

Ibn Daud's Concept of Evil and Its Relationship to Free Will

Amira Eran^{*}

Abstract: Abraham Ibn Daud's *The Exalted Faith* (*al-'Aqīdah al-rafi'ah*), composed around 1160, is a seminal work that represents an ambitious and pioneering attempt to reconcile Aristotelian philosophy with Jewish theology. Despite its rigorous philosophical style, which closely follows Avicenna's ideas and phrasings, scholars have highly praised Ibn Daud's integration of Aristotelian and Neoplatonic concepts, his engagement with Islamic philosophical traditions, and his influence on subsequent Jewish thinkers.^① Although his work was somewhat overshadowed by Maimonides, it remains a valuable resource for understanding the development of Avicennian thought in late medieval Judaism. Since Ibn Daud defines the purpose of *The Exalted Faith* as a solution to the problem of free will, I aim to explore this idea in this brief article. To do so, I will focus on the second chapter of the sixth principle, where Ibn Daud declares that he fulfills the aim of his book by linking the problem of free will with divine omnipotence, foreknowledge, and providence. I

^{*} Amira Eran is Professor Emerita of Jewish Thought at Levinsky-Wingate Academic College.

^① Resianne Fontaine, "The Study of Abraham Ibn Daud in the Past Three Decades: What Do We (Not) Know?" *Anales del Seminario de Historia de la Filosofía: Abraham ibn Daud: filosofía, historia y tradición en el caso de Sefarad* 40 (2023): 183-189; Yossi Assudri, "Abraham Ibn Daud and His Philosophical Book The Sublime Faith-Conjectures," (Hebrew) in *Homo Homini (Adam le-Adam)—Essays in Jewish Philosophy Presented by His Students to Professor Warren Zev Harvey*, eds. Shmuel Wygoda, Ari Ackermann, Esti Eisenmann, and Aviram Ravitzky (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2016), 41-82.

JEWISH STUDIES

犹太研究

第26辑

will argue that his innovation lies in integrating free choice within the framework of divine providence, preserving an absolute possibility within the causal chain.

Key Words: Abraham Ibn Daud, *The Exalted Faith*, Free Will, Divine Providence, Avicenna, Medieval Jewish Philosophy, Aristotelianism, Pioneering Jewish Thought

I. Background

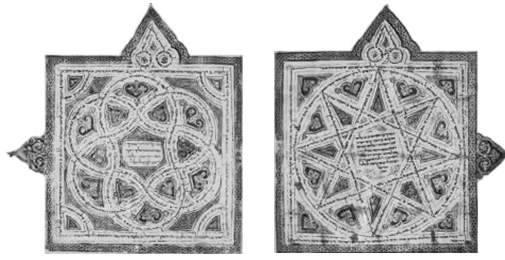
1. Biography

Abraham Ibn Daud was born in Córdoba in 1110 to a learned family. Following the Almohad invasion of Spain in 1147, he fled to the Christian Kingdom of Castile, where he settled in Toledo. Judah ha-Kohen, author of *Midrash ha-Hokhmah* (early 13th century), and later Isaac Israeli, author of *Yesod Olam* (1310), both reiterate the national narrative that Ibn Daud was martyred (*kiddush ha-Shem*) around 1180. Since 1954, however, most scholars have accepted d'Alverny's identification of Ibn Daud with Avendauth (*Avendeuth philosophus israelita*), a translator active in Toledo's Arabic-to-Latin translation movement^① and a collaborator of the well-known Dominicus Gundissalinus.^② Recent studies have reinforced this compelling hypothesis.^③ Beyond mere translation, Ibn Daud and Dominicus Gundissalinus integrated

① Nicola Polloni, "The Toledan Translation Movement and Gundissalinus: Some Remarks on His Activity and Presence in Castile," in *A Companion to Medieval Toledo: Reconsidering the Canons*, eds. Y. Beale-Rivaya and J. Busic (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2018), 263-280.

② Marie-Thérèse d'Alverny, "Avendauth?" in *Homenaje a Millás-Vallicrosa*, vol. 1 (Barcelona: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1954-1956), 19-43.

③ See Charles Burnett, "The Coherence of the Arabic-Latin Translation Program in Toledo in the Twelfth Century," *Science in Context* 14 (2001): 249-288; Amos Bertolacci, "A Community of Translators: The Latin Medieval Versions of Avicenna's *Book of the Cure*," in *Communities of Learning: Networks and the Shaping of Intellectual Identity in Europe, 1100-1500*, eds. Constant J. Mews and John N. Crossley (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 37-54; Alexander Fidora, "Religious Diversity and the Philosophical Translations of Twelfth-Century Toledo," in *Communities of Learning: Networks and the Shaping of Intellectual Identity in Europe, 1100-1500*, 19-36.



philosophical materials into their own writings, often employing similar arguments despite their differing perspectives.^① During his time in Toledo, Ibn Daud composed *The Exalted Faith* (*Ha-Emunah ha-Ramah*, c. 1160-1161) and *The Book of Tradition* (*Sefer ha-Qabbalah*). Both complementary works affirm the enduring validity of Judaism through distinct yet interwoven approaches—one philosophical, the other historical. While *The Exalted Faith* employs reasoned argumentation to establish the truth of prophecy and religious belief, *The Book of Tradition* reinforces this certainty by demonstrating the reliability of its transmission across generations. Both works underscore Ibn Daud's broader vision: just as divine causality governs nature through spiritual, intellectual heavenly substances, so too does divine providence govern history through intellectual human figures. This parallel reveals his conviction that both the content of revelation and its faithful transmission (*qabbalah*) are ultimately rooted in the same divine order

2. Hebrew Translations

The original Arabic text of *The Exalted Faith* is lost, but two Hebrew translations have survived. The first, *Ha-Emunah ha-Ramah* was completed in the late 14th century by Solomon ben Lavi (c. 1370?), a poet in his own right who came from a family of scholars. The fact that his translation survives in 16 extant copies attests to the high regard in which it was held, for both its linguistic accuracy and its conceptual fidelity to the original text. Shortly thereafter, the mystic Samuel ibn Maṭūṭ completed the second translation, *Ha-Emunah Nissa'ah*.^② This version differs from Solomon ben Lavi's in its stylistic choices, systematically favoring phonetic resemblance to the original Arabic over semantic accuracy in Hebrew.

