and as inferiors are capable of sin. The sins of humans come from our own imperfections and not from God. Through this reasoning humans have free will and commit both sins and good deeds of their own accord and can therefore be punished and praised.

Free will for humans has been established but to what extent does God have foreknowledge of our actions? Within the creation story, this question has been debated for thousands of years. The following scene ensued:

But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" And he said, "I heard the sound of thee in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?"

Genesis 3:9-11

Did God truly not know where the humans were in the garden, or was it a rhetorical question? God had only created two humans, we can comfortably assume He knew where they were in the Garden. God cannot have divine providence without the foreknowledge that man's temptation would lead him to taste the fruit from the tree of knowledge, and disobey God. Philo accepts that God could have known what the humans were going to do, allowed them to use their free will, and then chose to punish them for their decision afterwards. This reasoning allows mankind to exert their free will. One could argue that God placed temptation in front of the humans and that disobeying Him was only natural. If humans want access to free will, they must accept the challenges that come with it. There will always be temptations towards evil or sin, and humans are constantly tested. When they fail, they must accept their punishments with honor.

C. Divine Providence and Free Will

Divine providence and punishment are not mutually exclusive. God can still punish humans for their actions even if He knows what will occur because He is not

controlling them. “The providence of God is the principal and almost the only cause that the divisions of the soul are not left entirely without any governor” (Yonge, *The works of Philo Judaeus, the contemporary of Josephus*, 388). God acts as a parent teaching lessons and uses his creations to teach those who come after them. This part of Genesis allows us to engage in a modern reading, to try and understand why the outcome of the creation story was so negative for humans. The scripture wanted us to see that, although God might not be watching our every movement, we must remain moral, keep our promises, and accept consequences. The story of creation also expresses the power and might of God. If God can cause us to bear children in pain and require us to sow the earth, what can He not do? This passage attained its purpose, inspiring people during ancient and modern times to believe in the power and justice of the Almighty.

Next, Philo takes a different route and focuses on how mankind is unique. Animals work for men and are subordinate. God tells us many times we are special, but in reality we’ve known that all along. We think for ourselves, use pack animals for labor, and create great literary works. God must have given men a certain place in the world to allow us to use our free will and strength effectively. Philo argues that animals do not make choices everyday, which separates them from us, from free will, and from God. In the beginning when the animals were being created they had the ability to speak; for example, the serpent talks with Eve. If we take this at face value animals fell from the grace of God following the incident in the Garden of Eden. Throughout history animals have been praised for all sorts of reasons but ultimately man has abilities that animals do

not. Animals hold a special place in the world at large but there is a reason they are not ruling over us.

Effectively animals do not have free will. While they have the ability to move where they want and graze where they desire, they do not think on a higher plane. Animals can never do something evil because there is no sense of morality within them or behind their actions. Philo insists that animals, unlike humans, cannot be blamed for their wrongdoing because they have a different type of soul. Philo discusses the type of soul humans have and what it is capable of accomplishing. He holds that the soul is expressed through the mind. It is the mind that makes man different and therefore special. Philo questions whether or not one's mind truly belongs to him since God is the possessor and creator of all. If God created the mind does it not follow that He has access to everyone's thoughts and actions? Here we must turn to the qualities of God as seen by Philo: "Through His goodness He begat all that is, through His sovereignty He rules what He has begotten. And in the midst between the two there is a third which unites them, Reason, for it is through reason that God is both ruler and good" (Lewy, Yochanan. *Philosophical writings: selections edited by Hans Lewy*, 69). God uses reason to control all He has created and all He rules over. God would not use His power to pry into the lives of everyday crooks and do-gooders, He allows the system of law already in place to punish and reward. Through reason He sees we can take care of ourselves at different points throughout history and do not always require His direct intervention.

It would be possible for God to know what is going to happen without him controlling free will. However, Philo contradicts himself when he speaks of prophets and

their relationship with God: “The Divine Spirit plays upon the vocal organism and raises sounds from it, which clearly express its prophetic message” (Lewy, *Philosophical writings: selections edited by Hans Lewy*, 75). Following this train of thought, God could potentially control a prophet’s voice; one could argue that it is done in order to benefit us, which is why God was allowed to interfere with our free will. Prophets are taken over by the holy one and used to convey a message, this interferes with man’s free will. It is possible for prophets to willingly accept God within their mouth but there were also prophets spoken of in the Torah who ran from God and were still forced to deliver His message. Moses is God’s most well-known prophet and makes it known that God has divine providence and uses it to watch over us in the same way a parent would watch over a child.

As previously stated, humans were created in the image of God, as revealed by their minds. One would naturally believe that God is not evil and would never use intellect to harm others. The question is: how are people are capable of evil when God is not evil? Since humans are created in God’s image, why is there evil in the world? Philo answers this by explaining that God is the ultimate cause of the world and humans are so far down the chain of causality that anything they do cannot be linked directly back to God. Accordingly, human intellect is not capable of divine perfection. Therefore, humans are capable of sins. Human sins come from human imperfections and not from God. This allows humans to be punished for their sins because God cannot be held responsible. To support his argument, Philo turns to a midrash in which the angels argued with God about the creation of humans. The angels argued that humans would be

evil; the angels' words became a self-fulfilling prophecy, which is why humans have the capacity for evil.

To what extent is God ignorant of what humans are going to do? Did God know humans were going to eat from the tree of knowledge and not from the tree of life? Philo says that man chose a mortal existence because he had no steady hold on the concept of life and mortality. Man lacked knowledge when he picked from the trees or did God place the snake in the Garden to lead him towards knowledge rather than eternal life? If God has the ability to manipulate man and mold him can it still be said that man has free choice? Does God only control humans when he wants to or when there is a great benefit to him? One could look at the events in the Tanakh in which God threatened biblical characters and wonder why God gave us free choice just to influence individuals and take it away?

