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Freedom as Awareness: A Clinical–Theological Reading of Pharaoh’s Heart in the Me’or Einayim

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines one of the most enduring theological paradoxes in biblical literature—the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart—through the interpretive lens of the Me’or Einayim of Chernobyl (R. Menachem Nachum Twersky, 1730–1797), a foundational text in early Hasidic thought. The biblical narrative presents a profound dilemma: if God hardens Pharaoh’s heart, how can Pharaoh be held morally accountable for his refusal to release the Israelites? This apparent contradiction between divine determinism and human free will has troubled exegetes across centuries, generating diverse rabbinic, philosophical, and mystical responses. The essay argues that the Rebbe’s reading offers a radical reframing of the problem by transforming it from a moral question into a metaphysical revelation about the nature of consciousness, concealment, and divine presence.

The analysis begins with a close textual reading of the Me’or Einayim on Parashat Va’era, presenting both the Hebrew original and English translation. The rebbe interprets “And I will harden Pharaoh’s heart” not as divine interference with moral agency, but as an intentional concealment (hester) of divine awareness designed to reveal a deeper truth: that even within states of hardness, resistance, and apparent autonomy, the divine presence remains fully immanent. In this theology, all phenomena in the world—including those experienced as evil or resistant—originate from the divine source. The distinction between good and evil is epistemological rather than ontological: good is revealed (nigleh) while evil remains concealed (nistar). God’s hardening of Pharaoh’s heart thus serves a pedagogical and revelatory purpose—to demonstrate that divine vitality pervades even the experience of spiritual opacity and egoic separation.

The essay locates free will not in independence from divine will, but in the capacity for awareness (da’at) of divine presence within concealment. Pharaoh’s failure is not that his will was overpowered, but that he refused to recognize that “all is from God” (hakol hu me-El). His hardened heart represents the egoic illusion of autonomous selfhood, the mistaken perception that one’s actions originate independently. Moses, by contrast, embodies da’at—the awakened consciousness that perceives divine agency even within resistance and limitation. True freedom, in the Me’or Einayim’s framework, is thus the ability to maintain awareness of the radical divine immanence expressed in the Hasidic doctrine of ‘ein od milvado’ (there is nothing outside of Him), even when that presence is phenomenologically hidden.

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Preface: Determinism in Rational and Mystical Frameworks

The question of human freedom versus divine determinism has occupied philosophers and theologians across millennia, generating fundamentally different approaches in rational philosophy versus mystical theology. Understanding these divergent frameworks provides essential context for reading the Me’or Einayim’s radical reinterpretation of Pharaoh’s hardened heart—and ultimately, for developing an embodied theology of patient determinism in clinical practice.

The Rational-Philosophical Approach to Determinism

Classical rational philosophy, particularly within the Aristotelian-Maimonidean tradition, approaches determinism as a logical problem requiring systematic resolution. Maimonides, in his Guide for the Perplexed and Mishneh Torah, constructs an elaborate philosophical architecture to preserve both divine omniscience and human moral

responsibility [1,2]. His solution relies on categorical distinctions: God’s knowledge differs essentially from human knowledge; divine foreknowledge does not constitute causal determination; human beings possess genuine bechirah chofshit (free choice) within their ontological sphere even as God’s knowledge encompasses all possibilities [3].

This rationalist framework treats determinism and freedom as mutually exclusive categories that must be reconciled through logical precision. The determinism question becomes: How can both propositions be true simultaneously? Maimonides resolves this through metaphysical stratification—God’s knowledge operates in a different modal register than human causality, allowing both divine omniscience and human agency to coexist without contradiction.

The Aristotelian influence here is unmistakable: causality follows predictable patterns; human reason can discern truth through logical analysis; apparent paradoxes yield to sufficiently subtle distinctions. Freedom, in this framework, means autonomy from external compulsion—the rational agent’s capacity to choose according to reason rather than passion, to act from knowledge rather than

ignorance. The free will debate centers on whether such autonomy can genuinely exist within a cosmos governed by divine providence or natural law.

Spinoza radicalizes this rationalist tradition by collapsing the distinction entirely: God and Nature are identical (*Deus sive Natura*), and what appears as human freedom is merely inadequate knowledge of the causal chains determining our choices [4]. True freedom lies not in libertarian free will but in understanding necessity-in aligning our finite intellect with the infinite causal order [5]. The wise person recognizes their thoughts and actions as necessary expressions of God/Nature and finds freedom through this recognition, not through some imagined independence from causality.

The Mystical-Paradoxical Approach

Jewish mystical theology, particularly in its Hasidic expressions, approaches determinism from an entirely different epistemic stance. Rather than resolving the paradox through logical distinction, Kabbalistic thought intensifies it, treating the simultaneity of divine determination and human agency as revelatory of deeper truth about divine reality itself.

The Zohar and Lurianic Kabbalah develop a theology of divine contradiction: God is both infinite (*Ein Sof*) and manifest in finite forms; both hidden and revealed; both transcendent and radically immanent [6,7]. The famous teaching that “No place is empty of Him” (*leit atar panui minei*) coexists with the doctrine of *tzimtzum*-divine contraction creating apparent absence [8]. These are not reconciled but held in generative tension.

