



STATISTICS AND FREE WILL

Experts attempt to predict people's future behavior through statistics. Does that mean you are just a statistic? Do you have the free will to make your own decisions or are you just a cog in the machine?

Join this ancient Jewish debate.



JEWISH INSIGHTS

A TASTE OF THE REBBE'S TEACHINGS



PARSHAT SHELACH

A. The Sin and The Consequence

Source 1 Numbers 13:17-20

Moses sent the men to explore the Canaanite territory. He said to them, "Go to the Negev, and then continue north to the hill country.

"See what kind of land it is. Are the people who live there strong or weak, few or many?

"Is the inhabited area good or bad? Are the cities where they live open or fortified?

"Is the soil rich or weak? Does it have trees or not? Make a special effort to bring back some of the land's fruits." It was the season when the first grapes begin to ripen.

וַיִּשְׁלַח אֹתָם מֹשֶׁה לְתוֹר אֶת־
אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם עֲלוּ זֶה
בְּנֶגֶב וְעֲלִיתֶם אֶת־הָהָר:

וּרְאִיתֶם אֶת־הָאָרֶץ מִה־הוּא
וְאֶת־הָעָם הַיֹּשֵׁב עָלֶיהָ הֲחֹזֵק
הוּא הֲרַפָּה הֲמַעֲט הוּא אִם־רַב:

וּמָה הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־הוּא יֹשֵׁב
בָּהּ הֲטוֹבָה הוּא אִם־רָעָה וּמָה
הָעָרִים אֲשֶׁר־הוּא יֹשֵׁב בָּהֶנָּה
הֲבְמַחֲנִים אִם בְּמִבְצָרִים:

וּמָה הָאָרֶץ הַשְּׂמֵנָה הוּא אִם־רֵזָה
הֲלִשָׁבָה עֵץ אִם־אֵין וְהֲתַחְזֹקְתֶם
וְלִקְחֹתֶם מִפְּרֵי הָאָרֶץ וְהֵימִים
יְמֵי בְּפוֹרֵי עֲנָבִים:

Source 2 Numbers 14:1-3, 26-32

The entire community raised a hubbub and began to shout. That night, the people wept. All the Israelites complained to Moses and Aaron.

The entire community was saying, "We wish we had died in Egypt! We should have died in this desert!

"Why is G-d bringing us to this land to die by the sword? Our wives and children will be captives! It would be best to go back to Egypt!"

...G-d spoke to Moses and Aaron saying,

"How long shall this evil group exist,

וַתִּשָּׂא, כָּל־הָעֵדָה, וַיִּתְּנוּ, אֶת־
קוֹלָם; וַיִּבְכוּ הָעָם, בְּלַיְלָה הַהוּא.
וַיִּלְנוּ עַל־מֹשֶׁה וְעַל־אַהֲרֹן, כָּל
בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל;

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם כָּל־הָעֵדָה, לֹד־
מִתְּנוּ בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם, אוֹ בְּמִדְבַּר
הַזֶּה, לֹד־מִתְּנוּ.

וַלְמָה ה' מְבִיא אֹתָנוּ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ
הַזֹּאת, לְנַפֵּל בַּחֶרֶב--נָשִׁינוּ
וְטַפְּנוּ, יִהְיוּ לְבוֹז; הֲלוֹא טוֹב לָנוּ,
שׁוּב מִצְרָיִמָה.

...וַיַּדְבֵּר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאַל־אַהֲרֹן
לֵאמֹר:

עַד־מָתִי לָעֵדָה הַרְעָה הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר
הִמָּה מְלִינִים עָלַי אֶת־תְּלֹנוֹת בְּנֵי

complaining against Me? I have heard how the Israelites are complaining about Me.

“Tell them as follows: As I live, it is My—G-d’s—solemn promise to make your words come true.

“Because you complained about Me, your corpses will fall in this desert. This will happen to your total count, everyone over twenty years old who was counted.

“You will not enter the land in which I promised to settle you. The only exceptions will be Caleb, son of Yefuneh, and Joshua, son of Nun.