It is self evident that one has a body, a mind, and a soul but we have no proof that the mind continues without the body. Philo appears to be struggling with the meaning of life. He asks: where does the soul come from? Where will it depart to? Do we control ourselves or does the soul control us? The dimension in which the soul lives is not under our control; we might even be under its control. When it is time to die and the soul leaves us, we have no control. When our soul longs for something we must give in or feel remorse, our soul has power, our soul has free will, and we have free will as a result (Lewy, *Philosophical writings: selections edited by Hans Lewy*, 32).

Philo holds that knowledge brings one closer to God. Man was created in the image of God but did not receive knowledge of good and evil until he tasted the forbidden fruit. "Let no one represent the likeness as one to a bodily form; for neither is

God in human form, nor is the human body God-like. No, it is in respect of the Mind, the sovereign element of the soul, that the word ‘image’ is used” (Lewy, *Philosophical writings: selections edited by Hans Lewy*, 54). Even with the knowledge of good and evil, man is inferior to God. The only way man could hope to become closer to the divine being is through knowledge. “For nothing is better than to search for the true God, even if the very discovery of Him eludes human capacity, since the very wish to learn, if earnestly entertained, produces untold joys and pleasures” (Lewy, *Philosophical writings: selections edited by Hans Lewy*, 59). One must use the mind to its highest ability to be closer to God. Although man may never understand God and his decisions, knowing he has free will can allow him to explore divine actions to his utmost ability. Striving to understand God will bring man pleasure. If man can never truly know God, why does he seek to know God? Similarly, if man cannot truly know himself, how does he even begin a quest for God?

Saadia believed that prophets existed to give knowledge to others enabling them to make a knowledgeable choice to follow or not follow God. Philo would have agreed with Saadia and would have gone even farther to say that prophets speak the words of God. However, Saadia and Philo differ in that Philo asserts that God actually inhabits man’s soul and causes man to speak.

“No pronouncement of a prophet is ever his own; he is an interpreter prompted by Another in all his utterances, when knowing not what he does, he is filled with inspiration, as the reason withdraws and surrenders the citadel of the soul to a new visitor and tenant, the Divine Spirit which plays upon the vocal organism and raises sounds from it, which clearly express prophetic message”

(Lewy, *Philosophical writings: selections edited by Hans Lewy*, 75).

God is the master of man, humans are not completely in control of their own bodies and choices. How then can the same man argue that humans have divine free will?

Saadia Gaon

A. Introduction

Saadia Gaon, who lived from 882 to 942 CE, was born in Egypt and lived in Palestine and Iraq during his lifetime. He was a rationalist of rabbinical Judaism coming from Mu'tazilite background. The Mutakallimun are followers of *kalam*, which refers to a group of Muslim theological schools that developed during Saadia's lifetime (Sirat, *A history of Jewish philosophy in the middle ages*, 15). Saadia's beliefs can be traced to Judaism and Mutakallimun beliefs in the justice of God, the goodness of God, and the singularity of God. He translated the Torah into Arabic, composed a book of prayers and poems, introduced scientific methodology into the study of Talmud, defined and codified numerous questions of *halakhah*, among other things (Sirat, *A history of Jewish philosophy in the middle ages*, 21). He also wrote a book called The Book of Doctrines and Beliefs, which forms the base of this exploration into free will, divine providence, and man's relationship with God. According to Saadia, mankind has free will and God is capable of divine providence; the two are not mutually exclusive. "In trying to characterize Saadia's type of piety as it emerges from his discussion of man's free will, we may say that it is one of confidence that reason has an answer to all problems; that God's omnipotence and human freedom do not collide; and that predestination and determinism need not be resorted to in order to account for the seeming perplexities of man's existence" (Altmann, *Essays in Jewish intellectual history*, 41). Man's

relationship with God is complex but God gives mankind the freedom to make his own decisions and doesn't interfere with the mortal world.

B. Divine Providence and Free Will

What exactly is the relationship between God and man? Saadia argues that God has foreknowledge of what man will do. God always knows what will occur; even if man changes his mind, God knew that change would occur. However one cannot say that God's foreknowledge of something causes it to happen, because that would take away man's free will. For free will to truly be free, the ability to act must precede the act in order to give equal opportunity for man to either act or desist. God is never able to intervene even if he knows what man is meant to do and could make it occur faster, because until man has done it there is no proof that it would have occurred. Man completing an act and man desisting from an act are both forms of actions since something occurs regardless, there is no middle ground. God's relationship with man exists on a plane in which man and God do not directly interact. Man is able to complete his wishes without God preventing him.

To prove the existence of free will in the context of divine providence, Saadia provides a number of proofs in a chapter called "Obedience and Rebellion". He uses four proofs - senses, reason, scripture, and tradition - to prove his view that God does not control humans. First, mankind has a sense of individual control, meaning from day to day we do not feel as though God is in control of our bodies. When a person lifts his hand, he does not feel as though he is a puppet. He is the only one controlling his decisions. A person's sense of self is complete without God. For example, an individual can consciously decide whether or not to speak or remain silent, Saadia believes this

shows man having control over himself. A potential problem with this theory is that God may be controlling our thoughts and actions but not allowing us to know that he is. It is not possible to prove this either way. In Saadia's view of sense, this could still be possible. Within the context of Saadia's life there would have been no way to understand the brain and how it controls parts of the body, but now we can look back on Saadia's writings and say he was correct regarding man's ability to control his body and senses. As of now, science does not fully understand the mind and cannot disprove the theory that God controls our minds without our knowledge.

