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### DO TRUE LOVERS HAVE FREE WILL? A PHILOSOPHIC PILPUL

*in honor of the marriage of Tziporah Machlah and Yehuda*

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Principle #6 of the Thirteen Principles of Belief reads: "I believe with perfect belief that all the words of the prophets are true". It is therefore astonishing that Meshekh Chokhmah asserts in his Introduction to Sefer Shemot that such belief is impossible.

Here is his argument:

*The prophecy of Mosheh is above the prophecy of all the prophets, because the prophecy of the others is (certified) on the basis of signs and wonders,*

*and anyone who believes in signs, has in his heart an imperfection*

**יש בלבו דופי,**

*or else is certified via a prophet who is (already) presumed to be a prophet (on the basis of signs and wonders), such as Elisha via Elyahu,*

*just that the Torah said to believe a prophet who displays signs and wonders,*

***just as it commands that we believe witnesses, even though it is not necessarily inevitable that they will always testify truth.***

*Chananiah ben Azor demonstrates this, as he was a true prophet but in the end became a false prophet, as they say in (the chapter titled) "Those Who are Strangled".*

*Not so Mosheh Rabbeinu, because all Israel heard the Holy Blessed One speaking to Mosheh face to face, and all of them reached the level of prophecy and saw how the Holy Blessed One spoke to him, therefore Shemot 19:9 says: "Behold I am coming to you in the thickness of cloud, so that the nation will hear when I speak with you, and they will believe also in you forever", because so long as they believed on account of the signs, as they did in Mitzrayim – it would have been easy to nullify (whatever Mosheh commanded) via another prophet who displayed signs*

*and wonders;*

*not so now – even if a thousand myriads of prophets came with signs and wonders to say in the name of Hashem that the point of a yud of Mosheh's Torah should be altered, we will not heed him, and we have a mitzvah to execute him in accordance with the law of a false prophet, since regarding the prophecy of Mosheh we ourselves are witnesses, and so Scripture says: and they will believe also in you forever".*

Meshekh Chokhmah contends that belief in prophets other than Mosheh is a legal rather than religious category, and reflects obligation rather than conviction. Belief in Mosheh is different because it originates in direct experience.

Meshekh Chokhmah's argument echoes Mishnah Avot 5:16's reflection on interhuman relationships:

*All love that is contingent on something – when that something ceases, the love ceases;*

*But (love) that is not contingent on anything – will not ever cease*

Belief in Mosheh is *emunah she'einah teluyah badvar* = noncontingent belief; belief on other prophets is *emunah heteluyah badavar* = contingent belief.

But even this does not convey the full radicalness of Meshekh Chokhmah's position. He actually offers two grounds for the contingency of belief in prophets. The first is that the evidence for their status is irrelevant. The second is that prophets are human beings with free will, and someone may be a true prophet one day and corrupt the next. Mosheh Rabbeinu is an exception to the first issue because his status is

established differently; but how could G-d tell the Jews to believe in Mosheh **forever**? Shouldn't they keep in mind that even he might be corrupted? As Meshekh Chokhmah writes:

*If so, how could G-d command that they believe forever in Mosheh – does not Berakhot 33a teach that “All is in the hands of Heaven except the fear of Heaven”, and (therefore) that knowledge does not compel choice? (Should they not be concerned lest Mosheh afterward choose, G-d forbid, to add (to the Torah) out of his own mind?!*

He concludes:

*Against our will, (we must say) that Hashem the Blessed removed choice from Mosheh utterly, and he was left determined, as the angels are.*

Two subtly ironic touches show that he understands just how extreme this conclusion seems. The first is his statement that the position that Mosheh Rabbeinu did not have free will is reached *al karchin* = against our will. The second is his citation of the source for his argument:

*Investigate closely all the words of Rabbeinu (=RAMBAM) in the Laws of the Foundations of the Torah Chapters 7 and 8, because all his words are holy, and **they were said in the spirit of prophecy without a doubt.***

In other words, Meshekh Chokhmah's argument for the possible falseness of all prophecy other than that of Mosheh Rabbeinu, derives from the words of Rabbeinu Mosheh (ben Maimon, RAMBAM), but the prophetic authenticity of RAMBAM cannot be doubted. Why not? Was Rambam also deprived of his free will?

Note also that in this reading Mosheh becomes the mirror image of Pharaoh.

But let us focus once again on the nexus of love and belief. Meshekh Chokhmah suggests that Mosheh's becoming angelic led to his separation from his wife.

In his formulation, the issue is a lack of physicality; Mosheh literally becomes an angel.

But it seems to me that a better argument can be made directly from the issue of free will. Genuine relationship requires that both parties maintain the relationship of their own choice, and a man without free will cannot be a real husband. Indeed, while Meshekh Chokhmah tries hard to present Mosheh's apotheosis as a reward, G-d created humans precisely because angels cannot freely choose to love Him.

But here is the problem. We argued above that love and belief are parallel. Contingent love, like belief in non-Mosaic prophecy, is subject to change and decay. Love based on direct experience of the other, like the Jewish people's prophetic experience of Mosheh's prophecy, is eternal. How can this be so? Why doesn't it depend on the lover's choice to act in accordance with his or her experience?

One might suggest that true lovers are deprived of free will. But we just argued based on Mosheh that true love requires free will!

I'm not at all sure that we should try to resolve this contradiction. As Rabbi Akiva does with the apparent contradiction between Divine foreknowledge and human free will, sometimes you just have to embrace the paradox: “*Everything is foreseen, and yet autonomy is granted*”. (Avot 3:15).

Instead, we should bless the newly married couple that their love, so deeply grounded in genuine experience of each other's souls, provide them with both the security that stems from a promise of eternity and the wonder generated by the constant experience of freely choosing to share one's life, and of having that choice freely reciprocated.