

Shabbat Spice

PARSHA VAERA



The Limits of Free Will

By Talia Cohen

In Parashat Vaera, Pharaoh's heart is described as "hardened" several times. Sometimes, it's Hashem hardening his heart, sometimes he does it to himself. Either way, the meaning behind this transformation through which Pharaoh's heart goes throughout the parasha is cryptic and has many possible explanations. The commonly accepted, *psbat* explanation is that Pharaoh was stubborn. Despite the stressful circumstances under which he was placed, Pharaoh refused to give in and compromise on his pride.

At times, Hashem is the source of this stubbornness and explicitly tells Moshe that this is the case. Rashi and other commentators explain that Hashem wanted Pharaoh to suffer with further plagues, so He caused him to continue being stubborn and refusing to free the Jewish people. This served as both a punishment to Pharaoh and the Egyptians, as well as a demonstration of G-d's greatness to all the nations of the world. But if G-d is the one "hardening" Pharaoh's heart, doesn't that compromise Pharaoh's free will?

Does declaring G-d's greatness and punishing the wicked really justify taking away the very basic freedom of a living person to choose the course of his or her actions? What "right" does G-d have to take away the thing that makes us human, the ability to choose between right and wrong, the divine spark in each of us?

There are many possible answers to this question, and the Midrash tells us that "*there are 70 faces to the Torah.*" Different approaches will touch different types of people, so I would like to share the one that I relate to on a personal level. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt"l, a brilliant teacher, mentor, leader, and scholar of the Jewish people of our generation offers a fascinating interdisciplinary approach to the question of Pharaoh's free will that can be applied to our own lives. He says that "*free will is not a given. We have to work for it.*"

Studies of the brain have shown that when a person repeats an action enough times for a prolonged amount of time, it strengthens the neural pathways for that behavior - we call that forming a habit.

(Continued...)

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Once this habit is formed, it is very difficult, on a neurological and psychological level, to break it and replace it with a new one. It takes hard work to break bad habits and form new, healthier ones. The same goes with our moral choices. Hashem blessed us with the gift of *teshuvah*. The opportunity to partake in the work of *teshuvah* becomes more scarce as we get sucked into our damaging behaviors. In fact, our very ability to choose our actions becomes compromised. *"Our freedom diminishes every time we fail to exercise it,"* says Rabbi Sacks.

This is exactly what happened to Pharaoh in our parasha. The first five plagues were a warning from Hashem, which Pharaoh stubbornly ignored. This is reflected by the language in which *"Pharaoh's heart became hard,"* without Hashem's involvement.

Pharaoh created a habit that took deep roots in his brain, and by doing so he diminished his capacity to choose. The Ramban explains that after these five warnings, G-d said *"you made your own heart heavy, so I am going to add impurity to your impurity."* Pharaoh was responsible for the disappearance of his own path to *teshuvah*, his own free will.

This idea is supported not only in Torah and scientific sources, but within the historical context of the story as well. The Egyptians had a sophisticated belief system regarding the afterlife. The Book of the Dead spells out the ancient Egyptians' concept of what happens after death. They believed that a person's heart is placed on a scale, along with a feather on the other side. If the heart is lighter than the feather, it means that the person is good and deserves to enter the afterlife. However, if the heart is "heavy with evil," it is destroyed forever. This is a striking parallel considering that the Hebrew word used to describe Pharaoh's heart hardening can also be translated as *"heavy."* This tells us that Pharaoh put himself in a position in which he was not even meeting the standards of his own society.

The most powerful man at the time had lost his own freedom due to his poor choices. It can happen to anybody. Through the actions the Torah prescribes to us, the *mitzvot*, *halachot*, and rituals we observe consistently, we build good habits, form strong, positive neural pathways, and ensure the continuity of our free will. In the words of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, *"Freedom is a muscle that needs to be exercised: use it or lose it."*

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L'ILUI NISHMAT ESTHER BAT ELIYAHU Z"L

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Recognizing G-d's Signs

By Caitlin Dilamani

This Parasha is a continuation of Moshe and Aaron's mission to liberate the Jews from their oppression in Egypt. To prove G-d's power, Aaron turned his staff into a snake, but since Egypt was already famous for its first-class magicians, Pharaoh just thought this was another magic trick and refused to believe them. The difference between this sign from Moshe and Aaron, and the power of the Egyptian magicians, however, is that while Aaron's staff actually turned into a snake, the Egyptians' staffs only took on the shape of snakes, and when Aaron's staff swallowed the others, it didn't get any bigger!

This instance aligns with the old Pharaoh's experience where he stood face-to-face with Yosef and recounted his dreams of seven thin cows eating seven fat cows without getting any fatter and seven sick ears of corn eating the seven healthy ones.

Like Moshe and Aaron, Yosef was also a Jew who gained high status, and it wasn't until the new Pharaoh saw the resemblance of all these circumstances that he finally recognized the seriousness of G-d's messengers.

From here, we learn an important lesson about the origins of our nation and the significance of Hashem's signals. We should always be mindful of the Almighty's superpowers and acknowledge his wide range of miracles, big and small.

Shabbat Shalom!

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