

# Illuminating Man's Inner World

## THROUGH THE LENS OF THE PARSHA

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### Parshas Va'era – Choice and Change: The Pharaoh Conundrum

There are certain topics in Jewish thought that have had an extended shelf life. Generation after generation going back for some 2,000 years pick up the mantle of debate from their predecessors and continue to question and prod in order to come to some meaningful resolution. In a way it's like a giant unending relay race in which the Tenaim pass along the baton to the Amoraim who relay it to the Geonim, Rishonim and Acharonim and then on to us. The notion is at once awe inspiring while also quite humbling.

The specific issue in question are the parameters of man's free choice especially as it relates to Pharaoh seemingly having free choice removed from him. We are all familiar with the pesukim from which this issue stems - ואני אקשה את לב פרעה (שמות ז:ג) - And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, ויחזק ה' את לב פרעה, For I have hardened his heart, ויחזק ה' את לב פרעה, And G-d hardened Pharaoh's heart (11:1) - all paint the picture of HKB'H stripping this leader of his choice.

The philosophical implications of this hardening are of course enormous. This is how the Midrash records the difficulty:

כי אני הכבדתי את לבו - אמר רבי יוחנן מכאן פתחון פה למינין לומר לא היתה ממנו שיעשה תשובה

**For I have hardened his heart - Rabbi Yochanan said: Does this not provide heretics with an opportunity to open their mouths to say that he had no means of repenting. (Shenos Rabbah 13:3)**

As mentioned, this conundrum of G-d stripping פרעה of free-choice and then punishing him for his inevitable decisions has been a source of energetic debate for the last millennia.

While almost all of the Rishonim address this in one way or another I would like to focus on the position of the Rambam. Maimonides speaks at length about the absolute prerequisite of man's freedom of choice and

that the very notions of repentance and reward and punishment rests on the indisputable and unassailable presence of בחירה חפשית. The language of the Rambam is striking:

ידבר זה עקר גדול הוא והוא עמוד התורה והמצוה שנגאמר (דברים ל טו) "ראה נתתי לפניך היום את החיים". וכתיב (דברים יא כו) "ראה אנכי נתן לפניכם היום". כלומר שיהיה בידכם. וכל שיחפץ האדם לעשות ממעשה בני האדם עושה בין טובים בין רעים

*And, this matter is a great and component part, the very pillar of the Torah and its precepts, even as it is said: "See, I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil" (Deut. 30.15), and it is, moreover, written: "Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and curse" (Ibid. 11.26). This is as if saying, the power is in your hand, and whatever human activity man may be inclined to carry on he has a free will to elect either good or evil. (Hilchos Teshuva 5:3)*

The language of the Rambam in saying that free choice a 'foundation' of the Torah is so remarkable that there are those who have asked why it is not listed among his thirteen principles of faith. The Rambam continues in this vein throughout the entire fifth chapter of hilchos teshuva and into the sixth chapter at which juncture the plot begins to thicken. The Rambam had already said that free choice is absolutely sacrosanct but now he seems to sing a slightly different tune. He writes that:

ואפשר שיחטא אדם חטא גדול או חטאים רבים עד שיתן הדין לפניו דין האמת שיהא הפרעון מזה החוטא על חטאים אלו שעשה ברצונו ומדעתו שמונעין ממנו התשובה ואין מניחין לו רשות לשוב מרשעו כדי שימזיק ויאבד בחטאו ושעשה. .... כלומר חטאו ברצונו והרבו לפשע עד שנתחייבו למנוע מהן התשובה שיהיא המרפא. לפיכך כתוב בתורה (שמות ד כא) "ואני אקשה את לב פרעה". לפי שחטא מעצמו תחלה והרע לישראל הגרים בארצו שנגאמר (שמות א י) "הבה נתחכמה לו". נתן הדין למנוע התשובה ממנו עד שנפרע ממנו

The choice to repent, claims the Rambam, is always

present until it isn't. There are those people who have consciously, brazenly, and unrepentantly thrown off the yoke of heaven until *לֹא מִנִּיחִין לוֹ* *אֵין מְנִיחֵהוּ הַתְּשׁוּבָה* וְאֵין מְנִיחִין לוֹ לְשׁוּבָה מִרְשָׁעוֹ - teshuva is withheld from that person so that he ultimately dies in this state of sin. פרעה says the Rambam is an example of such a person.