① See Gad Freudenthal, "Abraham Ibn Daud, Avendauth, Dominicus Gundissalinus and Practical Mathematics in Mid-Twelfth Century Toledo," *Aleph* 16 (2016): 61-106; Nicula Polloni, "Toledan Ontologies: Gundissalinus, Ibn Daud, and the Problems of Gabirolian Hylomorphism," in *Appropriation, Interpretation and Criticism: Philosophical and Theological Exchanges Between the Arabic, Hebrew and Latin Intellectual Traditions*, eds. Alexander Fidora and Nicula Polloni (Barcelona and Rome: FIDEM, 2017), 19-49.

② For a different view, see Warren Zev Harvey, "The Puzzling Hebrew Translations of Ibn Daud's *Exalted Faith*," in *Philosophical Translations in Late Antiquity and in the Middle Ages. In Memory of Mauro Zonta*, eds. Francesca Gorgoni, Irene Kajon, and Luisa Valente (Rome: Aracne, 2022), 35-62.

Unlike Ibn Lavi's widely copied translation, Ibn Maṭūṭ's version appears to have been intended for a limited circle of students and survives in only one manuscript.

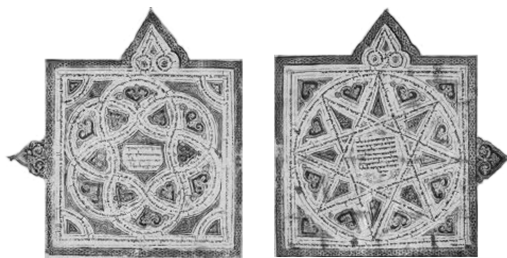
II. The Purpose of Ibn Daud's Book and the Link between Its Introduction and the Conclusion of Its Theological Part

In the introduction to *Ha-Emunah ha-Ramah* (henceforth ER), Abraham Ibn Daud states that his book is dedicated to the problem of free will. I see this proclamation as a systematic response to Solomon Ibn Gabirol's *Fons Vitae*. From the very beginning of *The Exalted Faith*, Ibn Daud harshly criticizes *Fons Vitae*, seeking to expose flaws in its overall theory. The primary aim of his critique is, in fact, to replace Gabirol's model of volitional divine intervention with Avicenna's concept of Necessary Existence as the foundation for providence.^① Ibn Daud rejects Gabirol's elevation of divine will and instead aligns with Avicenna's framework, where divine action flows necessarily from God's nature rather than being a deliberate, volitional act of a purposeful and engaged deity.^② He suspects that grounding metaphysics in will rather than necessity may lead to a conflict between theological limitations on divine omniscience and traditional:

He said: May God elevate you, you asked me some years ago about the problem of determination and choice, and you reported to me the discomfort you feel with both alternatives. If God compels a person's transgressions, how can God punish him for them, or how could religions proscribe them? Furthermore, how can God send prophets to command them? But, if they [actions] are granted to the person so that he can, if he wishes, transgress or refrain from doing so, how is it possible that God, exalted, has no control over something that exists? (ER,

① See my, "Ibn Daud's Critique of Ibn Gabirol's definition of Prime Matter & Dominicus Gundissalinus' Views," *Anuario de Seminario de Historia de la Filosofía* 40 (2023): 201-212.

② See Sarah Pessin, "On the Possibility of a Hidden Christian Will: Methodological Pitfalls in the Study of Medieval Jewish Philosophy," in *Encountering the Medieval in Modern Jewish Thought*, eds. J. A. Diamond and A. W. Hughes (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2012), part 4, chap. 2, 41-69.



introduction, p. 100, § 3, translated by Daniel Davies).^①

From the very beginning of *ER*, Ibn Daud presents the central tension between divine sovereignty and human moral responsibility. If all actions are predetermined, reward, punishment, and religious commandments lose their significance. Conversely, complete human autonomy seems to limit the role of divine governance in guiding human actions. Throughout his book, Ibn Daud supports his refined philosophical arguments with biblical verses. Yet he acknowledges that Scripture does not provide a definitive answer, as biblical verses on the subject appear contradictory:

You mentioned that an intellectual difficulty about this question arises because we find scriptural verses attesting that human actions are determined, such as exalted God's statement "and I will harden Pharaoh's heart" (Ex. 7:3) [...] Together with this, we find verses that testify to humans having choice, such as exalted God's statement "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death" (Ibid).^②

The apparent contradiction between different biblical verses reveals a deeper conflict: the clash between the universal rational principles of philosophy and the particular narratives of the Torah:

I then replied to you and said that some of the Torah's verses are meant according to their plain sense and some are said in terms that positively must be explained. The proof of this is, as [is clear from] the above, the contradictions between them, from which the only escape is to interpret one of the alternatives. I informed you that the verse that has to be explained is that which conflicts with the intellect's testimony, and

^① Daniel Davies, as part of the Gross project, is working on an English translation of *ER*. Where possible, I have made use of his translation and have translated the sections he has not yet completed. I am grateful to him for generously allowing me to use his excellent work. Cf. Norbert Samuelson, *The Exalted Faith* (Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press/London: Associated University Press, 1986) (henceforth *Samuelson, translation*), abstract, 2b, 39. For the Hebrew text, see my edition, *Ha-Emunah ha-Ramah and Ha-Emunah ha-Nissa'ah, critical edition with introduction and notes* (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2019) (henceforth *ER*), introduction, § 2, 98.

^② Cf. *Samuelson, translation*, 2b, 39.

