AUTONOMY IN JEWISH LAW—
IN THEORY AND IN PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

Jewish law is frequently described as confining a person in a tight
tapestry of detailed rules transforming him or her into an automoton. Curiously, the opposite assertion, that Jewish law provides a person with a broad, almost limitless spectrum for personal choice, is also not uncommon. The truth, of course, is far more nuanced. While there is considerable room within doctrinal Jewish law for the exercise of autonomy, it is often not because the principle of autonomy, per se, is prized. Moreover, an important cause for individual choice in Jewish law arises from non-doctrinal circumstances, such as sociological characteristics of the dispersed Jewish communities.

My paper attempts to focus on the nuances and, thereby, to illuminate not only the areas of personal choice within Jewish law and to identify their causes, but, thereby, to better depict Jewish law’s perspective toward personal autonomy.