In this framework, the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart becomes not a philosophical problem requiring solution but a mystical revelation requiring meditation. The text’s apparent contradiction-Pharaoh exercises his will, yet God hardens his heart-points beyond rational categories to the paradoxical nature of divine-human encounter. The Hasidic masters read such contradictions as pedagogical: they train consciousness to dwell in paradox, to hold opposites simultaneously, to recognize that ultimate truth transcends rational categories.

The Ba’al Shem Tov’s revolutionary teaching that “every descent is for the sake of a subsequent ascent” (*kol yeridah tzorech aliyah*) exemplifies this mystical logic [9]. What appears as divine withdrawal or human abandonment serves a hidden purpose. Pharaoh’s hardened heart is not explained away but contemplated as revelation: the very act of divine concealment reveals something essential about how God operates within creation.

Mystical determinism differs fundamentally from philosophical determinism. Philosophical determinism emphasizes causal necessity within a mechanical or logical system. Mystical determinism emphasizes divine intimacy-God so profoundly present within human consciousness that the distinction between divine will and human will becomes porous. As the Maggid of Mezeritch teaches, “A person thinks what God wants them to think.” This is not determinism as compulsion but determinism as communion [10].

The mystical approach recognizes that rational analysis cannot exhaust religious truth. Logic operates within duality-subject and object, cause and effect, freedom and necessity. But mystical awareness accesses non-dual consciousness where such distinctions dissolve. From this perspective, asking “Am I free or am I determined?” is like asking whether a wave is separate from the ocean. The question itself reflects a consciousness still trapped in the illusion of separation.

The Me’or Einayim’s Synthesis

R. Menachem Nachum Twersky’s Me’or Einayim represents a mature expression of Hasidic mystical theology, and his treatment of Pharaoh’s hardened heart demonstrates the distinctive features of mystical versus rational approaches to determinism. Where Maimonides would seek to preserve Pharaoh’s moral culpability through philosophical distinctions, the Me’or Einayim transforms the entire question by relocating freedom itself.

Introduction

This essay examines the tension between divine determinism and human free will through the lens of the Me’or Einayim of Chernobyl (R. Menachem Nachum Twersky, 1730–1797). The case of Pharaoh’s hardened heart serves as a central narrative to explore how divine concealment (*hester*) and divine presence interact within human consciousness. In the Me’or Einayim theology, free will does not imply independence from God, but the capacity to perceive divine vitality even in the experience of resistance or concealment.

Primary Text: Me’or Einayim, Parashat Va’era

Hebrew Text (Me’or Einayim, Parashat Va’era, s.v. “Vani Ak’sheh et lev Par’oh”)

ואני אקשה את לב פרעה – הני, כי כל המעשים שיעשה, גם כן, הכל הם מציאות נצחית, וכל מה שחשבתי שיהיה נסתר בהסתר, אך הוא היה הבורא בעצמו פרעה – שיתגלה בעולם שנים בהמשך ובהסתר שאל כל האדם, שם נמצא אלוהות, וכל מי ששכח את אלוהות הבורא גם בחיבור ההסתר – הוא אלוהות, ומה פרעה לא רצה לראות כי הכל הוא שאל, וזה ענין ההסתר, ומה פרעה שאל מהו הבורא האלוהי האחד, שיהיה לאמר לו.

English Translation

“And I will harden Pharaoh’s heart” - meaning, all actions that occur in the world, even those that appear to stem from evil, nevertheless occur from the Eternal One; but the good is revealed while evil remains hidden in concealment. Thus did the Creator will in the case of Pharaoh, that it should be revealed that everything in the world stems from God. Because hardness and concealment that enter a person’s heart, the Divine Presence is still there. Whoever seeks to see and to recognize will see, but whoever does not wish to see will continue to see through hardness and concealment -even from within concealment - so that the hardness would remain revealed. But whoever will wish to see that all is from God. And this is the meaning of the hardening - that the Divine Presence remains there, so that the more hardness is revealed the more it would be revealed [11].

Commentary and Analysis

The Me’or Einayim resolves the classical paradox of Pharaoh’s hardened heart through a radical insight: Pharaoh’s free choice was taken from him, but this does not constitute divine violation of human agency. Rather, it reveals the fundamental nature of choice itself. Choice depends on *da’at*-awareness. Without awareness, there is no choice. When *da’at* is taken, when a person loses that quality of awareness, then genuine choice becomes impossible. One chooses by virtue of Mind. One chooses between good and evil only through awareness.

This understanding transforms the entire problem of divine foreknowledge and human freedom. The classical philosophical debate assumes that choice is a metaphysical capacity independent of consciousness. But the Me’or Einayim teaches otherwise: choice is not an abstract power of the will but a function of awareness. To remove awareness is to remove the very condition of possibility for choice, yet this is not the same as mechanical determinism. The person still acts, still wills, still decides-but without *da’at*, these actions lack the illumination necessary for genuine moral agency.

The people in Egypt are unaware of YHWH. They live within Pharaoh’s consciousness, which denies the essence of faith, believing only in sorcery-in manipulable powers, in techniques of control, in

the ego’s capacity to master reality through knowledge and force. This is the hardened heart: not stubbornness but opacity, not willful refusal but inability to perceive. Egypt represents consciousness organized around power rather than presence, around control rather than awareness.