JEWISH STUDIES

犹太研究

第26辑

that many verses are expressed in a way appropriate for the masses rather than according to the truth of the matter (Ibid., § 4, translated by Daniel Davies).^①

Weighing the advantages and disadvantages of both alternatives, Ibn Daud further argues that the theological consequences of belief in determinism are far more severe and unavoidable than those of belief in free choice. While determinism leads to major and deplorable impiety, the impiety associated with free choice is minor and can be easily addressed:

I informed you that the impiety following belief in choice is not like the impiety following belief in determination. For there is no avoiding the impiety following belief in determination and, together with this, it is major and deplorable, but the impiety that follows belief in choice is slight and easy to escape. I subsequently saw that all I had explained in that statement was not of a level that would satisfy you and administer healing, for you had not found for yourself a [preferential] difference between the impiety that follows belief in determination and that which follows belief in choice. (Ibid., p. 102, § 5, translated by Daniel Davies).^②

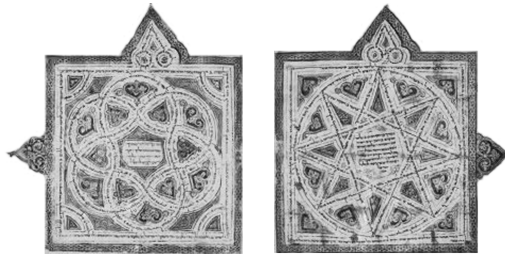
Ibn Daud underscores the impiety of determinism, emphasizing its threat to naïve belief. By highlighting the dangers of determinism, he reaffirms his commitment to safeguarding free choice within Avicenna's rigorous theoretical framework. Resolving the tension between human freedom and divine oversight requires a more nuanced approach to religious accountability and philosophical coherence than mere balance:

For it is impossible for any rational being to speak correctly about the problem of determination and choice without knowing about the attributes and actions of God, exalted, and what can and cannot come about from him. (Ibid., p. 106, § 11, translated by Daniel Davies).^③

① Cf. Ibid., 2b-3b.

② Ibid., 3b.

③ Ibid., 4b, 40.



Ibn Daud provides a detailed explanation of his book's structure, meticulously building it step-by-step to demonstrate the true reality of free choice:

For a satisfactory response to the question about determination and choice, which brought me to report everything that is in this book, can only be verified after knowing about God's attributes and actions. [...] Neither can this be ascertained before first positing the existence of incorporeal substances called angels. [...] It is therefore necessary to mention the species of motion and [to explain] that they all come from a mover, and that the mover of all of them is not moved. [...] We therefore need to mention in the course [of the discussion] the motions of the elements. [...] It is therefore necessary for us to mention what matter and form are [...] We have assigned the second book to [discussing] the meaning of religion [...] In the second book, we will also explain the origins of evils. We absolutely deny that they proceed from God. We will explain prophecy and its species [...] And we will explain the meaning of reward and punishment. This is the path we wish to take. It is clear that this investigation's subject is practical philosophy, inasmuch as it is accepted through religion and proven demonstratively in true philosophy. (Ibid., pp. 106-110, § 10-16, translated by Daniel Davies).^①

Ibn Daud explains how the structured inquiry in the first part establishes a philosophical foundation by progressing from matter and form to substance and accident, then to types of motion—first in corporeal bodies, then in incorporeal substances and celestial spheres. This progression lays the groundwork for understanding divine action and providence, which he considers crucial for addressing the issue of free will. The second part applies these philosophical principles to religion, explaining core theological doctrines, the origins of evil, prophecy, and divine justice. These discussions are essential for clarifying the compatibility of free will with divine foreknowledge. Across both parts of his work, Ibn Daud seeks to integrate human choice with adherence to the commandments, aligning philosophical inquiry with practical religious life.

^① Ibid., 5b-8b, 41-42.

JEWISH STUDIES

犹太研究

第26辑

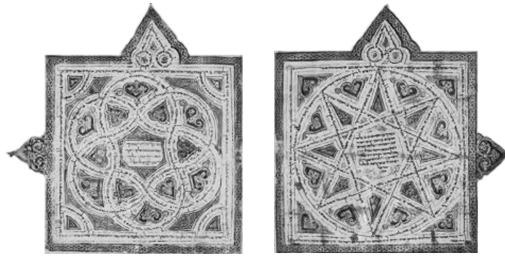
Readers are invited to seek the solution to the problem of determination and choice within the three parts comprising *The Exalted Faith*. The first expounds philosophical principles, the second integrates them into theological doctrine, and the third demonstrates their application in practical philosophy.^① In the second chapter of the Sixth Principle, which concludes the theological section of the book, Ibn Daud once again addresses the central dilemma of his work. At this stage, it becomes clear that the book's purpose is to ensure that the limited space preserved for free choice does not undermine faith in divine justice on one hand or in God's omniscience on the other.

In his introduction to this pivotal chapter, Ibn Daud declares "*This is the chapter for which and because of which we composed this book; it was the beginning of the thought and the culmination of the act.*" (my translation) Few lines later he revisits the same ambiguous verses he referenced in the introduction.

By linking the book's aim, as outlined in its introduction, to this chapter, Ibn Daud reveals the overarching structure of his work: The problem of free will can only be resolved through the adoption of Avicenna's concept of providence and, consequently, his approach to the nature of evil. He explicitly states in the chapter's title that it will explore "*the origins of good and evil, the arrangement of causes and their enumeration, the clarification of providence, and the secret of omnipotence.*" This formulation echoes Avicenna's work *On Providence and How Evil Enters Divine Predetermination*, which introduces Avicenna's discussion of providence.^② By presenting divine providence as a system that maintains order and purpose automatically, Ibn Daud effectively reframes the traditional discourse on God's moral governance of creation and its parallel in human moral responsibility. He also reinterprets the theological-educational system of

① Resianne Fontaine observes that Ibn Daud does not directly discuss the problem of free will anywhere in *The Exalted Faith*. See T. A. M. Fontaine, *Abraham Ibn Daud in Defence of Judaism: Sources and Structures of Ha-Emunah Ha-Ramah* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1990), 269-274, 265-266, 251-252, 239-240.

② Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, trans. Michael E. Marmura (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2005) (henceforth *Avicenna, Metaphysics*), book 9, chapter 6, 339. In this paper, I will limit myself to this source, which fully parallels *Najat*, ed. Muhyi al-Kurdi (Cairo, 1938), 284-291. For detailed references to *Najat*, see *ER*, 639-655.



reward and punishment, ensuring that human actions retain significance within this divinely guided framework.

