

The Challenge Of Choice

Va'Era 5783

In the year 210 BCE¹, a Chinese commander named Xiang Yu led his troops across the Yangtze River, to attack the army of the Qin dynasty. The troops set up camp on the banks of the river for the night, but they were awakened in the morning to the acrid smell of smoke. Looking from their encampment, they realized that their ships were ablaze, and their entire fleet was in the process of being incinerated. Suspecting arson, they hurried over to the ships to fend off any attackers, whereupon they discovered that it had been an inside job. In fact, it was Xiang Yu himself who set their ships aflame. To make matters worse, he didn't stop there- he crushed their clay cooking pots, too, so they were left with no source of sustenance. When confronted about his destructive behavior, he explained to his troops that by destroying the pots and the ships, they would have no choice but to fight their way to victory...or die trying. Xiang Yu certainly didn't win any popularity awards for "Best Commander," but his counterintuitive actions had a profound focusing effect on the troops. Realizing that they had no other choice, they grabbed their bows and spears, charged ferociously against the enemy and were victorious in nine consecutive battles, completely obliterating the forces of the Qin dynasty.

¹ Dan Ariely, *Predictably Irrational*, p. 139

It is the most fundamental philosophical questions about the *Parshiyot* we are now reading. God promises the Jewish people that He will harden Pharaoh's heart, in order to perform even greater miracles and exact retribution against the evil Egyptians. We believe, as a principle of our faith, that we are endowed with free will; the Rambam, in the fifth chapter of *Hilchot Teshuvah*, the laws of repentance² describes the ability of human beings to choose their actions as a fundamental pillar of Torah and Mitzvot. If so, how could God harden Pharaoh's heart and remove his free will? Furthermore, if God *did* remove Pharaoh's free will, why did He punish Pharaoh for doing that which he had no control over?

This question has occupied Jewish thinkers and Torah commentators spanning centuries, including the Rambam himself.

לפיכך כתוב בתורה (שמות ד כא) "וְאֶנִּי (אֶחָזֵק) [אֶקְשֶׁה] אֶת לֵב פַּרְעֹה". לְפִי שְׁחָטָא מַעֲצָמוּ תַחֲלָה וְהִרְעֵ לְיִשְׂרָאֵל הַגֵּרִים בְּאֶרֶצוֹ שְׁנֵאמַר (שמות א י) "הִבֵּה נִתְחַכְמָה לוֹ". נָתַן הַדִּין לְמַנַּע הַתְּשׁוּבָה מִמֶּנּוּ עַד שֶׁנִּפְרַע מִמֶּנּוּ. לְפִיכךְ חָזַק הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אֶת לְבוֹ.

For these reasons, it is written in the Torah [Exodus 14:4], "I will harden Pharaoh's heart." Since, he began to sin on his own initiative and caused hardships to the

² Laws of Repentance 5:3

Israelites who dwelled in his land as [Exodus 1:10] states: "Come, let us deal wisely with them," judgment obligated that he be prevented from repenting so that he would suffer retribution. Therefore, The Holy One, blessed be He, hardened his heart.

The Rambam's solution to this dilemma is that Pharaoh initially exercised his free will in enslaving the Jews, but in so doing, he sealed his fate³. Whereas everyone can repent, at any time, Pharaoh's ability to do so was removed. Pharaoh's certainly had free will to act, but his free will to *repent of his actions* was removed, so that he would be punished for the evil he perpetrated.

Rav Aharon Soloveitchik offered a related insight in one of his *shiurim* to his students prior to Yom Kippur. Yes, he said, Pharaoh was endowed with free will, but the more he chose stubbornly to enslave the Jews, the more difficult it became for him to change his actions. He was too far in; he depended on the Jews too heavily to provide the slave labor that was the engine of his kingdom, and he had already made a show of his imperviousness to Moshe's threats. Now, he had to save face and show resolute determination, avoiding weakness at all costs. At times, our decisions, too, set us on a path from which it becomes increasingly difficult to deviate. Our community, our profession, our group of friends- these are all choices, and the longer we are committed to them, the more difficult it becomes to leave,

³ Laws of Repentance 6:3

even if that is the emotionally healthy or morally upright thing to do. People in the throes of addiction, for example, often trace their challenges to their initial choice to dull their existential pain with some kind of addictive substance- whether it is drugs, cigarettes, food or anything else- and now find it extremely difficult to see a way out.

