

**Failing our Way to Success**  
***A D'var Torah for Parshas Va'eira - January 15, 2021***

Dear Friends,

There's a popular aphorism, usually attributed to Albert Einstein (though, like most quotations attributed to Einstein, there's no evidence that Einstein ever said it) which states that doing the same thing over and over again, and expecting different results, is the definition of insanity. If you check the DSM-V, I'm pretty sure you won't find any major mental health disorder defined in these terms, but if we delete the charged word "insanity" and substitute "foolishness" or "self-delusion," the statement is accurate, and for most of us, I'm afraid, a painfully familiar description of our lives. How many of us have made the same commitments year after year, either at the high holidays, or at the secular new year, or maybe around our birthdays—to eat healthier, to start exercising, to make time to learn Torah, to keep in better touch with loved ones, only to find ourselves in the same place we started, year after year.

This week's parsha and next, Parshat Va'eira and Parshat Bo, would seem to be the perfect illustration of this pattern of behavior. Over and over again, Pharaoh is afflicted by plagues from G-d, and over and over he refuses to let the Israelites go, only to experience another plague worse than the one before. He does the same thing over and over again, expecting the results to differ, only to be predictably, inevitably disappointed, until finally things get so bad that he gives up and lets the Israelites go.

We could easily conclude that this is the major moral lesson of this week's parsha, to warn us of the dangers of repeating the same pattern of behaviors over and over when they are not working. Perhaps the Torah wants us to learn from the example of Pharaoh and conclude that when we find ourselves thwarted over and over, we have to take the hint and accept the inevitable. Had Pharaoh done this, had he been able to take the hint the first time, he could have saved himself and his people a great deal of pain and suffering.

That's the moral lesson from Pharaoh's point of view. However, there's another side to the story.

Last week, in the opening parsha of the book of Shemot, we read about Moshe's first encounter with Pharaoh after returning to Egypt. Pharaoh, of course, refused Moshe's demand that he allow the Israelites to go worship G-d in the desert. In the wake of this failure, Moshe and the Israelites were discouraged in the extreme. The Israelites blamed Moshe, and Moshe blamed G-d, complaining "למה זה שלחתי Why did You send me? Ever since I came to speak to Pharaoh in Your name, he has only made it worse for Your people!"

I'll point out that this complaint comes before any of the plagues, before the marvel of the staffs turning into serpents. At this point, all that had happened is that Moshe had

gone to Pharaoh once, and demanded that he let the Israelites go, Pharaoh had retaliated, and Moshe and the Israelites had become discouraged.

Our parsha picks up in the midst of G-d's response to Moshe's complaint. G-d reassures Moshe that He will redeem them eventually, but when Moshe relates this to the people they will have none of it. Moshe once again becomes discouraged, refusing to speak to Pharaoh, saying "the Israelites won't listen to me, why should Pharaoh?" and then again complaining that he is not the right man for the job. At this point, we might expect G-d to get angry and rebuke Moshe, but instead He gives him a pep-talk, reminding him that G-d will be there guiding him in what to say and do, and Aharon will be by his side to deliver the message to Pharaoh. In the midst of this pep-talk, G-d makes the famous declaration "But I will harden Pharaoh's heart...When Pharaoh does not heed you, I will lay My hand upon Egypt and deliver My ranks, My people the Israelites, from the land of Egypt with extraordinary chastisements." (Shem. 7:3-4)

G-d says this here, warning Moshe that He will harden Pharaoh's heart, because He knows how discouraged Moshe was by even one refusal from Pharaoh. Hashem needed to let Moshe know that though there will be many more failures, success is guaranteed in the end, and that short term failure is nothing to get discouraged about.

Perhaps we might even understand from this a reason for the hardening of Pharaoh's heart: that God hardened Pharaoh's heart in order to train Moshe and the Israelites not to be discouraged by initial failure. Had Pharaoh released us after one plague or two, Moshe and the Israelites would not have come out of Egypt knowing that repeated failure can yet lead to success.

By finally redeeming us from Egypt only after appearing to "fail" to do so more than 10 times (remember that there were two visits to Pharaoh before the plagues began), G-d was preparing us for the hardships our people would face throughout history. Our experience in Egypt gave us the faith that justice and virtue will ultimately triumph, no matter how many setbacks we may experience along the way.

This is the opposite of the message that doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results is the definition of insanity. While for Pharaoh the lesson of our parsha is to learn to bend, not to be stubborn and refuse to budge, for the Israelites the message was one of perseverance. Keep doing the same thing over and over, and if you have G-d on your side you will eventually triumph no matter how many setbacks occur along the way.

How do we know whether we're Pharaoh or whether we're the Israelites at any given moment? When we experience a setback, how do we know whether we are meant to keep fighting in the faith that ultimately we will persevere as the Israelites did, or whether we should take the setback as a message that we need to change course, as Pharaoh did?

I have an idea that the answer lies with paying close attention to the voice inside our heads that wants us to keep going and the voice that wants us to change direction. Usually one of those voices is a voice of fear. Sometimes we want to give up because persevering in our present course frightens us. Other times, the thing that frightens us is changing, and the voice of fear is what is calling us to persevere. For Pharaoh, the voice of G-d was literally telling him to let the Israelites go, but his own fear told him that he couldn't live or maintain his power without an enslaved Hebrew underclass. For the Moshe and the Israelites the voice of G-d was telling them to speak to Pharaoh and demand their freedom, but their fear of Pharaoh's retribution, Moshe's fear of failure and of losing the confidence of the people, told them to give up and change course.

When we are torn between persevering in the face of challenges or giving up and changing our approach, we should ask ourselves, which of those impulses is motivated by fear? That's the one we should not listen to. When fear is telling me to give up, then I should persevere, and when fear tells me not to change, to stay the course, that's when I need to change my whole approach. By changing course or staying the course, immediate success is not guaranteed, but if we choose to overcome the voice of fear and listen to the voice of G-d, then success eventually, after much struggle is assured.

We cannot know when or how the ultimate redemption will be achieved; how many plagues will it take before the Pharaohs of this world stop hardening their hearts; how many failures we must go through before we experience success. All we can do is carry on trying. In the words of Samuel Becket: "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better." Eventually, with G-d's help, we will find our way to success.

Shabbat Shalom!

Garth Silberstein