

Lesson 14 – Freewill, Predeterminism, and Pharaoh's Stubborn Heart

Goal:

- Students will be able to explain the philosophical problem engendered by Hashem stiffening Pharaoh's heart and list three responses.
- Students will apply the lesson of the dangers of stubbornness to their own lives and to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Activity:

1. Discuss: A man meets a woman, falls in love, and they decide to marry. Is that choice predetermined or were they free to choose either way?

A woman is convinced that Macs are better than PC's. She's used a Mac all of her life, she made lots of money by buying Apple stock early, and she loves Macs so much she works pro bono in Apple's advertising department to convince everyone else to buy a Mac. One day she goes to Best Buy to buy a new laptop. She decides to buy a Mac. Was that an act of freewill or was it predetermined?

Some scientists see the world in a mechanistic way. Materialists think that all events in the world, including those in our brains, are determined by the location and momentum of all particles following the rules of physics. Other psychologists think that our actions are predictable based on our genes and our psychological states. If that is true, then is a murderer responsible for his actions?

Even if we assume that people generally have freewill and are therefore responsible for their actions, what about an action performed under torture. If a nuclear scientist is abducted by terrorists and pressured by torture to help them build a bomb that destroys a city, is the scientist responsible?

2. The topic of freewill is vast and complex. The purpose of the above discussion is not to solve all of the problems but to at least bring them up. Now students should be ready and interested in the questions posed by the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. How can Pharaoh be held responsible and punished for his refusal to let Bnei Yisrael go free if Hashem hardened his heart and removed his freewill? See what answers they come up with. Then review the following three answers offered by Hazal and the Rishonim:

A. Shemot Rabbah 13,3 explains that Hashem did remove Pharaoh's freewill, but did so only after the fifth plague. Pharaoh had freewill in the first five but then lost his right to repent as part of his punishment. Look back at the chart in the previous lesson and notice the change in verbs in the last column from Pharaoh hardening his own heart in the first five plagues (and the seventh plague), while Hashem hardens it only for the others. Rashi and Ramban follow this interpretation in their commentaries to Shemot 7:3. Rambam also interprets along these lines in *Mishneh Torah Hilchot Teshuvah* 6:3 (though he does not

distinguish between the first and last five but rather seems to think that Hashem withheld Pharaoh's freewill through all of the plagues as a punishment for torturing Israel).

B. Rabbi Yosef Albo (Spanish philosopher, 1380-1444) writes that Hashem hardened Pharaoh's heart in order to maintain his free choice, not withhold it. If Pharaoh had agreed to free Bnei Yisrael under the pain of a plague, then that would not reflect his true will based on repentance but only a decision forced by compulsion.

Have a discussion here about the ethics of using torture on criminals in order to extract a confession. Suspects will sometimes admit to a crime they did not commit just to stop the torture.

C. Rabbi Shmuel David Luzzato (a.k.a. Shadal, Italy, 1800-1865) suggests that Pharaoh maintained his free choice throughout and Hashem never intervened. The Torah, however, sometimes uses language that ascribes a human action to Hashem being that Hashem is the ultimate cause of everything.¹ The Torah, however, reserves this style to descriptions of extraordinary events. Therefore, in the first few plagues, which were relatively less impressive and harsh, Pharaoh's stubbornness is described as Pharaoh's action (8:28) or using the passive voice, "Pharaoh's heart stiffened." On the other hand, the Torah describes Pharaoh's stubbornness in the face of the later harsher plagues as Hashem's action, even though it was actually a result of Pharaoh's own free will, in order to emphasize the extraordinary degree of his obstinance.

3. Discuss which of the three responses most resonate with the students. What are the pros and cons of each answer? What are the interpretive and philosophical consequences of each position?

4. Discuss the trait of stubbornness in general. What prevents people from admitting they are wrong even in the face of clear evidence? Can you think of an example when you or someone you know prevented him/herself from making a correct decision because their judgment was clouded by their own stubbornness?

Abba Eben famously said: "Palestinians never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity." Look at the map of the UN partition plan and consider how the Palestinian would have been better off today had they accepted that plan. Their stubborn refusal to recognize a Jewish state fueled by anti-Semitism led them to attack Israel again in 1967, allowing Israel to acquire more territory and annex Jerusalem. Yassir Arafat's obstinance in agreeing to a peace negotiation has delayed the creation of a Palestinian state and caused much suffering to all, but mostly to the Palestinians themselves. Perhaps one could say here that "Hashem hardened Arafat's heart."

¹ The Rambam sets this principle in Moreh Hanevuchim 2:48 where he cites the example of Yosef who says to his brothers, "God has sent me [to Egypt]." Even though it was the brothers who maliciously sold Yosef to a caravan bound to Egypt, considering the extraordinary circumstances and outcome, Yosef attributes the event to Hashem.