It is Rav Ovadia Sforno's strikingly original explanation, though, that I think is especially worth exploring. He explained that Pharaoh's refusal to send away the Jews, even in the face of such miraculous manifestations of divine wrath and retribution, is the *ultimate act of free will*. How could it be anything else? It is a choice to ignore God, to be oblivious to obvious messages designed to scare us straight. When the Torah describes God as hardening Pharaoh's heart, it means that God turbo-charged his free will, giving him extra fortitude to defy God when he might not have otherwise had the strength to do so. In this interpretation, Pharaoh was not a victim of his *inability* to choose, but was done in by his *ability* to do so. In his outstanding book *Predictably Irrational*⁴, Professor Dan Ariely of MIT described a series of experiments he performed inspired by the story of Xiang Yu, which proved that people make irrational decisions- particularly in the economic realm- when they are focused on keeping their options open, and maintaining their choices in any situation. Sometimes, simplifying or reducing our choices leads to

⁴ Chapter 8

clarity. I'm reminded of one of my favorite scenes from one of my favorite movies, *My Cousin Vinny* (which celebrated its 30th anniversary last year). Cousin Vinny and his girlfriend Mona Lisa Vito travel to Alabama to defend his cousin and the cousin's friend, who are wrongly incarcerated on a homicide charge. One morning, they go for breakfast at the local cafe. Sitting down at the counter, they look at the posted menu and see three options: Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner. The choice was an easy one, and, without giving away too much, the fact that it contained grits played a key role in cross examination. How many times have we felt paralyzed by indecision, by sifting through a plethora of options? It's the people who have difficulty committing to one person while dating, because on their dating app there may be someone else who is more interesting, or better suited to them. It's when you spend hours scrolling through Netflix and can't find a movie you want to watch, when you need another few minutes to review the 5 page menu, or when we stand in the aisle looking overwhelmed when we need to select a laundry detergent. The ability to choose was what allowed Pharaoh to be punished for his treatment of the Jews, but it was also a punishment on its own.

No matter which interpretation you prefer regarding *Pharaoh's* ability to choose, each one speaks to the importance of *our* ability to choose. This past week was the yahrtzeit of Rav Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, the great Mashgiach of the Gateshead Yeshiva and then, later in his life, of the Ponevezh Yeshiva. One of the most famous

ideas Rav Dessler develops in his magnum opus, *Michtav Me'Eliyahu*, is that of the *nekudat habechirah*- the point of choice. We all have areas that test our willpower, our religious commitment and our moral fortitude. The *nekudat habechirah* is the flashpoint at which these are tested- for each person, it is different. One person's point of choice might be whether to give charity at all; another person's would be whether to tithe their income. One person's point of choice might be whether or not to eat kosher exclusively, while for another person, the point of choice is whether or not to consume only *chalav yisroel* dairy products. One person's point of choice might be whether, when they get angry, to lose control and unleash a torrent of verbal or even physical abuse; for others, getting angry at all is the point of choice. Seven years ago, when she passed away, I spoke about the mind boggling hospitality displayed by Rebbetzin Henny Machlis and, *yibadel lechaim*, her husband Rabbi Mordechai Machlis toward one and all, including many who were mentally ill or had various emotional needs. After her passing, one of the common themes from those who eulogized her was that she was preternaturally patient, never letting the many people who intruded on her life ruffle her feathers. In a recent interview, Rabbi Machlis spoke about his legendary late wife, and said that the calm, serene presence was not one that came naturally to her. In her earlier years as a parent, with their older children, she would lose her temper; often, when confronted with an infuriating situation or misbehaving child, she would turn to Hashem and say, "Hashem, please help me not to get angry." Her younger children never knew a

woman for whom anger was an option, because she did what Rav Dessler describes as our *avodah*, our job in the world: she moved her point of choice. We are all living, and we are not stagnant, so our point of choice can and does change regularly. Free will is a muscle, one that must be exercised to stay healthy and limber. Our challenge is to advance the point of choice- emotionally, intellectually, spiritually and religiously- putting ourselves where our choices will be loftier ones. To be sure, it isn't easy. Moving our *nekudat habechirah* is scary; changing important aspects of ourselves may mean changing our self-definition. But if God enhanced Pharaoh's ability to choose, he certainly allows us to do the same. May the choices we make be the best ones, and may our point of choice even move in the positive direction.