In sum, Ibn Daud opens his book with a bold proclamation that its purpose is to resolve the problem of free will—a promise its meticulous structure is designed to fulfill. Yet, the climactic discussion emerges only later, in the second chapter of the Sixth Principle, where he directly confronts the tension between divine omniscience and human choice. He explicitly links this chapter to the book's overarching goal, reaffirming that resolving the problem of free will was his central objective. His resolution builds on Avicenna's concept of providence, which reinterprets divine governance as an indifferent system that preserves cosmic order without intrinsic moral significance. Through this framework, Ibn Daud ensures that free will does not contradict divine justice or omnipotence but instead integrates seamlessly into a structured philosophical and theological system.

III. Evil, Free Choice and Providence

The problem of free choice is closely linked to the problem of evil. Both challenge divine providence, seemingly compromising God's absolute supremacy: evil suggests that providence is not wholly good, while free will appears to limit divine knowledge. Surprisingly, their interplay ultimately allows Ibn Daud to resolve this apparent conflict, as free will provides the key to explaining evil. Humans, by exercising their will in opposition to divine or natural laws—prioritizing their own perspective over universal good—become the primary source of evil. This line of reasoning clarifies why Ibn Daud defines the purpose of his book as addressing the problem of free will alongside his discussion of providence.

Avicenna reconciles providence (*'ināya*) and evil by situating the latter within the framework of divine order. He maintains that both emerge from the hierarchical structure of existence, reinforcing God as the sole source of actual being. Consequently, he argues that substantial evil lacks true existence and is merely the absence of good (*'adam al-khayr*), a point he elaborates in *The Metaphysics of the Healing* (Book 9, Chapter 6), where he attributes evil to

JEWISH STUDIES

犹太研究

第26辑

the finite and contingent nature of the material world.^①

Ibn Daud fully adopts Avicenna's concept but introduces subtle modifications to allow genuine space for human free will.^② He begins by describing providence as a process of self-awareness:

...And since the First, may He be exalted, comprehends His own essence, and His essence, may He be exalted, is the most significant of the attributes of perfection, and He comprehends them in the most complete manner, through true knowledge, He also knows that His perfection is not directed solely toward His own essence. Rather, it is such that it overflows from Him to others, and from them to others, until beings become increasingly distant from Him in order. (ER, part 2, principle 6, chapter 2, p. 636, § 1, my translation).^③

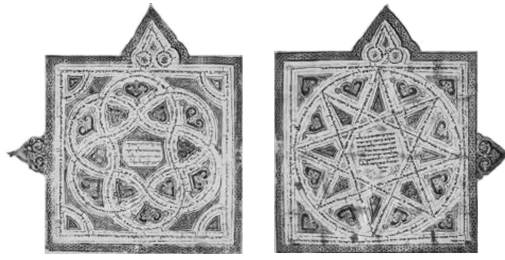
The order of the universe, emanating from the self-contemplation of this absolute source of goodness, yields the best possible cosmos. Evil never originates from God.^④ Since God, by nature, is not directly involved in worldly events and does not interfere with human choices, the suffering caused by poor

① Cf. *Avicenna, Metaphysics*, 340, § 3-4; 341, § 8.

② See my "Abraham Ibn Daud's Concept of Evil and its Reflection upon Free Choice," *Tura* (1989): 261-269 (Hebrew).

③ Cf. *Samuelson, Translation*, 201b, 245.

④ The intellect conceptualizes things according to their degree of existence. As pure privation, deficiency cannot be directly grasped by an intellect that is fully actualized. Therefore, an intellect without potentiality does not conceptualize privation or evil in themselves, since absolute evil does not exist: "Rather, we say that the conceptualization of the intellect differs in accordance with the existence of things: [as for] the things [whose existence is] extremely strong, the intellect falls short of perceiving them because of their predominance, whereas the conceptualization of things whose existence is extremely weak, like motion, time, and prime matter, is difficult because they have a weak existence. [As for] privations, the intellect, being absolutely in actuality, does not conceptualize them, for privation is perceived insofar as [the possession of a] disposition is not perceived. Therefore, what is perceived of privation insofar as it is privation and of evil insofar as it is evil is something in potentiality and the privation of a perfection. Then, if an intellect perceives it, it perceives it only because it stands in relation to it in potentiality. Hence, the intellects with which there is not mixed what is in potentiality do not conceive privation and evil insofar as they are privation and evil and do not conceptualize them, there being in existence nothing that is absolutely evil." (Tommaso Alpina, *Translation of Avicenna's Kitāb al-Nafs*, in *Subject, Definition, Activity: Framing Avicenna's Science of the Soul, Scientia Graeco-Arabica*, ed. Marwan Rashed, vol. 28, 238, Appendix [4.2])



decisions remains beyond His scope:

He further states that attributes of deficiency are attributes of privation, some of which are affirmative, though the affirmative ones are few.^① As for the privative attributes, we may illustrate them with an example: Light is a quality that arises in the air when an illuminating body shines upon it, but when the illuminating body is removed, the air remains dark—not because anything new has occurred in it, but because the quality that had been newly introduced has now departed. Thus, darkness is merely the absence of something; it is not an independent entity. Likewise, a person's wealth is the presence of money, whereas poverty is simply the absence of that wealth. Similarly, intellect, esteem, and adherence to religion are qualities acquired through intelligence and when intelligence is lacking, these qualities are absent as well. (Ibid., p. 638, § 4, my translation).^②

Ibn Daud echoes Avicenna's insight that deficiency is a privation rather than a positive reality.^③ He illustrates this by explaining that darkness is merely the absence of light, just as poverty is the absence of wealth and ignorance the absence of intellect. Such privations exist only as the lack of their positive counterparts and are not actively created by God, meaning they do not directly reflect divine providence. At this stage, Ibn Daud does not explicitly distinguish between human traits and natural phenomena, but he emphasizes the role of sincere piety and moral and intellectual discernment in addressing such deficiencies:

All privations are not created by God, may He be exalted, nor by

① Cf. *Avicenna, Metaphysics*, 340, § 4, ll. 1-2: "There is no informative statement about absolute privations, but only about the utterance [of the term]."