Saadia's next argument is about reason. If God could exert force on humans why would he need to command them to do things? Wouldn't God be able to cause things to occur simply by thinking them? We see with our senses that this does not occur. God commands humans and humans disobey God, and the world keeps moving. This argument is extremely effective because it works from the ground up. To further Saadia's argument, within the Torah itself there are many situations in which humans do not do as God commands and receive punishments. However, they do not have their actions forcibly controlled by God, which supports Saadia's claim that God cannot control man.

Saadia goes on to say that God would not force humans to do anything because then man could attribute his negative actions, or non-actions that had negative consequences, to God. Saadia argues that free will must be present because "man cannot be considered as the agent of an act unless he exercises freedom of choice in performing it, for no one can be held accountable for an act who does not possess freedom of choice

and does not exercise this choice” (Rosenblatt, *The book of beliefs and opinions*, 187).

This reasoning relies on the justice of God, which is a core faculty of the existence of God. Saadia goes even further and notes that God does not interfere with the actions of humans and does not exercise any force upon them to obey or disobey him (Rosenblatt, *The book of beliefs and opinions*, 188). Saadia believes God wants genuine choice from humans so he can truly reward or punish them for their choices.

“I must further explain that man does not perform any action unless he chooses to do it, since it is impossible for one to act if he has no free will or fails to exercise his free will... I maintain further that the Creator does not allow His power to interfere in the least with the actions of men, nor does He compel them to be either obedient or disobedient”
(Rosenblatt, *The book of beliefs and opinions*, 120).

Saadia’s next argument is framed through questions. These questions derive from the base that God has divine providence. The first question he addresses is: Why did God issue commandments and prohibitions to the virtuous who he knew would not be led astray? Saadia answers that God issued orders to inform a virtuous individual what was desired of him so that he would know he was doing right. This gives purpose to an individual’s action and allows him to work towards more specific goals. Secondly, to reward an individual to the fullest that individual must have knowledge of what is required of them because once they are aware, their good deeds become blessings since they are following God’s commandments. Doing something without a reward is good nonetheless but once a commandment is provided an individual has conscious knowledge of what they should be doing. An individual must decide whether he is going to do right, wrong, or nothing at all. If an individual were rewarded for a good deed he was not

informed about, it would also be acceptable for him to be punished for committing a misdeed he had not been warned about. It is for this reason that commandments must be given so that everyone has to take full responsibility for their actions and sins. It ensures that everyone has the same knowledge of God and knows what is required of them.

The next question is: Why did God send missionaries to unbelievers when he knew they would never become believers? Saadia answers this through six points. First, he argues that had God not provided the unbelievers a way out, they never would have been presented with good so they would have been able to say they hadn't chose evil, it simply existed for them. By putting the choice in front of man, God holds him responsible for his actions. As we know from earlier, people can choose to act or not act, but if they are given no information they can not be punished because it would be unjust. The information allows the unjust to be punished and to understand why they deserve punishment. Secondly, if for some reason man had not done as God had assumed and at the last minute chosen to do something different, God could not punish him because He would be punishing him based on something he had not yet done. God cannot punish man in case he corrects his ways even if it wasn't originally what God thought would happen. God must allow the scenario to play out to make sure he doesn't preemptively punish anyone. Thirdly, all, including non-believers, should know the words of God and the prophets because they are important.

In addition, Saadia argued that if someone orders another to do something wrong and they do not do it they are innocent, in the same way another can order someone to do good and be regarded as wise even though the person didn't end up doing it, as occurs in

this case. This idea parallels the status of prophets: they are considered holy even if people do not end up following them because they were trying to help people be better. Even though the non-believers did not change God was wise in allowing them the opportunity. In this case, it is the thought behind the action and not what ultimately resulted from it. Fifthly, someone could think the act of simply agreeing to do something regardless of whether it is good or evil could be seen as good, so giving them the correct knowledge prevents them from arguing that they didn't know better and thought they were doing right. Saadia's sixth argument centers on the nature of God. He states that God made no distinction between what characteristics befell which men, including which men would be followers or not. Since He cannot differentiate, he preaches his commandments to everyone. The final key question Saadia asks is: man cannot be held responsible for an act unless he exercises choice... but if man makes all his choices, why are some sins not punished? Saadia's answer is that most acts committed by humans are not significant enough to deserve a punishment. Another reason is that most people do not intentionally sin, so unintentional acts are often excused.

Maimonides

A. Introduction

Maimonides lived during the 12th century during a time of forced conversions to Islam. His family went to Egypt to escape persecution. He became a prominent Jewish figure in Egypt and led the Jewish community for many years. He was a follower of Aristotle and was a rabbi and Talmudic scholar, the royal physician in Egypt, and a philosopher (Sirat, *A history of Jewish philosophy in the middle ages*, 158). Within philosophy and rabbinical schools he is known for having written The Guide for the

Perplexed, Teshuvot, and an extensive commentary on Jewish law called the Mishneh Torah. He holds thirteen principles to be true regarding God, all of which influence his philosophical writings. The belief in a single God, divine providence, and eternity of God are the basis for his arguments regarding free will (Sirat, *A history of Jewish philosophy in the middle ages*, 171). Maimonides wrote for different audiences at different levels and ensured that the common man and the intellectual were both able access his philosophical ideas. He wrote at length about the existence of evil, free will, punishment, repentance, and divine providence.