The problem with this position of the Rambam is threefold. The first is that the Rambam himself lists the twenty-four different types of people who lose their share in the world to come. At the end of that list the Rambam writes that:

בְּמָה דְּבָרִים אֲמֹרִים שְׂכָל אֶחָד מֵאלוֹ אֵין לוֹ חֵלֶק לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא  
 כְּשֶׁמֵּת בְּלֹא תְּשׁוּבָה אֲבָל אִם שָׁב מִרְשָׁעוֹ וּמֵת וְהוּא בְּעַל תְּשׁוּבָה  
 הָרִי זֶה מִבְּנֵי הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא שְׂאֵין לָהּ דְּבָר שְׁעוֹמֵד בְּפָנֵי הַתְּשׁוּבָה.  
 אֲפֹלוֹ כִּפּוּר בְּעֵקֶ

In other words that even though there are certain people for whom *olam habbah* should be taken away from, if they choose to do teshuva, they still merit the world to come. The Rambam is clearly stating that teshuva is not held back from even the worst of sinners

Secondly, the Rishonim point out that individuals such as Achav and Menashe eventually did teshuva. It is hard to make an argument that these two were qualitatively any better than Pharaoh, yet the gates of teshuva were opened for them but not for him. Why should that be the case?

Lastly, I have always been bothered by what seems to be an internal weakness in the position of the Rambam. On the one hand free choice is established as an 'amud' - an unshakeable foundation of our belief system. Then in the very next breath, the Rambam says that this is only true for certain people, but if you are truly wicked then HKB'H takes away that right to choose. Seemingly the absolute sine quo non of free choice should preclude its removal.

The totality of these questions led the Abarbanel to say about this position of the Rambam that his position was

**והוא אצלי זר וקשה מאד**

**(This position) is strange and foreign to me**

How do we resolve the Rambam? How could we claim that teshuva is always an option, witness the repentance of the worst scoundrels known to man, claim that free

choice is immutable and then also state that for certain people G-d has removed that choice??

A number of years ago I thought of the following approach in the Rambam and was gratified to see that Nehama Leibowitz Z'L seems to have said the same.

These pages are not the place to get into a lengthy discussion about free choice but both in the works of Jewish thinkers and in the pages of philosophy the question has been posed as to how truly free a human being really is. Is man's behavior completely determined by him or are their forces of predeterminism that dictate most of man's behavior? Where one comes from, their upbringing, personality, the circumstances and expectations of his/her life and all of one's past choices all conspire to, if not eliminate free choice, severely limit its scope. Famously, Rav Dessler compares this reality to the image of a football field in which the only areas of choice, and hence the only areas in which a person receives reward and punishment are the few yards in front of him. What is both behind the person or too far in the distance is not subject to man's free choice - free choice is limited to a relatively small swath of land in the individual's personal landscape.

When the Torah says that G-d hardened פרעה's heart what is being conveyed is that due to the past decisions that Pharaoh had made, due to him becoming entrenched in a certain position, due to his drawing lines in the sand and needing to save face - due to all of that he no longer really had genuine free choice as to whether he should release Am Yisroel. His own behavior eliminated any chance for allowing a truly thoughtful and unimpeded decision in an area that had become so personal.

The Rambam himself seems to say as much. He writes that:

יְכוּן זֶה שְׂאֵמֵר (תהלים נא יד) "וְרוּחַ נְדִיבָה תִּסְמְכֵנִי" כְּלוֹמֵר תִּנְיָן  
 רוּחִי לְעֲשׂוֹת חֻפְצִי וְאֵל יִגְרְמוּ לִי חֻטְאֵי לְמַנְעֵי מִתְּשׁוּבָה אֲלֵא  
 תְּהִיָּה הַרְשׁוּת בְּיָדִי עַד שְׂאֲחֹזֵר וְאֲבִין וְאֲדַע דְּדַרְךְ הָאֲמֵת.