“You said that your children will be taken captive; they will be the ones I will bring. They will get to know the land that you rejected.

“You, however, will fall as corpses in the desert.”

יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הִמָּה מְלִינִים
עָלַי שְׁמָעֵתִי:

אָמַר אֱלֹהִים חַי־אֲנִי נְאֻם־ה'
אִם־לֹא כִּאֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתֶּם בְּאָזְנִי
כֵּן אֲעֲשֶׂה לָכֶם:

בַּמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה יִפְּלוּ פְּגָרֵיכֶם
וְכָל־פְּקֻדֵיכֶם לְכָל־מִסְפָּרְכֶם
מִבֶּן עֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וּמַעְלָה
אֲשֶׁר הִלִּינְתֶם עָלַי:

אִם־אַתֶּם תָּבֹאוּ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ
אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁאַתִּי אֶת־יָדֵי לְשִׁכּוֹן
אַתְּכֶם בָּהּ כִּי אִם־כָּלֵב בֶּן־
יִפְנֶה וַיְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן־נּוּן:

וְטַפְּכֶם אֲשֶׁר אָמַרְתֶּם לְבוֹ
יְהִי וְהִבִּיאתִי אֹתָם וַיִּדְעוּ
אֶת־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר מֵאִסְתֶּם בָּהּ:

וּפְגָרֵיכֶם אַתֶּם יִפְּלוּ בַּמִּדְבָּר
הַזֶּה:

>> The Rebbe

How Could G-d Promise?

A question arises from these verses:

How could G-d promise that their children would ultimately enter the land—if it was possible that the children might sin and likewise lose their privilege?

After all, their parents failed at the debacle of the spies and lost their own opportunity to enter the land. Moses even feared that Joshua, his closest protégé, was susceptible, and therefore added the letter י—yud from the name of G-d to his name, saying, “May G-d save you from the schemes of the spies.”

How could G-d promise that their children would enter the land if it depended on their own free will?

B. Statistics and Probability in Judaism

>> The Rebbe

Statistics — in Jewish Writings

We can explain it with the following preface: There is a concept which is celebrated as a brand-new innovation of recent generations that never existed before, while in truth, this concept—like all others—has a source in Torah.

This is known as “statistics.” The principle is that although it is impossible to foresee the behavior of an individual, we can predict how large numbers of people will behave in a month, year, or even ten years from now. By evaluating past behavioral patterns, we can determine future trends as well. This technique has proven to be accurate; although it hasn’t been fully understood, they’ve demonstrated that the method works and they take pride in the innovation, and so on.

But the truth is that we find it in Torah:

Source 3 Genesis 15:12-14

When the sun was setting, Abram fell into a trance, and he was stricken by a deep dark dread.

G-d said to Abram, “Know that your descendants will be foreigners in a land that is not theirs, enslaved and oppressed, for four hundred years.

“But I will finally pass judgment on the nation who enslaves them, and they will then leave with great wealth.”

וַיְהִי הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ לְבוֹא וַתִּרְדָּמָה
נִפְלָה עַל־אַבְרָם וְהָיָה אֵימָה
חֲשֹׁכָה גְדֹלָה נִפְלֵת עָלָיו:

וַיֹּאמֶר לְאַבְרָם יָדַע תְּדַע כִּי־
גֵר יִהְיֶה זְרַעְךָ בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא לָהֶם
וְעֲבָדוּם וְעָנּוּ אֹתָם אַרְבַּע
מֵאוֹת שָׁנָה:

וְגַם אֶת־הַגּוֹי אֲשֶׁר יַעֲבֹדוּ בְּךָ
אֲנִי וְאַחֲרָיִכֶם יֵצְאוּ בְּרִכְשׁ
גְּדוֹל:

Source 4 Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance 6:5

Doesn't Torah say, "They will be enslaved and oppressed"? Clearly, G-d decreed that the Egyptians would commit evil! Similarly, Torah states, "This nation will stray after the alien gods of the land." Clearly, G-d decreed that the Israelites would serve idols. If so, why did He punish them?

