

## Maimonides Meets *The Terminator*

By Rabbi Dan Ornstein

Back in 2013, I caught up with the rest of the movie-going world, howbeit twenty nine years late, when I finally watched *The Terminator*, whose main character is a cyborg that has been programmed to kill people and wreak mayhem. In case you missed the space age technological revolution taking place under our noses as I did, "cyborg" is shorthand for cybernetic organism, a living thing which is usually though not exclusively a human being, whose biological functions have been greatly enhanced through external or built in computer technology. Cyborgs have enjoyed a huge role in popular science fiction entertainment. In addition to *The Terminator*, played famously by Arnold Schwarzenegger, think about the six million dollar man, whose bionic parts replaced and were superior to the biological parts he lost in an accident. However, cyborg technology is not merely the subject of fantasy. It is also one aspect of current biomechanical research that includes computerized prosthetic limbs, brain-computer interfaces for people who have lost their sight or their mobility, retinal implants, and cochlear implants for hearing loss.

On the level of pure entertainment, I enjoyed *The Terminator* immensely, even though the acting is terrible, and this is not my favorite film genre. It provides us with a more exciting version of your standard crash-and-burn car chases, and I am captivated by its theme of villains and heroes who go back in time to alter their own futures as well as that of the human race. However, I have a movie watching disease called *sermonitis cinematica*: I can't watch a film without calculating the number of sermons or blog postings I can extract from it based upon the big ideas that it presents. Thus, as I watched, I was also struck by how the film poses significant philosophical questions concerning human nature and moral freedom. Schwarzenegger's character looks fully human; in fact, he is too perfectly human, as one should expect of a body builder who was chosen to play a man-machine combo with super-human strength. Of course, the "soul" of this so-called human is all machine, programmed to be mercilessly and relentlessly destructive. The film also turns the theme of "Man vs Machine" on its head. Man and machine oppose each other on one level, in the form of a battle between humans and cyborgs. Yet, at another level they are chillingly in synch because they occupy the same organism.

The Hebrew month of Elul and its themes of freedom and repentance are upon us once again. As we draw closer to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, I

pause to think about what actually sets us apart from machines: Is our behavior somehow programmed, thus exposing our ideas about free will as a huge illusion, or are we truly free to do good and evil and to repent when we have done wrong? For me, this is not a matter of abstract speculation, but a persistent question motivated by my despair at many people's seemingly uncontrollable capacities to behave badly. When I feel that despair, I draw comfort and strength from the classic of Jewish law and ethics, Maimonides' *Laws of Repentance*, found in his law code, the Mishneh Torah:

*Free will is granted to all people. If one desires to turn himself to the path of good and be righteous, the choice is his. Should he desire to turn to the path of evil and be wicked, the choice is his... Each person is fit to be righteous like Moses, our teacher, or wicked, like Jeroboam. [Similarly,] he may be wise or foolish, merciful or cruel, miserly or generous, or [acquire] any other character traits. There is no one who compels him, sentences him, or leads him towards either of these two paths. Rather, he, on his own initiative and decision, tends to the path he chooses. (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance 5:1, 2. Translation by Rabbi Eliahu Touger.)*

This passage is a fragment of Maimonides' larger religious and philosophical argument in defense of free will and the value of repentance. Would he as an astute scientist, philosopher, and religious Jew have drawn different conclusions about human freedom had he possessed our contemporary knowledge about the profound genetic, environmental, and psychological influences upon human development? There is no way to know for sure. However, I suggest that

Maimonides was not trying to make a convincing scientific assertion. He was asking us to make a firm religious and moral commitment to freedom, the most important characteristic distinguishing humans from all other living things. I suspect Maimonides would have said to the Terminator, "As horrible as the consequences of your behavior are, your actions are inherently irrelevant because you have been programmed to behave that way. The only 'programming' installed in human beings by God is our actual ability to choose our behaviors. It is precisely our paradoxical capacity to be terminators or tender hearted that makes being human so meaningful."

None of Maimonides' argument is intended to dismiss the truth about the painful psychic, cognitive, and physical limitations with which some people live, for which we are obligated to give them care and support. What Maimonides is teaching us is that human freedom is ineradicable and that our dignity is predicated upon our moral responsibility. That may be hard for some people to accept, but it is no science fiction.

Shabbat shalom.