B. Creation and Mankind

Maimonides believed that man had the ability to act freely from the moment he was created. When man ate the fruit from the tree of knowledge he demonstrated choice in choosing to disobey God (Frank, Leaman, and Manekin, *The Jewish philosophy reader*, 26). However, Maimonides argues that man did not intentionally eat from the fruit of knowledge to disobey God but because the tree was appealing to the eyes and good for food. Man possessed free will without intellect, after he ate the fruit, he gained access to the intellect he had previously been deprived of. Why then was God allowed to punish man when man didn't know any better? Regardless, man was "punished by being deprived of that intellectual apprehension. He therefore disobeyed the commandment that was imposed upon him on account of his intellect" (Maimonides, Weiss, and Butterworth, *Ethical writings of Maimonides*, 131). This means that mankind's actions no longer lacked meaning and his intellect gained purpose, allowing him to be punished because at this point he understood the consequences and what he did wrong. Intellect allowed man to better interpret and understand his actions. Even though humans did not

have the intellectual capacity to understand their actions, since they had not yet eaten the fruit, they could still be punished because they had free will and acted. It was for this reason that God could punish humans:

“this was the punishment corresponding to disobedience; it was *measure for measure*. He had been given license to eat good things and to take pleasure in ease and tranquility. When he became greedy, followed his pleasures and imaginings, and ate what had been forbidden to eat, he was deprived of everything and had to eat the meanest kinds of food, which he had not used as aliment before-and this only after toil and labor”

(Maimonides, Weiss, and Butterworth, *Ethical writings of Maimonides*, 132).

According to Maimonides, this is how God understands our relationship to free will. Everything we do in conscious disobedience of God is punishable with a corresponding punishment. Since we knew that God did not want us to eat from the tree of knowledge, even though we didn't fully grasp the concept, we disobeyed God and were punishable.

C. Divine Providence

During Maimonides' lifetime, he was influenced by a number of individuals. Aristotle's writings pertaining to the universe and how it functioned were key to how Maimonides himself saw human existence. Aristotle believed the universe existed in two parts, one that is controlled by Providence and God, and another that is controlled by no one. God controls the planets and what is on them, which is how He comes to control life on earth. According to Aristotle, nothing is prone to change. Species do not change,

and everything is just as it was when God first created the world. However, individuals within species have the ability to change, which is how Aristotle explains the existence of mortality. Plants and animals, not including mankind, do not have the same capabilities as man such as intellect and the Divine Providence of God watching over them.

Maimonides's opinion follows Aristotle's train of thought: "In the lower portion of the Universe Divine Providence does not extend to the individual members of species except in the case of mankind. It is only in this species that the incidents in the existence of the individual beings, their good and evil fortunes, are the result of justice, in accordance with the words, "For all His ways are judgment." But I agree with Aristotle as regards all other living beings and *à fortiori* as regards plants and all the rest of earthly creatures" (Maimonides and Friedländer, *The guide for the perplexed*, 511). Maimonides goes on to say that he accepts this theory because he has not seen or read of any circumstance of divine providence involving animals so he is comfortable agreeing that only man is affected by Divine Providence and intellect.

After Maimonides agrees with Aristotle, he questions why mankind was chosen to receive Divine Providence. His belief in God was so strong that he simply said, "it was the will of God, it is the decree of His Wisdom, or it is in accordance with the laws of Nature" (Maimonides and Friedländer. *The guide for the perplexed*, 513) that we have these higher abilities. It is answers like this that lack credibility, and since Maimonides is capable of providing multiple proofs for other questions, this last response does not have any conviction behind it. Although he does say the gift of divine providence could simply be through the will of God, he doesn't use the creation story as a proof for any of this. It would follow that because he is created in the image of God man received these

special gifts. However, Maimonides does explain that man has increased his conception of providence through the capacity to learn. “The relation of Divine Providence is not the same for all men; the greater the human perfection a person has attained, the greater the benefit he derives from Divine Providence” (Maimonides and Friedländer. *The guide for the perplexed*, 514). The intellectual capacity of a person determines the depth of his understanding of their relation to Divine Providence. According to this argument, people such as prophets or philosophers would have the greatest understanding, which puts Maimonides among those who understand the uniqueness of their relationship with God.

Maimonides believes that God knows what will happen but does not control it. In this sense, God could say that the Jews will be slaves in Egypt without directly causing it. It's simply knowledge that he holds and can access. In terms of human knowledge and capability, Maimonides held that humans couldn't possibly understand God. He believes that God knows about evil and knows everything that will happen but does not control it; He simply drops hints along the way. Maimonides wrote, “The notion of His providence is not the same as the notion of our providence, nor is the notion of His governance of the things created by Him the same as the notion of our governance of that which we govern” (Maimonides and Friedländer, *The guide for the perplexed*, 496). Even though humans will never fully understand God they still make their own choices, as seen in the very beginning in the creation story.

Pharaoh and Free Will

A. Introduction

The story of the Exodus from Egypt has been widely interpreted and analyzed. In the discussion of free will and divine providence. In the initial reading of the story, it

appears that humans, specifically Pharaoh, do not have free will. The following passage will be examined through the philosophical lenses provided by Philo of Alexandria, Saadia Gaon, and Maimonides:

For Pharaoh will say of the people of Israel, 'They are entangled in the land; the wilderness has shut them in.' And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host; and the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD." And they did so. When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, the mind of Pharaoh and his servants was changed toward the people, and they said, "What is this we have done, that we have let Israel go from serving us?" So he made ready his chariot and took his army with him, and took six hundred picked chariots and all the other chariots of Egypt with officers over all of them. And the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt and he pursued the people of Israel as they went forth defiantly.

Exodus 14:3-8

Philo, Saadia Gaon, and Maimonides all hold certain premises to be true: all believe mankind has free will and control over all their actions, all believe some form of divine providence exists, and all believe God is free from sin and evil.