The answer is: He did not decree that a particular person be the one to stray. Every person who strayed to idol-worship could have chosen to refrain from doing so. G-d is merely informing us of the pattern of the world. It is like someone who says, "This nation will have righteous and wicked people." A wicked person is not entitled to claim that his wickedness is unavoidable because G-d told Moses there would be wicked Jews. The Torah also says, "There will always be poor in the land."

The same is true of the Egyptians: Every Egyptian who oppressed the Israelites had the choice to refrain from doing so. G-d did not decree on a particular person, rather, He merely informed Abraham that his descendants were destined to be enslaved in a strange land.

וְהָלֹא כְּתוּב בַּתּוֹרָה (בראשית טו יג) "וְעַבְדוּם וְעִנּוּ אֹתָם", הָרִי גִזַּר עַל הַמִּצְרַיִם לַעֲשׂוֹת רָע. וְכָתִיב (דברים לא טז) "וְקָם הָעָם הַזֶּה וְזָנָה אַחֲרֵי אֱלֹהֵי נֹכַח הָאָרֶץ", הָרִי גִזַּר עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל לַעֲבֹד עֲבוֹדָה זָרָה. וְלָמָּה נִפְרַע מִהֵן.

לְפִי שֶׁלֹּא גִזַּר עַל אִישׁ פְּלוֹנִי הַיְדוּעַ שִׁיְהִיָּהּ הוּא הַזּוֹנֶה אֶלָּא כָּל אֶחָד וְאֶחָד מֵאוֹתָן הַזּוֹנִים לַעֲבֹד עֲבוֹדָה זָרָה אֱלוּ לֹא רָצָה לַעֲבֹד לֹא הָיָה עוֹבֵד. וְלֹא הוֹדִיעוּ הַבוֹרֵא אֶלָּא מִנְהֵגוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם. הָא לָמָּה זֶה דוֹמָה לְאוֹמֵר הָעָם הַזֶּה יְהִיָּה בְּהֵן צְדִיקִים וְרָשָׁעִים. לֹא מִפְּנֵי זֶה יֹאמֵר הַרָשָׁע כְּבָר נִגְזַר עָלַי שִׁיְהִיָּהּ רָשָׁע מִפְּנֵי שֶׁהוֹדִיעַ לְמוֹשֶׁה שִׁיְהִיוּ רָשָׁעִים בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל. כְּעִנְיָן שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (דברים טו יא) "כִּי לֹא יִחַדֵּל אֲבִיוֹן מִקְרֵב הָאָרֶץ".

וְכֵן הַמִּצְרַיִם כָּל אֶחָד וְאֶחָד מֵאוֹתָן הַמִּצְרַיִם וְהַמְרַעִים לְיִשְׂרָאֵל אֱלוּ לֹא רָצָה לְהִרְעֵלָהֶם הַרְשׁוֹת בְּיָדוֹ. שֶׁלֹּא גִזַּר עַל אִישׁ יְדוּעַ אֶלָּא הוֹדִיעוּ שְׁסוּף זָרְעוֹ עֲתִיד לְהִשְׁתַּעֲבֹד בְּאָרֶץ לֹא לָהֶם.

>> The Rebbe

The Answer: Individual vs. Collective

Maimonides explains the concept of free will at length in the Laws of Repentance: “Every person has the free will to do as he chooses, and nobody withholds that ability from him...” But he then follows with a question: When G-d says that a foreign nation will enslave the Israelites, He seems to preordain the Egyptians to commit evil. Is that not a contradiction to the principle of free will?

He answers that “every Egyptian who oppressed the Israelites had the choice to refrain from doing so. G-d did not make this decree on a particular person, rather, He merely informed Abraham that his descendants were destined to be enslaved in a strange land.” “G-d is merely informing us of the pattern of the world. It is like someone who says, ‘This nation will have righteous and wicked people.’ A wicked person is not entitled to claim that his wickedness is unavoidable...”

On an individual level, every person has free choice. But in the story about Abraham, Torah is telling us about broader behavioral patterns (and this explanation also resolves the sharp critique written by the Raavad [see below]).

We see here that a concept which seems to be a recent innovation is clearly stated by Maimonides with regards to a clear verse in the Torah!