② Cf. *Samuelson, Translation*, 202a. l. 11- 202b. l. 3, 245.

③ *Avicenna, Metaphysics*, 341, § 8.

JEWISH STUDIES

犹太研究

第26辑

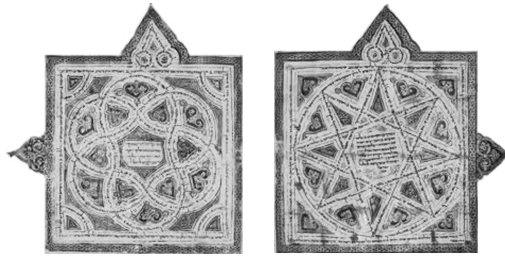
anyone else, for they are not things that can be made.^① One cannot say that God created the absence of an elephant in Spain, for such a statement is meaningless. Rather, one should say that God did not create an elephant in Spain, nor did He create the absence of an elephant there. If the absence of an elephant in Spain were considered a deficiency for Spain, it is not that God created this deficiency; rather, He did not create the perfection that would remove it. Neither the deficiency nor its removal was actively created—He simply left it as it is. Likewise, a person who lacks intellect is not someone to whom God gave ignorance, but rather someone to whom God did not grant intellect (Ibid., p. 640, § 5).^②

Ibn Daud explains that the absence of elephants in Spain is not the result of an active divine act; rather, God simply did not place them there. Similarly, a person who lacks intellect was not given ignorance by God but was simply not granted wisdom. This distinction clarifies divine providence's role in each case. The absence of elephants in Spain, much like the absence of pink flying elephants elsewhere, carries no moral or existential significance and requires no explanation. However, the absence of intellect in a human being, which defines and distinguishes humanity, does call for consideration in terms of divine responsibility.^③ The inevitable conclusion, based on the philosophical framework presented, is that while intellectual deficiency may occur naturally, the responsibility for acquiring knowledge ultimately rests with the individual,

① Ibn Daud includes privation alongside matter and form as one of the three principles constituting every being (see *ER*, Part 1, Chapter 2, § 15, 166). He follows Avicenna's interpretation of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*: "The principles corresponding to naturally existing things are three: form, matter, and privation [...] Privation does not have the status of an absolute existent, nor does it have the status of an absolute non-existent; rather, it is the removal of the potentiality of a definite being." [*Kitāb al-Najāt* (Cairo: Ma ṭba'at al-Sa'āda, 1938), 101, my translation] This aligns with Aristotle's formulation: "The causes and the principles, then, are three, two being the pair of contraries—one being definition and form, the other privation—and the third being matter." [*Metaphysics*, trans. W. D. Ross, Book XII, part 2 (1069b)]. From this perspective, privation's mode of existence is even lower than mere potentiality, existing at a level beneath the material substrate itself.

② Cf. Samuelson, *Translation*, 203a, 246.

③ Avicenna also distinguishes between the deficiency of primary perfection and that of secondary perfection. He explains that the latter is not the result of an agent's inaction but rather the recipient's failure. See Avicenna, *Metaphysics*, 347, § 25.



as it remains within human capacity to develop and refine. Moreover, a lack of intelligence is liable to ensue harmful consequences, both immediate and long-term, affecting not only the individual but also those around him. Misguided judgments may lead to countless difficulties. Thus, intellectual deficiency not only absolves divine providence of responsibility for human misfortunes but also clarifies their origin.

In sum, by embedding free choice into divine providence, Ibn Daud upholds God's justice while affirming human responsibility for moral and intellectual shortcomings. Drawing on Avicenna's framework, he argues that divine wisdom ensures an optimal natural order in which all things fulfill their purpose. Moreover, God neither limits free choice nor bears responsibility for the mistakes of the non-intellectual.^①

IV. Matter, Providence and Free Choice

Another factor in the emergence of evil is matter itself. Present in all natural, corporeal entities, including the human soul, matter is inherently limited and imperfect, making it a fundamental source of evil.

Ibn Daud follows Avicenna in regarding matter as the cause of occasional imperfections within the divinely planned and optimal cosmic order. Matter, as the lowest link in the Great Chain of Being, serves as the intermediary connecting the eternal, active First Cause with the passive, potential material realm:

All these ordered entities are moved by something higher than them in rank and they, in turn, move what is beneath them in rank, until existence has two extremes. One extreme is unimaginable in its perfection, distance, and the removal of its sanctity from all forms of deficiency. It moves all things without itself being moved. The other extreme is unimaginable in its deficiency, distance from all forms of perfection, and is moved by all things in an ordered and intermediate manner without itself moving anything. This is what we have called ‘

^① Resianne Fontaine, “‘Happy is he whose children are boys’: Abraham Ibn Daud and Avicenna on Evil,” in *The Arabic, Hebrew and Latin Reception of Avicenna's Metaphysics*, eds. D. N. Hasse and A. Bertolacci, Band 7, 2012 (henceforth *Fontaine, Abraham Ibn Daud and Avicenna on Evil*), 170.

JEWISH STUDIES

犹太研究

第26辑

matter,’ and all of this has already been explained. (Ibid., pp. 636-638, § 2).^①

As an integral part of the natural order, matter gives rise to accidental and harmful occurrences, particularly as potentialities strive to actualize.^② Ibn Daud follows Avicenna, when he maintains that evil in human beings stems from two distinct sources: first, from humanity’s dependence on material conditions to actualize decisions and desires; second, from the interaction between the material body and the soul, where matter naturally affects the soul. The principle that “*existence has two extremes—one unimaginably perfect, distant, and free from all deficiency*” applies equally to the human soul. Its lower faculties are tied to biological and material functions, while its higher faculties are governed by the intellect. Error and evil arise when the intellect fails to regulate bodily impulses and when moral judgment is flawed.^③ Thus, the pursuit of knowledge reduces the likelihood of harmful actions.