Picking up the theme from the last parsha, the exodus from Egypt is the manifestation that the mercy of YHWH is Elohim—namely strong and omnipotent, master of all powers. The plagues demonstrate not divine cruelty but divine pedagogy: Pharaoh’s sorcerers can replicate the first plagues, confirming Pharaoh’s worldview that power is technical, manipulable. But as the plagues intensify, even the sorcerers must acknowledge “This is the finger of God” (Exodus 8:19). The collapse of sorcery’s effectiveness forces recognition that power itself serves a transcendent source. YHWH (mercy, relationship, presence) reveals itself as Elohim (power, judgment, force) not two gods but one reality perceived through expanding awareness.

A person falls from awareness because of some trial from God. Will the person stand by the ways of God? This requires faith. The Me’or Einayim’s teaching that “increased hardening serves increased revelation” must be understood through this lens: the loss of da’at is not arbitrary punishment but divine testing. Can the person maintain faith even when awareness dims? Can trust persist when clarity fails? The hardening of Pharaoh’s heart creates a situation where faith becomes necessary precisely because da’at has been withdrawn.

This reading parallels the Hasidic doctrine of *ein od milvado*—“there is nothing outside of Him.” Pharaoh’s heart represents egoic consciousness that believes it chooses independently, that attributes causality to itself and its powers. The hardening reveals that even this illusion of autonomy derives from God: divine presence so intimately sustains consciousness that the very capacity to deny God comes from God. Yet without da’at, this paradox cannot be perceived. Pharaoh acts without awareness of the divine ground of his actions.

The text’s genius lies in its recognition that awareness itself can be given and withdrawn. This is not determinism in the philosophical sense—Pharaoh still exercises will, still makes decisions. But his choices lack the illumination of da’at, the consciousness that would allow him to perceive the divine reality structuring his experience. He chooses, but his choices are ignorant. He wills, but his will is blind. The hardening is not the removal of agency but the removal of the awareness necessary for agency to be truly free. In the clinical encounter, this theology transforms our understanding of patient resistance entirely. The defended self, the traumatized psyche that cannot trust, has not lost free will in some metaphysical sense. Rather, trauma has removed da’at—the capacity for awareness that would allow different choices. The patient who says “I know I should trust you but I can’t” is precisely describing the loss of da’at: intellectual knowledge persists (“I know”) but the awareness necessary for choice has been compromised (“I can’t”).

The therapist’s task becomes not convincing the patient to choose differently but helping restore da’at—creating conditions where awareness might return. This cannot be forced any more than God could force Pharaoh’s awareness. The clinician creates safety, consistency, presence—a relational field where the patient’s capacity for awareness, obscured by trauma, might gradually reconstitute. But the return of da’at cannot be willed into being; it emerges when conditions allow.

The Me’or Einayim’s claim that divine presence persists within concealment even when awareness fails becomes therapeutically crucial. The patient’s capacity for da’at has not been destroyed, only obscured. The work of therapy is not creating something new but removing obstacles to what already exists in potential. Like Pharaoh facing the plagues, the patient must encounter reality in ways that gradually overwhelm the defended consciousness, forcing recognition of what the defended self has denied.

Embodied Theology and Patient Determinism in Clinical Practice
The philosophical and mystical approaches to determinism find unexpected convergence in the clinical encounter, where abstract theology becomes embodied reality. When we shift from theoretical debate to therapeutic praxis, the question transforms: How does a patient’s sense of determinism—their experience of being trapped, compelled, unable to change—manifest in the body and in the therapeutic relationship?

The Phenomenology of Patient Determinism

Patients frequently present with what might be termed “embodied determinism”—a lived conviction that they cannot change, that their symptoms or patterns are fixed, that they are determined by trauma, genetics, neurochemistry, or fate. But the Me’or Einayim’s teaching about da’at reframes this entirely: these patients have not lost free will but have lost da’at, the awareness necessary for genuine choice.

The chronic pain patient who says, “This is just who I am now,” reports not metaphysical determinism but the loss of awareness that would allow imagination of alternatives. The traumatized patient who cannot trust, despite wanting to, experiences not the absence of choice but the absence of da’at: “I know I should trust you, but I can’t” perfectly describes the split between intellectual knowledge and the awareness necessary for volitional freedom. The depressed patient who knows intellectually that cognitive distortions are distortions yet remains unable to feel otherwise inhabits consciousness without da’at—mind persists, but the illuminating awareness that would allow different perception has dimmed.

This parallels Pharaoh’s condition precisely. Pharaoh continues to decide, to act, to exercise will. He is not a puppet or automaton. But his decisions arise from consciousness that has lost da’at—the awareness of YHWH’s presence, the recognition of divine reality structuring all experience. He chooses, but his choices are blind. He wills, but his will lacks the illumination that would reveal the divine ground of his willing.

The clinical encounter reveals that trauma does not destroy the capacity for choice but removes the awareness necessary for choice to be genuinely free. The hypervigilant patient “chooses” to remain guarded, but this choice lacks da’at—the awareness that would allow recognition of present safety versus remembered danger. The dissociated patient “chooses” to withdraw, but without the awareness that would allow discrimination between current relationship and past violation.