This also explains G-d’s assertion that the second generation in the desert would ultimately enter the Land of Israel. It is an assertion about the entire generation, and therefore does not contradict the personal free choice of every individual.

Source 5 Raavad on Maimonides

This long explanation lacks flavor, and by my life, I'm almost prepared to say that it is childish chatter. The Creator will tell the idol-worshippers, "Why did you stray? I didn't mention you by name so that you retain your free choice!" And the idol-worshippers will respond, "Then who did you decree upon—those who didn't stray? If so, your decree has not come true!"

אָמַר אַבְרָהָם: אֱלֹהֵי הֵם אֲרִיכוֹת
דְּבָרִים שְׂאִינֵן מִתְבָּלִים, וְחַיִּי
רֵאשִׁי כְּמַעֲט אֲנִי אוֹמֵר שֶׁהֵם
דְּבָרֵי נְעוּרוֹת. "אִמְרֵי הַבּוֹרָא
לְזוֹנִים: לָמָּה זָנִיתָ? וְאֲנִי לֹא
הִזְכַּרְתִּיךָ בְּשֵׁם כְּדֵי שְׂתֵאמַר
שְׂעָלֶיךָ גְּזַרְתִּי! יֹאמְרוּ לוֹ
הַזּוֹנִים: וְעַל מִי חָלָה גְּזַרְתְּךָ?
עַל אוֹתָן שְׂלֹא זָנוּ? הֲגַה לֹא
נִתְקַיְמָה גְּזַרְתְּךָ.

C. The Safest Investment

>> The Rebbe

A Lesson About Education

This teaches us an important lesson about educating children and engaging with unaffiliated Jews:

Some argue that it is pointless to engage in outreach, because ultimately—they correctly assert—every person retains his own free will. After you invest great effort in teaching someone Torah, he may just choose to do the opposite. Why invest energy in an endeavor in which success is uncertain? It would be better to do something which is sure to bear results: to sit and study Torah, to resolve a difficult question in Maimonides and so on. The Alter Rebbe describes the amazing things that occur in Heaven whenever we innovate in Torah learning—even the heavenly angels come to listen to our original Torah thoughts.

Even When It Doesn't Add Up

However, with all due respect, we need to strive to fulfill the directive of our Rebbes, who taught us that even if we need to leave our own Torah study, we are duty-bound to go out into the street, find a Jew who never studied Alef Bet, and teach him Alef and Bet. If he knows the actual Hebrew alphabet, teach him the Alef Bet of Judaism.

Who Is at Fault?

What of the claim that engaging with others might prove to be useless? Usually, the deficiency is in the teacher, not the student. If someone reaches out to others with genuine sincerity, he is bound to see results. If that was not the case, the deficiency is his own.

And if you did everything in your power but still made no impact—it is no longer your concern. Your responsibility is to engage him; the final result is not your concern. Comparably, Jewish law states that if you search for *chametz* but find nothing, your blessing was not recited in vain, because we are commanded to

search for *chametz*, not to find it. If you didn't find any, that's alright—you still fulfilled the mitzvah perfectly. The same is true regarding the commandment to “reproach your colleague”—we are commanded to reproach a friend “even one hundred times.” His choice of behavior afterwards is not your concern; you performed your obligation.

G-d's Promise

But, most importantly: In our case, G-d promises us that ultimately, our efforts will bear fruit. G-d says that the children will ultimately be brought into the Land of Israel; even if there seems to be an exception to the rule, someone out of the ordinary, it is only an individual. You will certainly impact the broader public and bring them closer to Judaism.

Engaging with G-d's children is the perfect preparation for the spiritual conquest and transformation of 'Canaan' into the 'Land of Israel,' which will lead to the physical conquest of the land; as the verse says, “Your borders will extend from the Euphrates until the Mediterranean Sea,” with the coming of our righteous Moshiach—may he come and redeem us very soon.

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מיזם של "משרד השלוחים"

נוסד בימי השבעה לזכרון ולע"נ הרב גבריאל נח וזוגתו רבקה הי"ד
שלוחי הרבי במומבאי, הודו