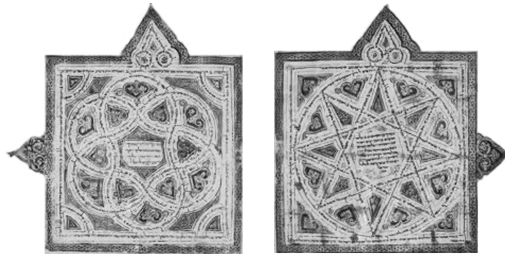
In the sixth chapter of the first part of his book, Ibn Daud explores the human soul, explaining its functions according to Avicenna’s theory. In the following chapter, he examines its intellectual properties, clarifying how the soul’s pursuit of pleasure and lack of intellectual cultivation lead to wrong choices. In the sixth chapter of the second part of the book, Ibn Daud further explains that although the wrong decisions of mediocre, immoral, or foolish individuals contribute to evil consequences, they ultimately integrate into an improved orderliness of the universe:

And this soul can only be found in a body of delicate temperament, with fine and refined organs. However, the existence of reality as a whole necessitates that among humanity, there will be individuals of coarse temperament, akin to beasts—possessing strong, rigid limbs and weak intellect—so that they may be more suited to plowing, harvesting, and building. At times, they may even sell the advantage of their physical

① Cf. Samuelson, *Translation*, 201a-202a, 245. Cf. My, “The Parable of the ‘Sower and the Seeds’ in the Exalted Faith,” *Tarbiz* 73 (2003): 139-151 (Hebrew).

② In Avicenna’s worldview, human matter functions like matter in general: it either hinders or fully manifests divine forms. Avicenna, *Metaphysics*, 343, § 14.

③ Ibid., 354, § 20-355, § 24.



strength to those who lack beasts of burden, carrying loads on their heads, necks, and backs, just as animals do.^①

Others, by contrast, are killers, taking payment for risking their lives in battle—not to prevent their own loss or to ward off harm from their domain, for such acts of killing would be considered valor, one of the virtues of the soul, rather than a pursuit of reward. From this, it is evident that there exist deficient types of people who, despite their inherent imperfections and the impediments that prevent their full intellectual development, nonetheless serve a purpose in the overall order of existence. (Ibid., pp. 646-648, § 9, my translation)^②

Ibn Daud's reasoning aligns with a perspective reminiscent of evolutionary theory—namely, that variations or deficiencies may serve a broader natural purpose. The differing levels of perfection among human beings—from individuals like Moses, who epitomize the pinnacle of human achievement, to those whose capacities more closely resemble those of animals—ultimately contribute to the harmony and benefit of the whole. He argues that if all humans reached Moses' level, a world of only flawless individuals would disturb the natural balance. Similarly, he explains that the existence of less perfect species enriches the world by providing a greater diversity of possibilities, thereby enhancing its overall completeness and functionality.^③ The diversity in human traits, arising from individuals' inability to attain complete intellectual and moral perfection, further demonstrates the overall goodness of the world. This goodness stems primarily from the inherent nature of reality and the intrinsic link between the necessity of existence and the necessity of goodness. Ibn Daud not only argues that human privations, such as a lack of intellect or moral virtues, do not contradict God's goodness; he contends that they prove that God's commandments are actually beneficial:

And God, may He be exalted, has already established, in opposition to these disgraceful traits, individuals who are entirely free from them,

① Cf. *Avicenna, Metaphysics*, 344, § 15.

② Cf. Samuelson, Translation, 205a, 247; *Avicenna, Metaphysics*, 344, § 14; 246, § 23, l. 35; chapter 7, 348, § 4.

③ Cf. *Ibid.*, chap. 6., 343, § 12.

JEWISH STUDIES

犹太研究

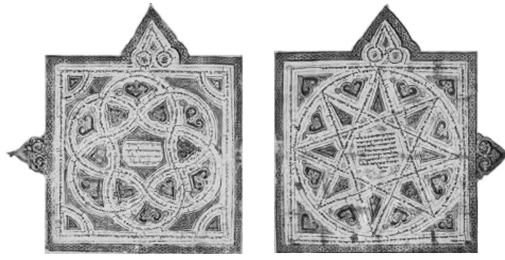
第26辑

who were sent to those afflicted by such deficiencies to convey God's commandments and warnings. Furthermore, the existence of individuals afflicted with these inferior traits alongside those who are free from them is not entirely impossible. If it were, God would not have commanded something that is unattainable. Likewise, if it were an absolute necessity, human beings would be compelled to act accordingly in all circumstances—just as one must inhale cool air into the heart and exhale the heated air within. In such a case, there would have been no need for a divine command concerning it, just as no divine command was given regarding respiration, which is essential for human survival. Instead, this matter remains within the realm of possibility (Ibid., p. 650, § 11, my translation).^①

These statements suggest that the giving of commandments preserves a distinct space for human will. Ibn Daud's reasoning implies that divine providence, which governs natural phenomena, operates with the same indifference toward human free will. It is not God who instills virtue but moral reasoning, nor does He eliminate intellectual deficiency—this is achieved through the pursuit of knowledge and learning.^② Ibn Daud asserts that observing the commandments advances human intellectual perfection, viewing them not as arbitrary tests of obedience but as essential pathways to moral and spiritual development. He further draws a parallel between an individual's immoral actions—incidental from the perspective of divine providence—and a house burning down due to specific local conditions unrelated to the world's overall order of goodness. In both cases, one should not hastily attribute evil to divine

① Cf. *Samuelson, Translation*, 205a-b, 248.