Egypt represents consciousness organized around power rather than presence, around control rather than awareness. Pharaoh believes only in sorcery—in manipulable techniques, in the ego’s capacity to master reality through force and knowledge. This is precisely the consciousness of the traumatized nervous system: reality becomes a field of potential threats to be controlled, managed, predicted. Relationship becomes strategic rather than receptive. The loss of da’at transforms existence into a problem of control rather than an occasion for presence.

The Neurobiological Reality of Constraint

Contemporary neuroscience validates this understanding of da’at as the condition for genuine choice. Trauma literally rewires neural circuitry; the amygdala becomes hyperresponsive; the prefrontal cortex’s regulatory capacity diminishes [12,13]. But what neuroscience describes mechanistically, the Me’or Einayim understands theologically: trauma removes da’at. The traumatized nervous system is not simply different—it is organized for survival rather than awareness, for reaction rather than perception.

The loss of prefrontal regulation means loss of the neural substrate for da’at—the capacity to observe one’s reactivity, to create space between stimulus and response, to hold multiple perspectives simultaneously. The hypervigilant amygdala operates without da’at: it reacts automatically, correctly identifying threat in the past but unable to discriminate present safety. This is not the absence of neural activity but neural activity without awareness, choice without da’at.

Yet neuroplasticity demonstrates that da’at can be restored [14,15]. The brain remains capable of reorganization throughout life. Therapeutic intervention—whether through medication, psychotherapy, somatic practices, or relational healing—can facilitate the return of awareness [16,17]. This is not creating something new but removing obstacles to the capacity for da’at that trauma has obscured.

This neuroscientific reality embodies the Me’or Einayim’s teaching precisely: the patient is both determined and free, but freedom depends on da’at. Their current neural organization genuinely limits their capacity for awareness—da’at has been withdrawn through the trial of trauma. Yet within these constraints, the potential for da’at remains. The hardening is real, but divine presence—the capacity for awareness—persists within the concealment, waiting for conditions that allow its emergence.

The parallel to Pharaoh is exact. God removes Pharaoh’s da’at as a test: will he maintain faith even when awareness dims? Can he trust YHWH even when direct perception of divine presence has been withdrawn? The traumatized patient faces the same test: can trust emerge even when the neural capacity for da’at has been compromised? Can relationship persist when awareness of safety has been neurologically disrupted?

The Therapeutic Relationship as Tzimtzum

The Me’or Einayim’s theology of divine presence within concealment offers a precise model for therapeutic presence within patient determinism. The therapist does not dismiss the patient’s experience of being stuck: “You could change if you really wanted to.” Such voluntarism denies the reality of embodied constraint. Nor does the therapist collude with hopelessness: “You’re right; you can’t change.” Such fatalism forecloses the possibility concealed within determinism.

Instead, the therapist practices tzimtzum—contraction creating space. By acknowledging the genuine reality of the patient’s constraints while maintaining faith in transformation’s possibility, the therapist creates what Winnicott calls “potential space”—the transitional zone where change becomes imaginable [18].

This mirrors divine tzimtzum in Lurianic Kabbalah: God contracts to create space for finite existence, yet the contracted space is not truly empty of divine presence. Rather, a residue (reshimu) remains, sustaining creation from within its apparent independence [19]. Similarly, the therapist’s contraction—their refusal to impose change,

their respect for the patient’s defenses—creates space for the patient’s agency while maintaining therapeutic presence as sustaining ground. The patient who cannot trust is met not with demands for trust but with trustworthiness that requires nothing in return. The clinician’s steadiness over time—their consistent presence whether the patient withdraws or approaches, rejects or accepts—becomes the reshimu, the trace of divine faithfulness within the patient’s experience of abandonment or betrayal.

Pain as Pharaoh

The Body’s Resistance to Healing

In pain management, patient determinism manifests with particular intensity. Chronic pain rewrites the nervous system’s threat detection algorithms; centralized pain persists independent of ongoing tissue damage [20,21]. Patients reasonably protest: “But the pain is real!” They experience medical dismissal of their symptoms as gaslighting, as denial of their embodied truth.

The pain is real. The nervous system has genuinely reorganized around pain processing; the suffering is not imagined or voluntary [22]. Yet the pain’s persistence needs not be permanent. Central sensitization can be reversed through graded exposure, cognitive restructuring, and nervous system retraining [23,24]. The patient is both genuinely constrained by their current neurobiology and genuinely capable of change.

Here Pharaoh’s hardened heart becomes the body’s persistent pain signal—both authentic and modifiable, both the patient’s real experience and a pattern that can transform. The clinician who dismisses pain as “just” psychological or neurological denies its reality. The clinician who declares pain permanent denies its plasticity. The embodied theology of the Me’or Einayim suggests a third way: fully honor the reality of the hardened heart while recognizing divine presence—the possibility of transformation—within the hardening itself.

Working with chronic pain requires what might be called “therapeutic accompaniment into determinism.” The clinician does not argue the patient out of their conviction that they cannot improve. Instead, the clinician accompanies the patient into their experience of being stuck, finding there the concealed capacity for movement. “You’re right that your nervous system has organized around pain. Let’s explore what your nervous system might be trying to protect you from through pain.”