B. Philo on Pharaoh & Free Will

It is common knowledge that humankind sins. In Judaism, there is an entire high holiday devoted to repentance and atoning for one's sins. According to Philo, God only allows people to repent if they truly feel remorse, which is why in Exodus Pharaoh is not given the opportunity to repent. Throughout the story of Pharaoh enslaving the Hebrews, God, through Moses, gives Pharaoh the chance to release the slaves and make things right without any repercussions or punishments. Pharaoh did not have any goodness in his heart and would not release the Hebrews on his own accord and God responded by

sending punishments to him and his people. These punishments were supposed to make Pharaoh realize that he was wrongly enslaving the Hebrews and that the ethical response would be to release them, but they had no such effect. If humans have free will, why was it within God's power to change the course of history by sending plagues? By sending punishments through Moses, God is indirectly interacting with humans. God is indirectly causing human suffering, which is also troubling. The idea that God not only caused Pharaoh pain, but also punished the entire Egyptian population by killing children, is difficult to swallow.

Is God a just God? Yes, "But man, possessed of a spontaneous and self-determined will, whose activities for the most part rest on deliberate choice, is with reason blamed for what he does wrong with intent, praised when he acts rightly of his own will" (Lewy, *Philosophical writings: selections edited by Hans Lewy*, 29).

According to Philo, God is just in causing Pharaoh to suffer because He was working toward a greater good and was trying to better Pharaoh as an individual. Pharaoh himself had a choice of whether he wanted to repent and free the Hebrews. It was his stubbornness, not evil within God, that caused his suffering. Pharaoh deliberately chose not to act and, in doing so, he alone was responsible for what befell him and his people. When man does falsely by God it is within God's realm of justice to react accordingly. 'Wrong with intent' means that God will not punish for mistakes but only when there is already evil within a man's heart. In this case Pharaoh is the one who harbors evil within his heart. Pharaoh acted wrongly with intent, which is why God deals him a heavy

punishment. Why, though, did God not cause Pharaoh to suffer in his punishment instead of simply killing him?

Philo believed that simply killing Pharaoh and allowing his people to escape punishment would only be a narrow, human concept, “man who has no eyes for the great court of justice, for men think death is the termination of punishment... to suffer a death which is deathless is unending.” (Marcus, Ralph, *Philo: Supplements*, Book VIII 355), which is why God deals out a harsher and fuller punishment. Pharaoh not only experience the death of his first son but sees the pain of his entire people losing the first generation of offspring. In Philo’s train of thought, God is justified in his actions because none of Pharaoh’s men stepped up to oppose Pharaoh’s decisions. Therefore, the whole nation was responsible and deserving of punishment.

The Egyptian nation had no qualms about enslaving the Hebrews so it was justifiable for God to use Moses to deal out punishments. God does not harbor ill feelings such as those experienced by humans. Rather, he sees injustice and uses his divine abilities to remedy it. “Everything will suddenly be reversed, God will turn the curses against the enemies who rejoiced in the misfortunes of the nation... in their infatuation they did not understand that the short lived brilliance which they had enjoyed had been given them not for their own sakes but as a lesson to others” (Marcus, Ralph, *Philo: Supplements* Book VIII 421). Philo believed that God has the power to see what was to come and use humans to punish one another, acting through them. Using Philo’s reasoning, this could explain the use of plagues and explain why God didn’t just smite Pharaoh.

God is sometimes viewed as not possessing malevolent intentions. But according to Philo, “God is not a tyrant who has made a practice of cruelty and violence and all the deeds committed by a despot who rules by ruthlessness, but a king invested with a kindly and law-abiding sovereignty who governs the whole heaven and earth with justice” (Marcus, Ralph, *Philo: Supplements*, Book IX 461). God is a ruler unlike Pharaoh, he does not rule through mercilessness or injustice. God is a supreme being who is not petty and callous like man can be. Man can always fall victim to evil and when it’s too late, such as it was for Pharaoh, he cannot escape from his own cruelty. “For nature has borne all men to be free, but the wrongful and covetous acts of some who pursued that source of evil, inequality, have imposed their yoke and invested the stronger with power over the weaker” (Lewy, *Philosophical writings: selections edited by Hans Lewy*, 46). God ensures that all men are born free; it is the choices men make that ruins them. It is not God who puts men into situations where they will be enslaved, but rather selfish and unjust humans who impose their will on others. In this way, some men come to be treated like cattle and other men think they are commanders of the world. Evil is something complex that must be striven after and someone capable of evil is someone who knows right from wrong and chooses the latter.

C. Saadia Gaon on Pharaoh & Free Will

According to Saadia Gaon, free will must be present because “man cannot be considered as the agent of an act unless he exercises freedom of choice in performing it, for no one can be held accountable for an act who does not possess freedom of choice and does not exercise this choice” (Rosenblatt, *The book of beliefs and opinions*, 187). “The ability to act must necessarily exist before the act, so as to give man the free choice

of either acting or abstaining from the act. For if the ability to act came into existence only at the moment of the action and were co-existent with it, the two would be either mutually interdependent or neither of them would be the cause of the other” (Rosenblatt, *The book of beliefs and opinions*, 118). Therefore, Saadia would agree with Philo that man has free will and that God allows Pharaoh to continue on his path of self-destruction but doesn’t cause it. Pharaoh initially had the choice of whether or not he wanted to free the Hebrews and continued to have the choice until his heart became so hard it was no longer conceivable. Up until the moment someone completes an action he has the ability to choose his course of action. This allows people to make last minute decisions and to know that they can always change their mind and do the right thing in the end.

