

Temple Sinai

Parshat Vaera

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Hardening the Heart

משנה אבות ד'ב'

(ב) בן עזאי אומר, הוי רץ למצוה קלה כבחמורה, ובורח מן העברה. שמצוה גוררת מצוה, ועברה גוררת עברה. ששכר מצוה, מצוה. ושכר עברה, עברה:

Pirkei Avot 4:2

(2) Ben Azai says: Run to do an easy commandment as to a difficult one, and flee from sin; since a commandment leads to another commandment, and a sin leads to another sin; since the reward for a commandment is another commandment, and the reward for a sin is another sin.

Rachel Adler

God does not harden Pharaoh's heart until the 8th plague. Pharaoh's behavior reminds me of Mishnah Yoma 8:9. אחטא ואשוב, אחטא ואשוב אין מספיקין בידו. לעשות תשובה. (One who says, "I will sin and repent, sin and repent again," that person can never return/repent) I've always thought that this means the person becomes incapable of teshuvah because when one has lied about it repeatedly, one can't even believe oneself any more.

Rambam (Maimonides), Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance 6:3

There are many passages in Scripture which seem to contradict the principle of freewill, and many have been misled by their tenor. They imagine that the Holy One pre-ordains a person to good or evil. I shall however provide a key to understanding these passages. When one sins of her own freewill, she is punished . . . sometimes in this world, sometimes in the Hereafter, and sometimes in both. When does this apply? When he does not make amends. But if he makes amends, repentance is the antidote to retribution. The same as a person's sin is of his own free prompting, so is his repentance. But it may sometimes happen that one's offence is so grave that he is penalised by not being granted the opportunity to turn from his wickedness, so that he dies with the sin that he committed. . . . They sinned intentionally and eagerly transgressed until they deserved to be denied *teshuvah*, which is the "remedy." Therefore it is written in the Torah: *I will harden Pharaoh's heart*

(Ex. 14:4) – since he initially sinned of his own initiative and abused Israel, who were living in his land, as it says, *Come, let us deal cleverly with them* (Ex. 1:10), judgment was rendered to deny [Pharaoh] *teshuvah* until [God] punished him – therefore the Holy Blessed One hardened [Pharaoh's] heart.

Joseph Albo (15th c. Spain) *Sefer Ha'ikkarim (The Book of Principles)*

The wicked man becomes pious and returns to the Lord when the blow falls -- out of fear of retribution, as in the case of Pharaoh, who said, "I have sinned this time; the Lord is righteous (Exodus 4:27). Because such a situation savours of compulsion and not of free will, the Lord hardened his heart, so that he imagined that the plague was accidental rather than providential. This was to eradicate the cowering effects of the plague itself, leaving his freewill uninfluenced by any compulsion. Only then could it be demonstrated whether his repentance was freely motivated. In this manner, the gates of repentance are shut in the face of the wicked. But, far be it from the Almighty to withhold from man his free choice to do good! On the contrary, Scripture states (Ezekiel 18:32): "For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth . . . wherefore turn yourselves and live." But God leaves man to his free choice, exercising no outward compulsion on him."

Sforno (Italian, 15th-16th CE)

The Almighty sent the plagues to stir the Egyptians to repentance...and there is no doubt that, had not Pharaoh's heart been hardened, the latter would have let the Israelites go, but his actions would not then have been motivated by sincere repentance and submission to the Divine will, but merely because he could no longer bear the suffering of the plagues, as his servants intimated, "Knowest thou not yet that Egypt is destroyed?" But this would not have constituted true repentance. Had Pharaoh wished to submit to God and sincerely return to Him, nothing would have stood in his way. But God hardened his heart, fortified his resistance to enable him to endure the plagues and refrain from letting the Israelites go: "in order to show these my signs in the midst of them," that they might thereby acknowledge My

greatness and goodness and turn to Me in true repentance. (from Nechama Leibowitz, "I will harden Pharaoh's heart," *New Studies in Shemot*, p. 153.)

Unknown

We make choices every day. We get up in the morning and decide what to eat for breakfast, where to go from our homes, whom we will see, what we will say, and what we will do with our lives. That's the theory anyway.

There has been speculation from scientific circles in recent years that challenges the very idea that human beings have free will. Among the most famous of these is a study by the neurologist Benjamin Libet.

In his study, Libet showed that impulses to initiate some body movements are sent by the brain fractions of a second before we become consciously aware of them. The study suggests that our conscious awareness is the last part of us to find out what we are actually doing.

Our subconscious, our nerves and muscles all have decided what we will do before our consciousness ever finds out. The conscious mind comes up with the explanations, or the rationalizations, for our behaviors *only after the fact*. Libet concluded that the whole idea of free will may be an illusion.

Libet's study raises serious philosophical, moral and religious questions. It even has implications for criminal justice. If our bodies decide to do things without the involvement of the thinking, reflecting, considering parts of our brains, how can people be held responsible for their actions? If we do not choose to do things with the part of us that is capable of making moral decisions, is morality meaningful?

These are questions that were considered by the ancient rabbis long before Libet's study. In this week's Torah portion (*Bo*), God tells Moses, "Go to

Pharaoh for I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his servants so that my signs may be displayed in his midst" (Exodus 10:1). A classical midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 13:3) asks whether God denied Pharaoh the ability to freely choose his actions by hardening his heart. It troubles the rabbis that God eventually punished Pharaoh for actions he may not have been free to choose.

Rabbi Yochanan said, "Does the 'hardening of Pharaoh's heart' provide heretics with grounds to claim that Pharaoh had no way to repent?" Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish answered, "Let the mouths of the heretics be stopped up... When God warns a person once, twice, and even a third time, and he still does not repent, then God's heart closes against repentance... Thus it was with wicked Pharaoh. Since God sent five times to him and he took no notice, God said, 'You have stiffened your neck and hardened your heart, so I will add to your uncleanness.'"

Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish says that when people freely and repeatedly choose a path that goes against God, they close themselves from divine compassion. As they harden themselves, God responds by hardening against them.

From a psychological perspective, this could be understood as a natural consequence of indulging in behavior that is willfully ruthless and cruel. The more people become used to behaving in uncaring ways, the more they become deaf to any call toward compassion. God does not deny free will to Pharaoh, Rabbi Shimon may be arguing. Rather, Pharaoh's own choices remove him from the ability to be moved by ethical concerns.

How shall we reconcile this with what modern science teaches us about free will? Benjamin Libet's research suggests that our behavioral choices are more on the instinctual level than on the conscious level. Acting ethically may be more of a *habit* than a conscious decision. Through repetition, we inure ourselves to behaving well or behaving poorly. Morality may be more about subconscious patterns of behavior than we had imagined, but it is still something human beings can nurture within themselves, even on a Pavlovian level.

That is also, in a curious way, what the midrash suggests. Pharaoh did not lose his free will because of a divine thunderbolt. Through his own behavior and choices, Pharaoh trained himself toward the kind of hardhearted behaviors that stripped him of the ability to do otherwise. That is why God says that Pharaoh's heart was hardened; it was the consequence of his own choices.

And what does that teach us about ourselves? Be very careful about the choices you make in life. Every time you choose to respond to another person with care and compassion, you are setting an unconscious pattern that will be repeated. Every time you choose to be indifferent or unresponsive to the needs of others, you train yourself to be as stubborn and unmovable as Pharaoh.