This reframes determinism from obstacle to communication. The hardened heart speaks. Pain testifies. The body’s refusal to relinquish symptoms encodes wisdom about what felt unsafe, what required defensive organization, what the psyche was not ready to feel or face. Honoring the determinism—respecting the defenses—paradoxically creates the safety necessary for their softening.

Free Will as Da’at

Recognition, Not Independence

The Me’or Einayim’s teaching reveals that freedom means da’at—the capacity to perceive divine vitality within concealment—rather than independence from divine determination. Patient agency is not restored by convincing them they possess free will or could have chosen differently. Such voluntarism denies the reality that without da’at, genuine choice is impossible. One chooses by virtue of Mind. One chooses between good and evil only through awareness.

Instead, patient agency emerges through the restoration of da’at itself. The patient begins to develop awareness of patterns they previously experienced as simply “how I am.” The awareness itself—

”I notice I withdraw when you offer care”-creates a gap, however small, between stimulus and response. In that gap, da’at enters. In that gap, genuine choice becomes possible for the first time. This is not the patient achieving independence from their neural conditioning or trauma history. Rather, it is the emergence of awareness within the conditioning. The patient who recognizes their defenses as defenses-as patterns that once served survival even if they now constrict-has begun to recover da’at. They experience simultaneously their determinism (these patterns are real, powerful, organizing) and their freedom (I am not identical with these patterns; awareness creates space).

Neurologically, this corresponds to strengthening prefrontal regulation of limbic reactivity [25]. Psychologically, it corresponds to developing observing ego-the capacity for awareness to witness its own processes [26]. Spiritually, it corresponds to the Me’or Einayim’s claim that divine presence persists within concealment for those capable of perception. The capacity to observe one’s own determinism-to notice reactivity, to recognize defensive patterns, to become curious about one’s constraints-is itself da’at returning, is itself the freedom that was concealed within determinism.

This reframes therapeutic work entirely. The clinician does not help the patient “make better choices” as if choice were independent of awareness. Rather, the clinician creates conditions where da’at might return-where the patient’s capacity for awareness, obscured by trauma, might gradually reconstitute. Like Pharaoh facing the plagues, the patient encounters reality in ways that overwhelm defensive consciousness, forcing recognition of what the defended self has denied.

The plagues represent the collapse of sorcery-the gradual revelation that control is impossible, that manipulation fails, that power itself serves a transcendent source. Similarly, therapeutic work often involves the patient’s defensive strategies gradually failing, their attempts at control proving futile, their ego’s certainty dissolving. This is not punishment but pedagogy: the removal of false da’at (illusory awareness based on defensive consciousness) creates space for true da’at (awareness of divine presence structuring all experience).

Clinical Humility and Divine Hiddenness

This embodied theology demands profound clinical humility. The therapist cannot force the return of da’at any more than God could force Pharaoh’s awareness. A person falls from awareness because of some trial from God. Will the person stand by the ways of God? This requires faith. The clinician creates conditions-safety, consistency, attunement-within which da’at might emerge but cannot determine when awareness will return.

This challenges medical culture’s heroic interventionism fundamentally. The physician who must fix, cure, overcome symptoms enacts Pharaoh’s consciousness-believing in sorcery, in techniques of control, in the ego’s capacity to master reality through knowledge and force. The Me’or Einayim’s theology suggests instead a medicine of presence: the clinician remains faithfully present within the patient’s loss of da’at, trusting that this presence itself-like the divine presence concealed within Pharaoh’s hardened heart-may gradually become perceptible to the patient.

The concept of divine hiddenness (*hester panim*) becomes therapeutically generative precisely through the framework of da’at. Some patients remain, for now, unable to imagine change-not because they lack will but because they lack da’at. Their awareness has been withdrawn through the trial of trauma. The

question becomes: Can faith persist even when da’at fails? Can the patient trust the therapeutic relationship even when they cannot yet perceive its safety? Can the clinician maintain faith in the patient’s capacity for awareness even when the patient cannot yet access it? This mirrors Pharaoh’s test exactly. God removes Pharaoh’s da’at and observes: Will he maintain faith in YHWH even without awareness? Will he trust even when perception has been withdrawn? Pharaoh fails this test-he continues to believe only in sorcery, in power, in control. But the test itself reveals the structure of spiritual development: faith must emerge precisely where da’at has been removed, or faith remains untested, untempered, unreal.

The therapeutic parallel is profound. The patient who can trust only when they feel safe has not yet developed true trust-they have only developed accurate threat detection. Trust becomes real precisely when da’at fails, when awareness of safety has been neurologically disrupted, when the patient must trust despite the loss of perceptual confirmation. This is why trauma treatment is so difficult: it requires developing faith (trust in the therapist, in relationship, in the possibility of healing) precisely where da’at has been removed (awareness of safety, perception of benevolent presence, recognition of care).

This mirrors post-Holocaust theology’s recognition that God’s presence may be concealed to the point of seeming absent, yet faith persists not despite but through the concealment [27,28]. Clinical faith-the therapist’s sustained belief in the patient’s capacity for da’at even when the patient cannot yet access it-becomes the trace of divine faithfulness within therapeutic relationship. The clinician’s consistent presence provides external da’at (awareness of the patient’s divine image, perception of their capacity for healing) that the patient cannot yet provide for themselves.