*"Allow my spirit to uphold me". That is allow my spirit to do your will and do not allow my sins to turn me away and prevent me from doing teshuva. Rather, let the initiative to always remain with me, for me to be able to come back and understand and know the oath of truth...*

A careful reading of the Rambam and specifically the words *מִתְשׁוּבָה לְמַנְעֵי וְאֵל יִגְרַמוּ לִי הַטָּאִי* indicates that at stake is not that HKB'H has created a blockade to teshuva but a recognition that it is man in fact who through their choices have prevented the opportunities for growth and for return.

If this understanding of the Rambam is correct how would we correlate this man centered hardening with the pesukim that indicate that it was G-d who was the *מקשה*?

Nehama Leibowitz writes the following:

'God did not force Pharaoh to choose evil. It was Pharaoh's own doing. Once he persisted in his course of action it became more and more irresistible. God had built this response, as it were, into man's make-up. The more he sins, the more his sins act as a barrier between him and repentance.'

It wasn't G-d who hardened Pharaoh's heart per se. he simply placed into man's nature that one's choices ultimately makes free choice in future decisions near impossible. While, in all honesty, this may not be the simple peshat in the pesukim, on a conceptual level I believe the point is indisputable - man is the agent for limiting his own bechirah. Furthermore, this answer would resolve the questions that the Abarbanel and others had on the Rambam.

This answer raises an enormously daunting question. Namely, if man's bechirah is limited by the decades of decisions that he/she made previously. If, like Pharaoh, a human has become entrenched in the limitations of his or her own life. If so much of one's life is determined by all of the forces that have led him to this moment including all of his previous choices, then is it truly possible for man to change? Is change possible if man is pitted against the avalanche of his entire life up until this point in time? How much freedom do we have to change course? This is a huge and daunting question.

The great social psychologist Erik Erikson, who was knowledgeable in both secular and Torah sources developed a theory that there are 8 stages of psychosocial development. Each stage has a core conflict that is at the center of that time period and the successful navigation of each conflict builds ego and psychological strength.

The seventh stage which lasts roughly between the ages of 40 and 65 is defined by the conflict between Generativity versus Stagnation which essentially is the question of whether we are thriving and contributing or somewhat stagnant and stuck? To put this conflict in the light of our discussion in the Rambam, the question is does one feel that fundamentally they are thriving or does one feel an inability to change and move beyond the limitations that previous choices have created?

The answer is of course that man can always change. The question is how. What are the mechanics of change? What can a person reasonably expect to change about their lives and what is or should be beyond their purview and scope. How is meaningful and lasting change created? The important thing is to remember that at the end of the day what the Rambam wrote is as true now as it was nine hundred years ago

*רְשׁוּת לְכָל אָדָם נְתוּנָה. אִם רָצָה לְהִטּוֹת עֲצָמוֹ לְדֶרֶךְ טוֹבָה וְלִהְיוֹת צְדִיק הָרְשׁוּת בְּיָדוֹ. וְאִם רָצָה לְהִטּוֹת עֲצָמוֹ לְדֶרֶךְ רָעָה וְלִהְיוֹת רָשָׁע הָרְשׁוּת בְּיָדוֹ.*

*Every man was endowed with a free will; if he desires to bend himself toward the good path and to be just it is within the power of his hand to reach out for it, and if he desires to bend himself to a bad path and to be wicked it is within the power of his hand to reach out for it*

Do we sometimes feel like Pharaoh (well maybe not quite like Pharaoh) backed into a corner by our own decisions? Absolutely. With that said thoughtful, sensitive, and passionate man who understands the impact of his behavior on himself and on others, who realizes that ultimate happiness lies in a G-d centered life can always find the will and the means to לחזור ולהבין ולידע דרך האמת.

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