



Parades's Parsha Discussion with Rabbi Alex Israel

TORAH TO DISCUSS WITH TEENS AND ADULTS AROUND YOUR SHABBAT TABLE

Sponsored by Drs Amy Fox Griffel and Martin I Griffel in memory of her mother Sally Fox, Sima Bat Moshe v Michla on the occasion of her yahrtzeit.

Va-era. Are We Free?

"And God Hardened Pharaoh's Heart"

The question is well known: If God hardened Pharaoh's heart, how is he culpable for withholding freedom from the Israelites? A person can only be held responsible for his actions if he is free. If Pharaoh was compelled to act by divine fiat, then why is he to blame?

Maimonides says that sometimes, a person's free will can be withheld by God:

"It is possible that a person commits a grave offence or many sins such that ...repentance will be withheld from the individual... It is, in this vein that the Torah writes: "And I will harden Pharaoh's heart"(Ex. 14.4). Because he opted to sin, harming Israel who lived in his land... repentance was withheld from him, so that due punishment might be visited upon him." (Laws of Repentance 6:3)

But this approach hardly solves the issue. Pharaoh will still be paying the price for actions over which he has no control. Why is that fair or just? Should early decisions mean that later choices are denied?

So, let us try this a different way.

In the first five plagues, the Torah informs us that Pharaoh hardened his own heart (Shemot 7:13,22; 8:11,15,28; 9:7).



From the sixth plague onward, his hard-heartedness is instigated by God (Shemot 9:12;10:1,20,26; 11:20).

We might offer a psychological model to explain the dynamic. Maybe when the Torah speaks of “God” hardening Pharaoh’s heart, it is actually the machinations of the psychological processes instilled in us all by God. Let me explain: Sometimes a person begins to act in a certain way, building his or her life around particular decisions, certain lifestyle choices. After a while, the cumulative effect of those decisions, the momentum of his current position, is too great for him to shift course; he loses the ability to choose. If that chosen path would include behaviour that is bad, evil or immoral, then we might say that at first, he has chosen that direction, but after some time, he is trapped by his former decisions; his life is invested in those choices, and now he is unable to shift course; he lacks the ability to alter his situation and circumstances. Erich Fromm writes:

“Every evil act tends to harden man’s heart, that is, to deaden it. Every good deed tends to soften it, that is, to make it more alive. The more man’s heart hardens, the less freedom does he have to change, the more is determined by previous action. But there comes a point of no return when man’s heart has become so hardened and so deadened that he has lost the possibility of freedom.” (You shall be as Gods, pg.81)

Sin has a way of affecting its perpetrator, of controlling the individual. It penetrates our inner world as we become addicted to its ways. Anyone who has tried to eradicate an ingrained, toxic behaviour knows how difficult it can be:

Rav Assi said: At first the evil impulse is as thin as a spider’s web, but in the end, it is as thick as the rope of a cart.

Rav said: At first, the evil impulse is like a passing visitor, then it becomes a guest, and then finally it becomes the master of the house.” (Sukkah 52a-b)

Pharaoh then, is trapped by his own decision making. Once he has enslaved the Israelites, and the economy has become reliant upon them, once he has dug in his heels and refused to allow the Israelites religious freedom, once he has discredited Moses and made him into an enemy; he cannot capitulate, he is incapable of reversing his decisions. He has invested too much. He has lost his freedom to choose. His heart is hard and unchangeable. This situation will only end by Egypt’s total collapse.

“Pharaoh is everyman writ large. The ruler of the ancient world’s greatest empire, he ruled everyone except himself. It was not the Hebrews but he who was the real slave; to his obstinate insistence that he, not God ruled history.” (Rabbi Sacks, “Covenant & Conversation, Shemot” pg.50)

“We often think of freedom as a fact but is it also – and perhaps primarily – an aspiration. ...Mindfulness and constant, exquisite attention are necessary for freedom to flourish. Freedom needs to be nurtured and attended to, not taken for granted.” (Rabbi Shai Held, “The Heart of Torah vol.1”, pg.143)

Please discuss:

- Was God actively controlling or “hardening” Pharaoh’s heart, or is this a metaphor used by the Torah to depict the manner in which humans become entrapped by their earlier choices?
- Do you see people around you whose choices are curtailed, restricted? When is that good and when is that bad? (eg. Having a child will mean that you are now responsible for another human being, and some of your choices are impeded. But most parents welcome those constraints.)
- Where is freedom essential for our lives?
- How free are you?

Shabbat Shalom