Conclusion

Beyond the Determinism Debate

The rational philosopher’s question-”Are we free or determined?”-dissolves when understood through the Me’or Einayim’s teaching about da’at. The question is not whether we possess free will as a metaphysical capacity but whether we possess da’at-the awareness necessary for genuine choice. One chooses by virtue of Mind. One chooses between good and evil only through awareness. Without da’at, there is no choice, regardless of how much will or agency or neural complexity persists.

The patient is both genuinely constrained by neural organization, trauma history, genetic vulnerability, and social determinants of health, yet genuinely capable of transformation when conditions support the return of da’at-when neuroplasticity, relational healing, and embodied reintegration restore the awareness necessary for genuine choice. The constraint is not primarily mechanical but epistemological: not “I cannot choose” but “I cannot perceive the reality that would allow different choice.”

The Me’or Einayim’s theology offers clinical wisdom precisely because it refuses the either/or logic of philosophical determinism by revealing that freedom depends on da’at. Pharaoh’s hardened heart is both God’s action and Pharaoh’s condition, both imposed and descriptive of Pharaoh’s consciousness, both punishment and test. The removal of da’at reveals what faith remains when awareness fails. Similarly, the patient’s “stuckness” is both real constraint (trauma has removed da’at) and test (can faith emerge where awareness has been withdrawn?).

An embodied theology of patient determinism recognizes the body as site where da’at is both lost and potentially restored. Trauma

removes awareness; the nervous system’s protective patterns operate without da’at, reacting to remembered danger rather than present reality. Yet these same patterns encode the possibility of their own transformation. The body that learned fear can learn safety-not by willing it but by recovering the da’at that would allow discrimination between past and present, between memory and reality, between reaction and response.

Clinical practice becomes spiritual practice when the therapist recognizes in each patient’s loss of da’at the hidden capacity for awareness that might, given sufficient safety and time, return. The clinician does not deny the loss of awareness but remains faithfully present within it. The clinician does not impose da’at but creates conditions where it might emerge. And the therapeutic relationship becomes the space where the paradox of divine testing-removal of awareness to test whether faith persists-is lived as embodied reality rather than merely theological proposition.

This is the clinical meaning of the Me’or Einayim’s revolutionary reading: Pharaoh’s free choice was taken from him when da’at was removed, revealing that genuine choice depends on awareness. The patient’s most profound resistance reflects not the absence of will but the absence of da’at-awareness has been withdrawn through the trial of trauma. The clinician’s task is not to overcome the resistance but to remain faithfully present within the loss of da’at, trusting that awareness-the inherent capacity for da’at that constitutes the divine image in every person-persists even within the most defended, most traumatized, most hardened heart, waiting for conditions that allow its return.

Addendum

Elliot Wolfson and the Kabbalah of Determinism

The Me’or Einayim’s teaching about da’at, freedom, and divine determination finds profound philosophical elaboration in the work of Elliot R. Wolfson, arguably the most sophisticated contemporary interpreter of Kabbalistic metaphysics. Wolfson’s extensive corpus-particularly his monumental Heidegger and Kabbalah: Hidden Gnosis and the Path of Poiēsis (2019)-excavates the deep structure of Kabbalistic thought in ways that illuminate precisely the questions this essay addresses: How does determinism relate to awareness? What is the ontological status of choice within divine infinity? How does nothingness (ayin) relate to being (yesh)?

Ein Sof as Groundless Ground

Wolfson’s central insight concerns the nature of Ein Sof-the Infinite that stands as Kabbalah’s ultimate reality. Where conventional theology treats infinity as a positive attribute of God (omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence), Kabbalistic thought radicalizes infinity into something far more paradoxical: the identity-in-difference of Infinity and Nothingness as the “groundless ground” of existence [29].

As Wolfson demonstrates, Ein Sof cannot be approached through the categories of being. It is neither being nor non-being but the nihilating nothingness (ayin) from which all being (yesh) emerges. This is not the Neoplatonic hen (the One beyond being) but something more unsettling: a divine reality that is simultaneously infinite plenitude and absolute emptiness, total presence and radical absence. Ein Sof is the “nothing that nihilates,” resisting any attempt to fix it within ontological parameters [30].

This has direct implications for understanding determinism. If God is Ein Sof-infinite nothingness rather than supreme being-then divine determination does not operate as efficient causality (one being acting upon another) but as the groundless ground from

which all determinate existence emerges. Pharaoh’s actions, like all actions, arise from ayin, from the divine nothingness that both is and is not their source.

The Coincidence of Opposites Being and Non-Being

Wolfson’s phenomenological analysis reveals that Kabbalistic metaphysics operates through what he calls “the coincidence of opposites”: contradictory truths held simultaneously without resolution. Ein Sof is both infinite and nothing, both absolutely transcendent and radically immanent, both the source of all determination and utterly indeterminate [31].