Saadia differs from Maimonides and Philo because he doesn’t believe the words in the Torah are an accurate translation of what actually occurred. There is a story about Sihon, the king of the Amorites. He would not let the Hebrews pass through his land so they Hebrews fought him in order to get through. Saadia argues that Sihon needed to be given resolve; in reality, God was helping give him strength, not sending him to his death. God gave Sihon the resolve he needed to fight the Hebrews, it was a backwards blessing. The same holds true for Pharaoh’s resolve (Rosenblatt, *The book of beliefs and opinions*, 199). Pharaoh needed to be bolstered so he wouldn’t die from the plagues and maintained the strength to continue his wrath. Had he succumbed to human weakness, he would not have received his just deserts. “There are numerous instances of this kind of forced exegesis, which Saadia chose to apply in order to avoid the impression that the Psalmist occasionally questioned the justice of God. He distinctly declared that it was his

“way to explain every question concerned with the petition for release negatively.” He adopted this rule because he considered it “absurd” to associate injustice with the Creator, whose motive in creating was to “benefit” his creatures (Altmann, *Essays in Jewish intellectual history*, 40). Saadia wants to avoid any question of God’s greatness and will go so far as changing the Hebrew to prevent that from happening.

It was for this reason that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart: “Finally the godless may be permitted to linger on earth merely in order that his punishment be more severe. Thus God saved Pharaoh from the ten plagues only to drown him in the sea” (Rosenblatt, *The book of beliefs and opinions*, 216). God is a just God and wanted the punishment to fit the crime. God made an example of Pharaoh, proving that no matter how strong and successful you are, you must listen to God and will receive punishment if you do not show remorse. However, according to Saadia, God does not fear those that are disobedient. In fact, “Our Lord does not dread disobedience on account of Himself, since it is impossible to assume that any sort of accident should affect Him. He abhors disobedience for our own sakes because it has a harmful effect on us” (Rosenblatt, *The book of beliefs and opinions*, 122). However, if God did it to help us, what reasoning can He use for causing the flood to destroy all of humanity? Did that too benefit those who were living? No, it did not; God was indeed bothered by people not obeying Him and so this argument is incomplete or fragmented. In this light, God can act selfishly.

D. Maimonides on Pharaoh & Free Will

Maimonides believes that God knows what will happen but does not control it. In terms of what humans know and what humans themselves are capable of, Maimonides holds that humans cannot possibly understand God or His actions. Due to this

perspective we are simply unable to comprehend and cannot judge God because we are not capable of understanding Him. God is superior to all. He thinks God knows evil exists and knows who will or will not become evil. God has divine providence and knows everything that will happen but does not control it, simply drops hints along the way. Maimonides said, “the notion of His providence is not the same as the notion of our providence, nor is the notion of His governance of the things created by Him the same as the notion of our governance of that which we govern” (Maimonides and Friedländer, *The guide for the perplexed*, 496). Even though humans will never fully understand God they still make their own choices, as seen in Bereshit in the story of creation.

Maimonides believes God is making an example out of Pharaoh and showing His power by punishing him (Magid, *"Pharaoh's Hardened Heart: Cruel and Unusual Punishment and Covenantal Ethics"*). Maimonides holds that because Pharaoh deserves punishment he gives up his free will. Maimonides brings up the point that, “he that hath destroyeth his own soul” (Maimonides, and Friedländer. *The guide for the perplexed*, 269), meaning that man has corrupted his own soul and led himself to his own destruction. In saying this, Maimonides holds man completely responsible, which is in keeping with his view that men control their own actions. To destroy one’s soul is not an easy thing to do. It takes a strong will and a great strength to deviate from the status quo. Evil existed in Pharaoh before God interacted with him through Moses. God used a prophet to warn Pharaoh of what was to come since God had the ability to see the future. He was attempting to warn Pharaoh. Pharaoh was likely warned so that God could show

He was just in His actions against Pharaoh. It was then up to Pharaoh to prove he was worthy of forgiveness.

“Covenantal ethics includes the loss of free-will resulting from continued unremorseful sin, after which the individual loses the right of partnership with God and can be used as a tool for teaching others of the limits of covenantal ethics. For Maimonides, at least, this does not mean that one is excised from the covenant. Rather, the covenant includes, in extreme cases, the justification for such cruel and unusual punishment (i.e., relinquishing free-will) in order to administer retribution for previous behavior, especially in cases (such as this) when such punishment can be a public display for others.”

(Magid, "Pharaoh's Hardened Heart: Cruel and Unusual Punishment and Covenantal Ethics")

Maimonides explained a set of rules regarding repentance in the, Laws of Repentance, “when an individual or a collective willingly and knowingly sin it is fit that they be punished. God knows the fair and correct way of punishment. There is a sin that results in punishment in the next world, resulting in no retribution in this world, and a sin that is punished in this world and the next. In what cases does this apply? in cases where h/she does not repent. If they repent, repentance serves as a barrier against punishment. Just as one sins willingly and knowingly, one must repent willingly and knowingly”. Did Pharaoh willingly and knowingly sin or was God causing him to sin? “Maimonides sees God as trying to *eliminate* Pharaoh’s free will and chances of repenting, on the grounds that Pharaoh does not deserve to repent” (Shatz, "*Freedom, repentance and hardening of the hearts: Albo vs. Maimonides*, 492). This goes against what Maimonides believes about repentance, that everyone is entitled to it at any point, but clears God yet again.

The language of the text further supports the concept that Pharaoh was to serve as an example to be taught from, “In almost every instance where God hardens Pharaoh's

heart, the verse includes the clause "so that," "in order that," "to show that," "to make known," or "shall know." Both the plagues and the hardening of Pharaoh's heart (which seem to be inextricably intertwined) have pedagogical value" (Magid, "Pharaoh's Hardened Heart: Cruel and Unusual Punishment and Covenantal Ethics"). Those reading the Torah and hearing the stories were supposed to learn to fear God and understand His might. The Hebrews had just gone through a period of slavery, they needed to be able to see their God in a strong light and to understand that He had returned and was ready to protect them. In addition, the story serves as a reminder for all future generations that God is a force to be reckoned with. However, God does not punish everyone who sins. He focuses His energy on those that show no remorse because true evil causes Him to take away free will.

