

Vaera, Pharaoh, and Free Will - 2010

As I was doing dishes the other day, a familiar noise erupted from the family room - my sons Jonah and Shiah roughhousing with each other. A few moments after the initial sound of laughter came the also familiar sound of one boy crying, while the other shouted – “But he MADE me do it!” At ages 4 and 8, and in the midst of a fight, neither one likes it when I respond, as I almost always do, “He didn’t MAKE you do anything. You chose to – hit him, tickle him, laugh at him, you name it.” They don’t like it, but I keep on saying it, with the hope that they will come to understand over time one of the most important lessons I can teach them – that their behavior – and the subsequent consequences of their behavior - is the result of THEIR personal choice.

This concept of a totally free will is, according to my understanding of Judaism, one of the fundamental ideas of what it means to be human. Without free will, there can be neither reward nor punishment. Without free will we cannot hold those who sin culpable and neither can we reward those who behave righteously. Jewish tradition’s insistence on free will is one of the main disagreements between Judaism and Christianity. Christian tradition teaches that all human beings are born tainted with the stain of what they deem “the original sin” and are inclined towards evil as a result. Jewish tradition says no, human beings are born neutral, and while we are indeed all tempted at times to follow the wrong path, we indeed have the power and the choice to behave in a just, honest, and merciful fashion.

And though I know that free will is fundamental to Jewish belief, Jews around the world will read *Parashat Vaera* today, in which we find the following words: “**1** And the LORD said unto Moses: 'See, I have set you in God's stead to Pharaoh; and Aaron your brother shall be your prophet. **2** You will speak all that I command you; and Aaron your brother shall speak unto Pharaoh, that he let the children of Israel go out of his land.

ואני אקשה את לב פרעה והרביתי את אתתי ואת מופתי בארץ מצרים
3 And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and multiply My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt. **4** But Pharaoh will not hearken unto you, and I will lay My hand upon Egypt, and bring forth My hosts, My people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt, by great judgments. **5** And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch forth My hand upon Egypt, and bring out the children of Israel from among them.'

How is this possible? If Pharaoh’s will was really overruled for the sake of Hashem’s displaying signs and wonders, why did Pharaoh – and all of Egypt – deserve to be punished? I thought all of reward and punishment was based on free will!

I am not the first person, and undoubtedly won’t be the last person, that has been confused by this text. As far back as Rabbi Yochanan in the midrash, we see attempts at reconciling these ideas. Rabbi Yochanan explains that God gives a person multiple chances, but once those chances have been used and discarded, God stops issuing chances.

According to the midrash, that is what happens here. Thus we read in the Etz Hayim Humash: “We note that for the first five plagues, the text reads: “Pharaoh’s heart was hardened.” That is, he himself chose to be stubborn. Only for the last five plagues do we read “God hardened

Pharaoh's heart." In the beginning of the process, Pharaoh was equally free to be generous or to be stubborn. Every time he chose the option of stubbornness, however, he gave away some of his free will. Each choice made it more likely that he would choose similarly the next time, both to spare himself the embarrassment of admitting that he was wrong and because he now had the self-image of a person who would not yield to Moses' pleading." At first, it was you who hardened your heart. Henceforth I shall continue the hardening." The Humash continues with the following passage: "Similarly, Maimonides writes: "Sometimes a man's offense is so grave that he forecloses the possibility of repentance."

At times over the years this answer has satisfied me. But I admit, at other times I remain completely unmoved. I would like to believe that no matter how many times I make the same bad choice – like eating more chocolate than I should even snapping unfairly at my husband – I do have the power in me to change. According to this midrash, that is not the case. And so I must look for other possibilities. In searching for alternatives, I came across this passage from the medieval Portugese scholar Abarbanel, who usually follows Maimonides, but differs in this case. He wrote:

"This opinion from the midrash and from the wisest of our authors seems strange to me and exceedingly difficult in the light of what the prophets taught us about the ways of the Holy One Blessed Be He, since they all prophesied with one voice that G-d does not desire the death of a wicked person, but rather that he repent from his ways and live (see Ezekiel 18) as it is said: "Return, O wayward children, and I will heal your waywardness" (see Jeremiah 3,22), and the Psalmist said: "G-d is good and just, therefore He shows sinners the way" (Psalms 25,8). Abarbanel then quotes the Mishnah (Avot 2,10). "Repent even one day before your death...". It is thus quite unthinkable that the Holy One Blessed Be He would say to an evildoer "continue to do evil", as might appear to be the case with Pharaoh..."

