

What does a California home-maker have in common with Egypt's great Pharaoh?

To answer this question we begin with a 1960's psychology experiment conducted by Drs. Jonathan Freedman and Scott Fraser. In this study, a team of researchers telephoned California housewives and asked the women if they would be willing to answer a few questions – a relatively simple request with which most subjects complied. Three days later, researchers called back these same women with a second appeal – to allow the investigators to come into their homes and spend a few hours looking through their cupboards to explore the use of household products. Not surprisingly, there were some women who refused the psychologists this second time around – but only half as many as those in a control group who were approached about the home visit without ever having first been asked to answer the telephone questions. Freedman and Fraser dubbed their new discovery the “foot in door technique” and posited that once a subject starts to act in a certain way, the more likely she is to continue in that same direction. As humans, we like to see ourselves as behaviorally consistent and so once we self-identify, say, as “the kind of person who helps out phone researchers,” our natural impulse is to continue in that same vein, even as the demands necessary to maintain such a label begin to increase. All this, of course, is a bit complicated but Jewish tradition has pared it down to its very essence. In the famous words of *Pirkei Avot*: “*Mitzvah goreret mitzvah v'aveirah goreret aveirah* -- One good deed leads to another [and] one transgression leads to another.”

Recently BHCBE finished a course co-taught by myself and Dr. David Mogul, a member of our community and professor of biomedical engineering at IIT, entitled “How Free is Free Will: The Neuroscience of Human Decision Making.” Made possible by a generous grant from Sinai and Synapses, this three-part series explored different psychological and biological factors that influence moral behavior, often making our actions less freely chosen than we might have imagined, and then pondered questions of ethics, wondering how responsible we should be held for decisions not entirely under our conscious control. We ultimately concluded that while human free choice may not necessarily be absolute, it is morally useful to act as though it is in order to best inspire right behavior. We also surveyed Jewish wisdom on the topic of free will which led us to the enigmatic figure of Pharaoh.

While Judaism tends to have a robust doctrine of free will, illustrated by narrative passages such as the Golden Calf and by legal sections such as the 10 Commandments which both seem to indicate that humans have the ability to choose behavior freely and thus should be held responsible for its consequences, the one powerful counter-example to this norm comes in the course of the Exodus story. Here we confront one of the most theologically challenging pieces in all of Torah – the repeated hardening of Pharaoh's heart as he refuses time and time again to let God's people go. Were Pharaoh's wickedness but entirely a product of his own malevolent spirit, we could see his story as a simple, if regrettable, example of the dangers of human evil. But the situation soon becomes much more complicated: Says God – “I will harden Pharaoh's heart that I may multiply My signs and wonders in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 7:3). For God to plant obstinacy in Pharaoh's spirit and then punish him along with all of Egypt for refusing to free the Israelite nation seems to violate the principles of right and justice that are at the very core of our Torah. Which is to say nothing about the question of human free will!

Commentators are quick to point out that the “heart hardening” motif occurs precisely twenty times in the Exodus story, and in these twenty instances the direct cause of Pharaoh's stubbornness is attributed exactly ten times to Pharaoh himself and ten times to God. In fact, God's hand is entirely absent from Pharaoh's reaction to the first five of the ten plagues; while Egypt is struck with blood and frogs, lice, swarms of cattle and cattle disease we simply learn *v'hacbed et libo* – that Pharaoh's heart was heavy

[with resolve]. It is only with the advent of the sixth plague that we finally read that *God* hardened Pharaoh's heart. Prior to this, it may be assumed, Pharaoh was acting entirely of his own accord.

It is perhaps this that Pharaoh has in common with the California housewives of Freedman and Fraser's study - each time he hardened his heart it became that much more difficult for him to give in to his better nature and eventually do what he knew was right; Pharaoh essentially became trapped in his own willfulness and evil. As Freedman and Fraser demonstrated, once we have set down a certain path - whether one of cooperation with phone researchers or one of breeding injustice and tyranny - human nature would have us continue in that same direction, making it increasingly difficult to eventually reverse course. Each choice we make influences future choices, not in a way that abrogates free will but in a way that shapes our character - for the worse and for the better. Pharaoh's evil spirit came to rule over him, so much so that it seems as if his hard-heartedness came directly from God.

"One good deed leads to another and one transgression leads to another" so we should always choose wisely. And beware of the feet that we let into our mental doors - they can be surprisingly difficult to extricate!