According to Maimonides, there are three different types of evils and each occurs for different reasons. The first is human suffering, which occurs naturally. The second is man hurting other men through crime, such as through oppression or the abuse of power (Maimonides and Friedländer, *The guide for the perplexed*, 389). The third type of evil is self-inflicted, as one's own ambitions drive one towards personal desires, which in turn leads to destruction. Pharaoh's evil could fall under both the second and third categories. Pharaoh longed for power and legacy; why else would he be building pyramids using slaves? He longed to gain power for negative reasons in hopes of using his authority to his own advantage. For the third category to apply it must be said that Pharaoh's own ambitions and self-motivation drove him to destruction. His own demons destroyed him

in the end. God only provided Pharaoh with extra strength, keeping him alive so he could complete his attempt to destroy the Hebrews.

If humans have free will and the ability to repent, how does God know which humans will or will not repent? Maimonides believes God is omniscient and in fact already knows whether or not someone will repent. In keeping with this, He knows whether or not He can punish a non-repenting sinning individual (Maimonides and Friedländer, *The guide for the perplexed*, 120,). God is a just God and would not abuse His ability to punish humans for He does not feel anger or resentment. Saadia would disagree with Maimonides on when it is appropriate to punish someone. Saadia holds that until an act has been completed there is no way to know what would have occurred, even if God is supreme. The question of God cutting off Pharaoh's access to free will is deeply troubling because it in effect means that God could cut off any individual's free will. What if God acts prematurely to punish someone, his life is cut short before he can repent? Saadia argues that anyone is capable of repentance. After what amount of evil is God justifiably able to say a man will not repent and instead must die? We as humans live on a continuum and are constantly changing, how can God know an action has been brought to completion? God's actions are simply in response to man's decisions.

His actions towards mankind also include great calamities, which overtake individuals and bring death to them, or affect whole families and even entire regions, spread death, destroy generation after generation, and spare nothing whatsoever...

Whenever such evils are caused by us to any person, they originate in great anger, violent jealousy, or a desire for

revenge. God is therefore called, because of these acts, “jealous,” “revengeful,” “wrathful,” and “keeping anger” (Nah. i. 2); that is to say, He performs acts similar to those which, performed by us, originate in certain physical dispositions... they are in accordance with the guilt of those who are to be punished, and not the results of any emotion; for He is above all defect!

(Maimonides and Friedländer, *The guide for the perplexed*, 76).

In this quote Maimonides makes it clear that he believes God is above the acts of cruelty that occur between men. When God chooses to interfere it must be in regard to an extreme situation where a great wrong has occurred. God does not act out of passion and emotion, like He says we do, but out of a need to protect the greater good. God is not afraid to act in a way that causes destruction when He knows it is for justice. It is for this reason that God is willing to hurt the entire Egyptian nation, not just Pharaoh as an individual, on the Hebrews’ behalf. According to David Shatz, “true, God punishes Pharaoh and his people. But their eventual fate – their firstborn sons die and, later, their warriors drown at sea – suggests that it is the original crime of drowning or trying to drown male Hebrew children that meets with retribution, and not necessarily *any* obstinacy shown by them or their king” (Shatz, *“Freedom, repentance and hardening of the hearts: Albo vs. Maimonides”*, 490). The punishment the Egyptians receive is parallel to the sufferings of the Hebrews, which is why God is able to harden Pharaoh’s heart throughout Exodus and still remain just.

Exodus and Tribulations

In the problematic biblical story of Pharaoh, these three philosophers solve the problem of free will differently. Philo believes God gave Pharaoh proper warning of what was to come and a chance to repent. Because He did so, God's name is cleared, and He is also allowed to dole out a punishment. God's divine intellect and perfection protects Him. In addition, through using Moses as His medium, God can act freely by communicating effectively with humans. Instead of being a booming voice from the heavens, God has in essence taken the form of a human and gained their trust by performing miracles. Philo holds that God uses punishments to try and teach a lesson. However, at a certain point, God must have realized Pharaoh wasn't going to relent. Why then did He not just kill Pharaoh? A truly just God would not have enjoyed playing with His food. This is a reason Philo's complete acceptance of God is troublesome. However, Philo believes God acted to teach a lesson to everyone, which in fact was effective considering the Hebrews became a free and strong people.

Maimonides agrees with Philo that God is making an example out of Pharaoh and showing His power by punishing him (Magid, "Pharaoh's Hardened Heart: Cruel and Unusual Punishment and Covenantal Ethics"). The ultimate way God shows His power in this story is through destruction, only the Hebrews get to see His miracles in the desert. If God truly wanted to make an example of the Egyptians for generations to come, why didn't He leave them with a positive message from the Hebrews?

“Maimonides cites Ex. 9:15, 16, "I could have stretched forth My hand and stricken you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been effaced from the earth. Nevertheless I have spared you for this purpose; in order to show you my

power, and in order that My fame resound throughout the world." Maimonides extrapolates, "To show the entire world (*kol boyei 'olam*) that when God prevents the sinner from repenting, h/she cannot repent".

(Magid, "Pharaoh's Hardened Heart: Cruel and Unusual Punishment and Covenantal Ethics").

The concept of punishing the Egyptians for enslaving the Hebrews makes sense but a truly inspiring and justifiable God could have acted however He wanted, He could have set the precedent for the future: changing people from the inside out and making them understand how to defeat inner the evil instead of hardening them to further accept or utilize the evil.

Saadia took a completely different viewpoint. He argued that the passage itself was not being translated correctly, comparing it to the passage about Sihon and his dealings with the Hebrews. Saadia argues that Sihon needed to be given resolve; in reality, God was helping give him strength, not sending him to his death. This could even be as God doing a good deed by bolstering Sihon's resolve. God knew he was sending Sihon to death regardless, but giving him resolve yet again clears God's name. The same principle applies to Pharaoh in Egypt. Pharaoh had gone through tragedies and wanted revenge, so God was simply providing him with the strength to get his revenge. In the process God received the outcome He wanted, which was the freedom of the Hebrews and Pharaoh's just deserts.