② Cf. *Avicenna, Metaphysics*, 348, § 5. Ibn Daud does not align with the traditional view that divine providence directly rewards or punishes individuals. Instead, following Avicenna's concept of natural providence, he argues that fulfilling commandments increases one's chances of benefiting from nature, while violating prohibitions raises the likelihood of misfortune. This principle does not apply to irrational commandments. For an alternative interpretation, see Resianne Fontaine, who suggests that Ibn Daud departs from Avicenna by defining providence as divine and angelic assistance granted after a person's initial choice. See *Fontaine, Abraham Ibn Daud and Avicenna on Evil*, 172, note 67.



providence.^①

Likewise, a wise person should not hastily conclude that fire is an evil merely because he sees it destroy a particular crop. That crop, along with all seeds in the world, all plants, and all living beings, depends on fire as one of its fundamental elements. Without fire, neither plants nor living creatures could exist. What significance, then, does the minor harm it causes bear in comparison to its vast benefits? (Ibid., p. 648, § 9, my translation).^②

This argument seeks to demonstrate that evil is minimal relative to the overall good—not because what appears to be evil is actually good, as suggested in the previous argument, but because harm, damage, and suffering, regardless of their severity, are merely localized instances within a broader framework of immense benefit. For example, fire is essential to the optimal order of the world, serving necessary functions such as heating, cooking, and providing light. However, when it burns down a house or injures a person, the damage can be substantial. In such cases, it is crucial to recognize that the suffering caused by fire often results from human imperfections. Human folly or moral failure may create circumstances in which fire, typically beneficial to society, inflicts significant harm.^③ Here, the immediate cause of evil can often be traced to human free will, as individuals may make imprudent choices that lead to disastrous consequences:

Similarly, one who witnesses a shipwreck caused by the wind should not perceive the creation of wind as a misfortune. Rather, he should reflect on the essential role that wind plays in sustaining the bodies of animals and plants and in maintaining the natural order. When viewed in this light, the harm it occasionally causes is insignificant relative to its overall benefit (Ibid., § 9, my translation).^④

① Cf. Avicenna, *The Metaphysics*, Book 8, Chapter 6, 283, § 2, where Avicenna emphasizes that ultimate reality, as derived from God, is by definition pure good. Any perceived evil is relative or incidental within the best possible order of the world. What may seem catastrophic for one entity, serves as a benefit for another.

② Cf. Samuelson, *Translation*, 204b, 247. For the repeating heat and fire's arguments, see also, Avicenna, *Metaphysics*, 340, § 2; 346, § 23

③ Cf. *ibid.*, 342, § 9-10

④ Cf. Samuelson, *Translation*, 204b, 247.

JEWISH STUDIES

犹太研究

第26辑

In other words, evil is the result of viewing the world solely from the perspective of personal good and evil. This perspective, associated with the traditional notion of personal providence, has no place in a philosophical concept of providence that emphasizes the absolute separation between God and the material world.^①

In sum, Ibn Daud adopts Avicenna's hierarchical metaphysics, which posits that all beings emanate from God in a gradational order. Lower beings, being further removed from the Necessary Existent, possess greater potentiality and imperfection, making them more susceptible to privation and evil. Material existence inherently entails deficiency and the possibility of harm. The cosmic hierarchy reflects divine providence, with each being occupying its rightful place in the order of existence. Within this framework of remote providence, evil arises incidentally as a consequence of the limitations of the material world and human nature.

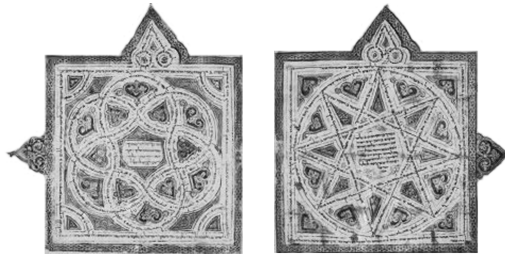
V. Ibn Daud's Synthesis of Causality, Free Will, and the Problem of Evil

Ibn Daud introduces a fourfold framework of causality—divine, natural, accidental, and free. Adopting this scheme from Avicenna, he integrates free will and contingency into his theory of providence and the existence of evil. His system of causes revolves around two principal poles: divine causation and voluntary human causation. Between these, intermediate causes serve to bridge the deterministic philosophical framework with the simplicity of religious faith—natural causes on one side and accidental causes on the other.^②

There have already been, in a certain sense, four types of causes, or, in another sense; they may be considered one category. These are: divine causes, referring primarily to the direct intention of God, exalted be He; natural causes; accidental causes; and voluntary causes. David, peace be upon him, enumerated three of these in a single verse, saying: "*And David said: As the*

① Maimonides also adopts Avicenna's perspective, arguing that the essence of evil in the world stems from an egotistical viewpoint, as stated in *The Guide of the Perplexed*, part 3, chapter 12.

② Cf. Fontaine, *Abraham Ibn Daud and Avicenna on Evil*, 171.



Lord lives, unless the Lord smites him..." (1 Samuel 26:10). This represents the divine cause, which occurs when a worshiper persists in transgression, and God's decree—whether carried out through natural means or not—strikes him. "*Or his day will come and he will die,*" (Ibid.) signifies the natural cause, which a person has no power to avoid. "*Or he will go down to battle and perish,*" (Ibid.) refers to the accidental cause, from which a person may protect himself, but which he may also willingly expose himself to, as expressed in "*and he will fall*" (Ibid. 26:10). A similar idea is conveyed in *Throns and snares are in the way of the perverse; he who guards his soul will be far from them* (Proverbs 22:5). Here, voluntary causes are also evident, as seen in David's entry into Keilah and his departure from it, along with many similar cases. The same applies to fulfilling commandments and committing transgressions—both are subject to human choice. Were this not so, the prophets would not have been sent, nor would rewards and punishments have been promised. The Torah itself commands virtuous ways and blessings (Ibid., § 16, my translation).^①

The division into four distinct causes (assuming one does not equate divine with natural causes and voluntary with accidental causes) seemingly proves the existence of agenuine space reserved for free will, to which the commandments are directed.^② However, if one maintains consistency and adheres strictly to

^① Cf. Samuelson, *Translation*, 207a, 249.