This structure precisely describes the Me’or Einayim’s treatment of Pharaoh. Pharaoh’s heart is both hardened by God and Pharaoh’s own condition; choice is both taken from him (through removal of da’at) and remains his responsibility; divine presence is both concealed and persistently present within the concealment. These are not logical contradictions requiring resolution but phenomenological descriptions of how divine reality manifests within finite consciousness.

The rational philosopher-whether Maimonidean or Spinozist-must resolve the paradox: either humans are free or they are determined. But Kabbalistic thought, as Wolfson demonstrates, refuses this either/or logic. Freedom and determinism are not mutually exclusive but mutually constitutive, both emerging from Ein Sof as differentiated expressions of the same groundless ground. The question is not “Which is true?” but “How does awareness (da’at) allow perception of their coincidence?”

Tzimtzum and the Space of Finite Existence

Wolfson’s extensive analysis of tzimtzum-divine contraction-provides the ontological framework for understanding how infinite determinism creates the space for finite choice. In Lurianic Kabbalah, Ein Sof contracts to create an apparent void (challal) where finite beings can exist. But this contraction is not literal withdrawal; rather, it is a transformation of divine presence from manifest to concealed [32].

Crucially, Wolfson emphasizes that the contracted space retains a residue (reshimu)-a trace of divine presence that sustains finite existence from within its apparent independence. This means that finite beings never genuinely exist “outside” Ein Sof; rather, they exist within a mode of divine presence that appears as divine absence. The freedom experienced by finite consciousness is real but not absolute; it is freedom within determination, agency within structure, choice within the all-encompassing reality of Ein Sof.

This illuminates the Me’or Einayim’s teaching that divine presence persists within Pharaoh’s hardened heart even when Pharaoh cannot perceive it. The hardening is tzimtzum-not God’s literal withdrawal but God’s transformation into a mode of presence that appears as absence. Pharaoh’s loss of da’at means loss of awareness of the reshimu, the divine trace that sustains his consciousness even in its state of concealment.

Acosmism and the Unreality of Independent Existence

Wolfson notes that certain streams of Hasidic thought-particularly Chabad-develop what he terms a “thoroughgoing acosmism”: from the divine perspective, there is no created universe at all [33]. Since all existence emerges from ayin (nothingness), its nature is to revert to nothingness; only God’s continuous creative act sustains the illusion of independent being. As the Tanya teaches, creation involves the emergence of “somethingness” (yesh) from

divine “nothingness” (ayin), and this yesh must be continuously transformed back into ayin to realize its true nature.

This radical position suggests that what we experience as determinism versus freedom is itself illusory—a function of consciousness that falsely attributes independent existence to finite beings. From the divine perspective (sub specie aeternitatis), there are no separate agents to be either free or determined; there is only Ein Sof appearing to itself as multiplicity.

Yet this does not eliminate the significance of human experience and choice. Rather, it relocates freedom: the tzaddik works not to achieve independence from God but to realize that independence was never real. Freedom becomes recognition of one’s true nature as divine self-manifestation, as ayin appearing as yesh. This is precisely the freedom that da’at provides—not autonomy but awareness of one’s ontological ground.

Language, Disclosure and the Apophatic Occlusion of Occlusion
Wolfson’s analysis of Kabbalistic linguistics reveals another dimension crucial for understanding da’at and awareness. Language in Kabbalah is not merely representational but theurgic—words participate in the divine reality they signify. The Hebrew letters are not arbitrary symbols but emanations of divine speech, configurations of Ein Sof manifesting as communicable form [34].

This means that da’at-awareness—is not simply mental cognition but participation in divine self-knowledge. When awareness is withdrawn, what is lost is not merely subjective experience but a mode of theurgic connection, a participation in the divine logos structuring reality. Pharaoh’s loss of da’at means loss of linguistic-theurgic connection to YHWH; his consciousness becomes opaque to the divine words that constitute existence.

Wolfson employs the striking phrase “apophatic occlusion of occlusion” to describe how Kabbalistic language simultaneously reveals and conceals, discloses and occludes [35]. Every statement about Ein Sof must negate itself; every disclosure involves deeper concealment. This is not failure of language but its proper function: language points toward what cannot be said by saying it improperly, by performing its own inadequacy.

The Me’or Einayim’s teaching operates precisely this way. By saying that increased hardening serves increased revelation, the text occludes its own occlusion—it points toward a truth that cannot be directly stated: that concealment itself is a mode of presence, that the loss of da’at creates the condition for da’at’s return in deeper form, that divine absence is the form that divine presence takes within finite consciousness.

Temporality and the Futural Past

Wolfson’s extensive work on time and temporality in Kabbalistic and Hasidic thought provides another crucial dimension [36]. He demonstrates that Kabbalistic temporality is not linear but recursive: the future folds back into the past, the past projects forward into the future, creating what he calls “the futural past”—a temporal structure where what will be determines what was, and redemption precedes creation.

This temporal structure explains the pedagogical function of Pharaoh’s hardened heart. God removes da’at not as punishment for past actions but as preparation for future revelation. The plagues unfold as a temporal process whereby Pharaoh’s increasing hardness creates the condition for Egypt’s ultimate recognition that “YHWH is Elohim”—that mercy and power, presence and

transcendence, are not two gods but one reality perceived through expanding awareness.