All three philosophers held that intellectual achievement was essential for humans to consider their relationship with God. It was not up to man to question God, only to defend God. God's intellect filled a plane of understanding that we couldn't begin to

comprehend. In keeping with this recognition, God's decision to bring destruction to an evil man is seen as being our comprehension. They will not say God could have gone about it differently because they hold that everything He does is done deliberately and with the future in mind. Through intellect, man who had free will from the very beginning could actually make educated decisions. God armed man with the ability to choose intellect over ignorance; from that point on, it was up to each individual to decide whether to use their potential knowledge to guide their use of free will.

Modern Implications

During medieval times God was of the utmost importance and man had to defend God from all blasphemy. The complex arguments discussed above were informed by a genuine sense of the perfection of God. Philo of Alexandria, Saadia, and Maimonides shared the view that God was perfect and all of their arguments refused to put blame on God, even if they addressed the possibility. If one takes away that solid base and allows for the fact that God makes mistakes or causes destruction, it could bring about a whole new way of viewing the story of Pharaoh. Let's assume Pharaoh started out as a kind individual. He was raised to be a leader, he was raised to enslave the Hebrews, he was completing what he believed to be his place in the world. He was set up to fail from the very beginning. He had never heard of the God of the Hebrews and naturally would expect this God to be weak, since the Hebrews had been enslaved for so long and had not been rescued. Along comes a man, his brother, second in line, someone who could potentially have been jealous of him, trying to convince him to free his work force. It is

only natural that he holds his ground; he is setting an example for his nation. Any weakness would be enough to destroy him and cause the dynasty to shift.

God, speaking through Moses, was trying to convince Pharaoh to go against everything he stood for. First God created a tyrant and then chose to punish him for his own upbringing. Why had God not gone to Pharaoh himself? Why did God allow for calamities to befall hundreds of people if He is supposed to be kind? Losing one's child is the ultimate bereavement and causing the death of the innocent is simply referred to as part of the deal by Philo, Saadia, and Maimonides. God's horrific acts were completed by Moses. God himself didn't dirty himself directly in the workings of humans. By stepping out, he cleared his name and let the Egyptians take the fall for his four hundred year abandonment of the Jewish people.

The Torah has been reworked and edited throughout history. Was the line "Then the LORD said to Abram, 'Know of a surety that your descendants will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs, and will be slaves there, and they will be oppressed for four hundred years; but I will bring judgment on the nation which they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions'" (*Genesis 15:13-14*), added later to explain the enslavement and justify it or to allow the Hebrews to view their enslavement as inevitable? The writing of enslavement into the history of the Jewish people, and having it come from the mouth of God, is troubling. By speaking, did God cause the enslavement to occur? Did He make a self-fulfilling prophecy? The Hebrews as slaves had been beaten into submission, going about their tasks without question. Did God know that the Hebrews would lose faith in Him and therefore cause them to go into slavery as a punishment? Is God the virtuous figure Philo, Saadia, and Maimonides think

He is? The three philosophers discuss God's divine providence and how it cannot cause anything to occur. Why then was it necessary for God to tell the Hebrews they would be slaves? Why did He warn then of the inevitable? Was this passage added later to excuse God's actions because what happened to Pharaoh did actually trouble people? There are many questions that are unanswerable without knowing for certain what the many writers of the Torah intended to do. Without factitious information, the Torah holds potential for speculation.

Those who wrote the Torah would never have presumed that people wouldn't accept the Torah as truth. God is questioned now and people are not afraid to disagree with the sages of the past. What worked to quell dissension then no longer works. It sets a precedent to analyze changes but is hard to reconcile with the events of today. We know too much for our own good; we are unable to escape the complexity of our time. Medieval philosophy offers a smaller focus and, since more truths are universally accepted, it is possible for philosophers to reach conclusions such as the ones discussed. They did not blindly follow God and their arguments hold up across time. Take, for example, Saadia's view that an action is not completed until it takes place and combine it with Maimonides' view on repentance. Now apply this model to present day. Criminals are often put in jail in order to prevent them from sinning again, going against Saadia's argument that the action must be completed before someone is blamed for it. Without allowing someone freedom, you can only assume what their course of action will be. Maimonides would argue that everyone needs to have the ability to repent and prematurely putting someone in jail contradicts his philosophy.

Today we still have a lot to glean from the writings of these men, for their logic and reason goes into details we may never have noticed. We as a generation have lost faith in the God they took for granted. We accept free will but not for the same reasons they did. Humans now are divided over the question of God's existence, something that is legal some places and worthy of death in others. It is difficult for us to put ourselves in the shoes of Philo, Saadia, or Maimonides because we as a human race cannot all agree on religious matters. We can use their words to understand that repentance and justice can be found and have been important throughout history. Saadia's analysis of free will and his many supporting arguments allow us to not simply rely on our questioning of God or inner feelings of freedom but rather on complex reasoning. The key support for the existence of free will while still believing in God is: Evils cannot possibly come from God and must come only from man, our free will brings them about. In places that do not believe in God it is sufficient to agree with Saadia's view that that we can feel our control over our own bodies and do not need anything more than that.

Going forward, all of the viewpoints presented by the philosophers are supported by their argument. Our existence in a different day and age with different beliefs does not take away their validity. New questions sprang up that were not addressed by Philo, Saadia, or Maimonides. We must continue to look at these theological thinkers in their own context, using all we have learned from them to better our understanding of the past and present.

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