^② In this context, it is worth considering not only the distinction between rational and irrational commandments, as is often emphasized, but also the role of seemingly irrational commandments in expressing mere obedience. Additionally, this discussion may extend to legal loopholing strategies—cases that are not defined solely by legal formalism, such as *ha'aramah* (*evasion*). In *Circumventing the Law: Rabbinic Perspectives on Loopholes and Legal Integrity* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2024), Elana Stein Hain examines the rabbis' nuanced approach to *ha'aramah*, demonstrating how they viewed it as a means of circumventing Jewish law within parameters they considered just (65-77). This perspective not only emphasizes the importance of individual free choice within the broader structure of the law but also highlights the flexibility of scriptural interpretation. In relation to Ibn Daud's view on free choice in unexpected circumstances and Avicenna's definition of relative evil, *ha'aramah* is similarly considered an individual, unforeseen case in which specific evil can be bypassed through special attentiveness to the *voluntas* rather than the *verba* of the law. In a related discussion, David Daube examines biblical cases in which discrepancies arise between *verba* and *voluntas*—letter and spirit, or act and intent—though commentators have often overlooked them. See David Daube, "How Esau Sold His Birthright," *The Cambridge Law Journal* 8 (March 1942): 70-75.

JEWISH STUDIES

犹太研究

第26辑

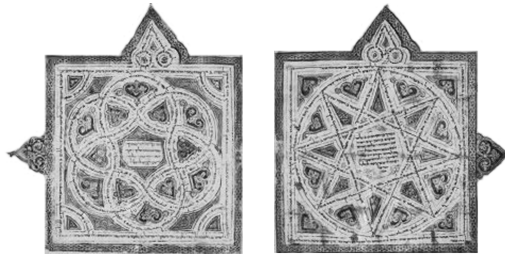
Avicenna's perspective, logic dictates that what appears to the believer as free will is, in fact, merely an accidental cause, whose contingency is equivalent to the very existence of evil in the world. If we further explore Ibn Daud's exegesis, we may conclude that the divine cause, which strikes a person's bad choice by God's decree, functions in the same way as the natural cause, which man has no power to avoid. However, he does have the ability to avoid the accidental cause, just as he can avoid voluntary causes, for which he is responsible. Moreover, voluntary causes function similarly to commandments: the more one considers them, the greater the chances of attaining pleasure and avoiding suffering.^①

In sum, Ibn Daud presents God as the enabler of human free will, grounding this capacity in humanity's contingent nature. Ibn Daud's adoption of divine necessity also commits him to a strict causal system—one disrupted only by human free will. Humans alone initiate causal chains that may run counter to God's ultimate wisdom. Ibn Daud builds on this by adopting Avicenna's view that providence is an automatic, hierarchical system. He argues that human free will exists within this structure, and adherence to divine commandments aligns human actions with cosmic order.

VI. Conclusion: Ibn Daud's Originality in Providence, Free Will, and Evil

This paper highlights Ibn Daud's originality in reinterpreting free will,

^① The final section of Ibn Daud's book is dedicated to practical philosophy, primarily addressing the objectives of the commandments. I believe this part is fully consistent with the philosophical framework established in the earlier sections. In my view, this section logically follows Ibn Daud's philosophical defense of free will, removing intellectual barriers to fully accepting religious duties categorically. Subjecting the commandments to rational critique, classifying them by their utility, and incorporating voluntary motivation naturally extend the first and second parts of *ER*, that aim at elevating simple faith into intellectual faith. (*ER*, 662). Resianne Fontain however interprets it differently. She argues that Ibn Daud shifts from a rigorous philosophical stance to a focusing on religious virtue. She maintains that in this final section, Ibn Daud emphasizes that serving God lovingly is the ultimate response to divine goodness, best realized through adherence to the Torah's commandments. Resianne Fontain, "Some Notes on Hasdai Crescas's use of Abraham Ibn Daud," *Anuario de Seminario de Historia de la Filosofía* 42 (2024): 419-427.



offering a new approach to individual providence. I aimed to demonstrate how he structured his work to establish a systematic foundation for a paradigm of scientific faith. In the Sixth Principle of his book, which concludes the theoretical section and transitions into his practical philosophy, Ibn Daud directly addresses the conflict between divine omniscience and human choice, presenting a fresh formulation of the longstanding tension between philosophy and naïve faith. This multifaceted conflict also mirrors the tension between God’s wholly good providence and the existence of evil, as both evil and human free choice challenge the perceived totality of divine providence. In my view, this line of reasoning underlies Ibn Daud’s ambitious vision for resolving the “problem of free will.”

Ibn Daud builds upon Avicenna’s concept of the contingent status of all existents to establish the possibility of free will. His primary aim is to defend adherence to the commandments and enhance moral decision-making. He employs Avicenna’s theories of providence and evil to demonstrate that fulfilling the commandments is the optimal way to act in accordance with the divine order. Just as in Avicenna’s thought, suffering is not an inductive sign of a substantive reality but rather an indication of privation, so too, for Ibn Daud, the fulfillment of the commandments signifies neither a gap in divine foreknowledge nor predetermined responsibility. In this way, free will is upheld as absolute contingency. Moreover, Ibn Daud argues that the absence of intellect in humans functions similarly to disobedience to God’s commands. However, while the former, though imperfect, contributes to diversity in human types and consequently improves the cosmic order, the latter only increases suffering. This approach reconciles the broader philosophical framework with traditional theological perspectives.

Ibn Daud constructs an inverse parallelism, arguing that just as God’s omniscience represents the highest level of existence and absolute goodness, human fragility—marked by a deficiency of knowledge—is the source of both moral and ontological evil. His explanation aligns with Avicenna’s hierarchy, where a greater distance from the divine intellect corresponds to increased contingency, error, and, ultimately, localized tragedies. Thus, Ibn Daud’s resolution of free will does not depend on a direct interventionist model of divine governance. Instead, he incorporates it into Avicenna’s vision of

JEWISH STUDIES

犹太研究

第26辑

providence as a naturally ordered, yet indifferent system, where human activity operates within the framework of contingent existence without contradicting divine omniscience. However, while Avicenna emphasizes the inherent limitations of finite existence and the necessity of a hierarchical structure for achieving the greatest possible good, Ibn Daud interprets God's goodness as making room for genuine contingency, enabling human free choice to be incorporated into divine knowledge and the optimal cosmic order through the fulfillment of His commandments. Like Avicenna, Ibn Daud seeks to minimize the scope of direct providence, but he attributes this "loosening" not merely to the structure of the cosmos but to the human soul itself. Whereas Avicenna associates evil with the material world, Ibn Daud reframes it as inextricably linked to chains of accidental volitional causes initiated by human beings.