

Parashat Va'era 5774, 2013:

Of Hardened Hearts and Returning to Hashem

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

The Torah's phrase: "*vayechazake Hashem et lav parah*" ("and G-d hardened Pharaoh's heart") appears once in our *parasha* (9:12), and four other times within the Book of Exodus (10:20, 10:27, 11:10, and 14:8). Another variant of our expression appears, as well, wherein G-d states that He will harden Pharaoh's heart (*Sefer Shemot* 7:3, and 14:4). In each of these instances, G-d determined Pharaoh's future actions. Like a *malach* (angel), the evil Egyptian king could only follow one course of action (see Rashi on *Sefer Bereishit* 18:2). Therefore, we are met with a fundamental problem: "What happened to Pharaoh's free will?"

The question of Hashem preventing Pharaoh from exercising his free will is exceptionally noteworthy, since the notion of Free Will is one of the most fundamental concepts of Jewish theology. Thus, the Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) states in *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah* 5:3:

This principle is a fundamental concept and a pillar [on which rests the totality] of the Torah and mitzvot as [Deuteronomy 30:15] states: "Behold, I have set before you today life [and good, death and evil]." Similarly, [Deuteronomy 11:26] states, "Behold, I have set before you today [the blessing and the curse]," implying that the choice is in your hands. Any one of the deeds of men, which a person desires to do, he may, whether good or evil. Therefore, [Deuteronomy 5:26] states: "If only their hearts would always remain this way." From this, we can infer that the Creator does not compel or decree that people should do either good or bad. Rather, everything is left to their [own choice]. (Translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

Moreover, man's freedom of choice in the moral, ethical and behavioral realms is absolute. This means we are fully responsible for our actions. No one, not even the Almighty, forces us to behave in a particular manner:

A person should not entertain the thesis held by fools ... that, at the time of a man's creation, The Holy One, blessed be He, decrees whether he will be righteous or wicked. This is untrue. 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. (Ibid. , 5:2)

Very importantly, the Rambam and others never differentiate between Jews and Gentiles regarding this essential principle of Jewish theology. All people, regardless of their particular faith community, have free will. Beyond question, *Sefer Yonah* bears eloquent testimony to the notion that non-Jews, including idol worshippers, have free will and the ability to do *teshuvah* (repentance). If so, why did Hashem prevent Pharaoh from exercising his free will, and compromise his ability to repent? Why did He harden Pharaoh's heart, and make him obstinate? Once again we must ask: "What happened to Pharaoh's free will?"

We are fortunate, indeed, that the Rambam provides us with an answer to these questions. In doing so, he blazes a new path in our understanding of Free Will. His *chidush* (novel interpretation) is a tipping point in our understanding of the heretofore-absolute nature of Free Will:

It is possible to commit a great sin or a number of sins until judgment is rendered by the True Judge, in such a manner that the punishment for this sinner will be - according to the sins which he had committed knowingly and willingly - an inability to have repentance and, thereby, does not allow him to return from his wickedness, so one will therefore die and be destroyed because of one's sin. The Holy One, Blessed Be He, said

through Isaiah, "Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and smear over their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and return, and be healed". [6:10] It is similarly written, "But they mocked God's messengers, and despised His words, and scoffed His Prophets, until the L-rd's wrath mounted against His people, till there was no remedy" [*Divrei Hayamim* 36:16].

This is saying that they sinned willingly and their iniquities were numerous, until we [i.e. Hashem] were obligated to suppress their repentance, repentance being the 'remedy'. Therefore, the Torah says, "And I will harden Pharaoh's heart" [*Sefer Shemot* 14:4] because he initially sinned willingly and caused evil for the Jews living in his country, as it is written, "Come, let us deal wisely with them" [*Sefer Shemot* 1:10]. [Therefore,] the Law permitted the suppression of his repentance until it was denied to him. Hence, the holy One, Blessed Be He, hardened his heart. (*Hilchot Teshuvah*, 6:3, underlining my own)

Based upon the Rambam's trenchant analysis, we see that the underlying factor regarding Hashem's suppression of Pharaoh's free will, and his consequent inability to do *teshuvah*, was the maniacal and volitional evil that he foisted upon our people. Since this was so consummately and manifestly inhuman, Pharaoh was subsequently denied the exercise of his free will and, thereby, the possibility of *teshuvah*. This punishment was the first of its kind, and reflects a total and abrupt break with the normative manner in which Hashem deals with man. It was, however, true *midah k'neged midah* (measure for measure), since Pharaoh had totally broken with the norms of behavior that should maintain between man and his fellow man.

In contrast, we are very fortunate that Hashem, in His great kindness and love for us, allows and encourages us to return to Him in *teshuvah sh'laimah* (complete *teshuvah*). This is a true gift. May we have the wisdom to recognize it as such, and to renew our relationship with Him each and every day, since each day offers an opportunity to do *teshuvah* (See Rabbi Eliezer's statement in *Pirkei Avot* 2:15). Then, too, may we always remember Yermiahu's stirring words in *Megilat Eichah* 5:21, and beseech Hashem to help us return in *teshuvah sh'laimah* unto Him: "*Hashiveinu Hashem alecha v'nashuvah*

chadash yemeinu k'kedem." ("Restore us to You, O L-rd, that we may be restored!

Renew our days as of old." Translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

V'chane yihi ratzon.

Shabbat Shalom

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