According to Menachem ben Yashar of Bar Ilan University, Abarbanel proposes and discards two solutions to our dilemma, then explains as follows: "God hardens Pharaoh's heart not at the onset of the plagues but after they are over, for it is at these junctures, at the end of each plague, that the Torah speaks of hardening Pharaoh's heart. Since each plague ends several days after its inception, and Pharaoh still has not freed the Israelites, he can then mistakenly conclude that the plague was only a natural disaster (which Moses, as a magician or scientist, might well have been able to predict in advance). It was this that allowed Pharaoh to harden his own heart to fulfill God's demands. In other words what God provided for Pharaoh was the opportunity - and perhaps the temptation - to harden his own heart."

Simply put, this is what happened with each plague. A plague began. Pharaoh asked Moses to make the plague stop. Moses prayed for the plague to stop. The plague stopped, and then Pharaoh has a choice. Once the pressure of the plague and the cries of his people were removed free will and choice were restored to Pharaoh. He could choose to submit to God and recognize His sovereignty, or continue stubbornly to deny it. Thus God enables Pharaoh to harden his heart at the end of each plague. This is what is meant by God hardening his heart. It is not that God was hardening Pharaoh's heart, but rather that God was really restoring Pharaoh's free will by freeing him from the pressure of the plague which would have forced him to do something he was not actually choosing.

I find this explanation of Abarbanel's very appealing, for rather than upending the concept of free will, we now have a rendering of the story that actually *reinforces* the centrality and importance of free will – even when that free will is used for evil.

Our parashah this week therefore tells us that we ALL have the power to use our free will to improve the world or to make the world a darker place. The Pharaoh in Egypt who we read of in the Torah was I believe the first real anti-Semite. Given the choice of decency or evil he chose to enlist his whole people in the murder of innocent Jewish baby boys. His son continued the legacy of oppression and was his first disciple. But his greatest disciples the Nazis also made their choices, and we are still learning about those choices more than 60 years later. Just this week I read an article by Judy Dempsey in the New York Times entitled: "Reich Bureaucrats Seen in a New Light." There I read the following: "What is coming to light now — and causing a major debate in Germany over the past few weeks — is the active involvement by Nazi Germany's civil servants in the annihilation of Jews. For decades, bodies like the Foreign Ministry and the Finance Ministry managed to make the public believe they had been relatively "clean" during the Nazi years. They pointed to their continuing efficiency as a source of pride. "What is revealing is the way the civil service, the bureaucrats, applied the law," said Professor Jane Caplan, a historian at St. Anthony's College, Oxford, and part of a commission investigating the German Finance Ministry's past. "They were not passive in their work. They became sources of innovation in order to make the system more efficient."

For years I have sympathized with Pharaoh's plight – being forced against his will, to do something. I now realize that it was his choice all along. The same is true for many in Germany who claimed they had no choices either. All along the choice, the actions, were in their hands.

As we go through our daily lives it is easy to try and blame others for the mistakes that we make. It is easy to blame our circumstances, the economy, anything but ourselves. But the choice for how we behave is always in our own hands. One of my favorite short stories from Jewish folklore is the one about the man who came to the rabbi and said, "Help me rabbi, I am old and a sinner and I would very much like to die a good, upright Jew!" "Why do you worry about dying lying an upright Jew?" asked the rabbi. "Better to live like one, and you'll be guaranteed to die like one!"

Shabbat Shalom