Clinically, this temporal structure illuminates trauma treatment. Trauma disrupts linear temporality; past danger colonizes present perception. The patient’s nervous system, organized around remembered threat, cannot distinguish past from present. The loss of da’at is precisely this temporal collapse. Therapeutic work involves restoring temporal differentiation—helping the patient recognize that what was dangerous then is not dangerous now, that the past is past rather than perpetually present.

Yet this restoration cannot be forced; it emerges through the therapeutic relationship over time. The clinician’s consistent presence creates what might be called “therapeutic futurity”—the gradual opening of a future different from the traumatic past. Like the plagues gradually overwhelming Pharaoh’s sorcerers, therapeutic reality gradually overwhelms defensive consciousness, forcing recognition of what the defended self has denied.

Hypernomianism and the Law Beyond Law

One of Wolfson’s most distinctive contributions concerns what he terms “hypernomianism”—not antinomianism (rejection of law) but the grounding of law in that which exceeds law [36–37]. In Kabbalistic ethics, the highest piety involves recognizing that divine justice transcends all juridical categories, that mercy operates beyond the distinction between guilt and innocence, that the law itself is grounded in the “law beyond law.”

This concept directly addresses the ethical paradox of Pharaoh. How can God justly punish Pharaoh for actions that God determined by removing his da’at? The rational philosopher must resolve this through metaphysical distinctions preserving Pharaoh’s culpability. But Wolfson’s analysis suggests a different approach: the question itself operates within juridical categories that Ein Sof transcends. From the perspective of the “law beyond law,” categories like guilt and innocence, punishment and reward, freedom and determinism, belong to finite consciousness’s attempt to map the unmapable.

This does not mean ethical nihilism; rather, it means recognizing that ethics operates within a mystery it cannot master. The clinician who treats traumatized patients encounters this constantly: Is the patient “responsible” for their symptoms when trauma removed their da’at, their capacity for genuine choice? The question has no satisfactory answer within conventional ethical frameworks. Yet the clinician must act ethically nevertheless—must remain present, must maintain faith in the patient’s capacity for da’at’s return, must refuse to impose change while creating conditions where change becomes possible.

Integration: Wolfson and the Me’or Einayim

Wolfson’s philosophical excavation of Kabbalistic metaphysics provides the deep structure supporting the Me’or Einayim’s teaching. When the Me’or Einayim says that Pharaoh’s free choice was taken from him, this does not mean God violated some pre-existing metaphysical fact about human autonomy. Rather, it reveals that what we call “choice” is always already situated within Ein Sof—that freedom exists only as awareness (da’at) of one’s ontological ground, not as independence from that ground.

When the text says that divine presence persists within concealment, this points toward Wolfson’s insight that Ein Sof is simultaneously the “nothing that nihilates” and the ground sustaining all existence. Presence and absence are not opposites but aspects of how infinite

reality manifests within finite consciousness.

When the text teaches that increased hardening serves increased revelation, this exemplifies the “coincidence of opposites” that Wolfson demonstrates throughout Kabbalistic thought: the coexistence of being and non-being within divine essence, the identity-in-difference of infinity and nothingness, the simultaneous reality of determinism and freedom.

Clinically, Wolfson’s work validates the theological-phenomenological approach this essay develops. The patient’s experience of being stuck is not simply psychological but ontological-it reflects a genuine condition where da’at has been withdrawn, where awareness of one’s true nature (as ayin appearing as yesh) has been obscured by trauma. The therapeutic task is not convincing the patient they are free (which would be false da’at, illusory awareness) but creating conditions where genuine da’at might emerge-where the patient might recognize that their separate, independent existence was never real, that they were always already held within a reality greater than ego-consciousness, that the freedom they seek is not independence but awareness of dependence on the groundless ground.

This is why trauma treatment is so difficult: it requires the patient to relinquish precisely what trauma taught them to value-the illusion of autonomous control. Egypt represents the consciousness that believes in sorcery, in technique, in the ego’s capacity to master reality. The exodus requires abandoning this illusion, recognizing that power itself serves a transcendent source, accepting that genuine freedom means awareness (da’at) of one’s place within Ein Sof rather than independence from it.

Wolfson’s work thus provides the philosophical rigor supporting the Me’or Einayim’s insight: freedom is not independence from divine determination but awareness within it, not autonomy from Ein Sof but recognition of one’s true nature as Ein Sof manifesting as finite consciousness. Pharaoh failed the test not by lacking free will but by lacking da’at-by remaining unconscious of the divine ground that sustained his consciousness even in its hardened state. The patient faces the same test: can they develop faith where da’at has been withdrawn? Can they trust relationship even when neural capacity for trust has been compromised? Can they recognize their true nature even when trauma has obscured it?

The answer cannot be forced; it emerges-or does not-through the mysterious process Wolfson calls “the nihilating leap,” the impossible transition from yesh (somethingness) to ayin (nothingness), from ego-consciousness to recognition of the groundless ground. The clinician can only remain present within the patient’s concealment, trusting-with clinical faith analogous to religious faith-that da’at persists as potential even when utterly unavailable to consciousness, that divine presence remains even within the most hardened heart, that the capacity for awareness waits within every human being as their deepest nature, obscured by trauma but never destroyed, concealed but never absent, waiting for conditions that allow its return.



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