וַיְחַזֵּק ה' אֶת לֵב פַּרְעֹה

1. שמות רבה פרשה יג ד"ה ג ד"א כ

ד"א כי אני הכבדתי את לבו, א"ר יוחנן מכאן פתחון פה למינין לומר לא היתה ממנו שיעשה תשובה, שנאמר כי אני הכבדתי את לבו

א"ל ר"ש בן לקיש יסתם פיהם של מיניים אלא (משלי ג: לג) אם ללצים הוא יליץ שהקב"ה מתרה בו באדם פעם ראשונה שניה ושלישית ואינו חוזר בו והוא נועל לבו מן התשובה כדי לפרוע ממנו מה שחטא, אף כך פרעה הרשע כיון ששיגר הקב"ה ה' פעמים ולא השגיח על דבריו אמר לו הקב"ה אתה הקשית ערפך והכבדת את לבך הריני מוסיף לך טומאה על טומאתך, הוי כי אני הכבדתי את לבו

Another explanation: *For I have hardened his heart* (10:1). R. Yohanan said: "Does this not provide heretics with ground for arguing that he had no means of repenting, since it says: for I have hardened his heart?"

To which R. Simeon b. Lakish replied: "Let the mouths of the heretics be stopped up. If it concerns the scorners, He scorns them (Prov. 3:34). When God warns a man once, twice, and even a third time, and he still does not repent, then God closes his heart against repentance so that He should exact vengeance from him for his sins. Thus it was with the wicked Pharaoh. Since God sent five times to him and he took no notice, God then said: 'You have stiffened your neck and hardened your heart; well, I will add to your uncleanness.'" Hence: *For I have hardened his heart*.

2. רבי יוסף אלבו, ספר העיקרים,

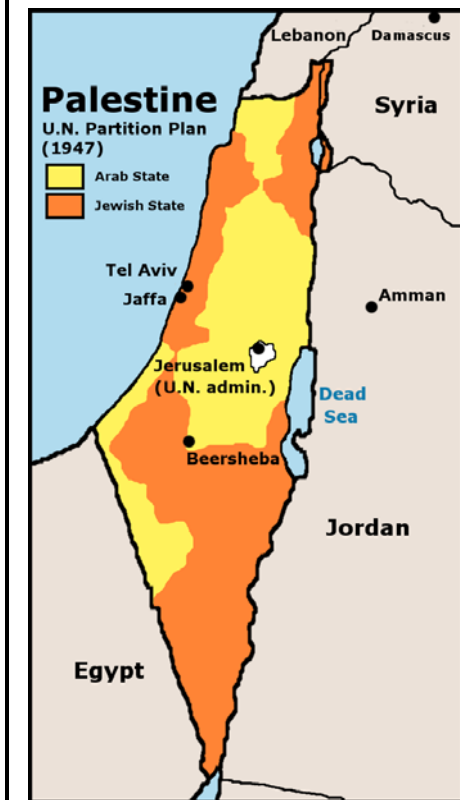
מאמר רביעי פרק כה

ועל זה הדרך יתפרש מה שנמצא בכתוב שהשם יתברך מחזק לב הרשעים או מקשה ערפם ומונע מהם דרכי התשובה, וזה שהרשע בבא עליו המכה הוא מתחסד ושב אל השם מיראת עונש המוטל עליו, כמו שאמר פרעה חטאתי הפעם ה' הצדיק וגו', ובעבור שזה הפעל דומה לאונס ואינו בחירי, הנה השם יתברך מחזק את לבו כשנותן לו צד או צדדין לתלות בהן המכה ולומר שבאה במקרה ולא על צד ההשגחה האלהית, וזה כדי שיסור מלבו המורד שקנה מחמת המכה וישאר על טבעו ובחירתו מבלי מכריח, ואז יבחן אם היתה תשובתו בחיריית, ומאשר בחירת פרעה כשסר מעליו עול המכה היתה לרע, אמר השם יתברך אני הכבדתי את לבו, כלומר כשהסירותי מלבו המורד שקנה מחמת המכה, וישאר על טבעו ובחירתו, והוא לרוע בחירתו בקש עלות ותאונות לתלות בהן ענין המכות ולומר שהיו במקרה.

3. רבי שמואל דוד לוצאטו, פירוש על שמות ז:

ואפשר לפרש כדעת רמב"ם שלא היה בזה עונש אלהי ונס ממש, אלא כי פרעה עצמו הקשה את לבו, אלא שכל המעשים ייחסו אל האל בצד מה, כי הוא הסיבה הראשונה.

ואני מוסיף כי המעשים המיוחסים בספרי הקודש אל האל הם המעשים הזרים שסיבתם בלתי מובנת לנו, וכן כאן קשי ערפו של פרעה אחרי ראותו כמה אותות ומופתים הוא דבר זר ומתמיה, על כן יוחס אל האל.



Further Reading: Nehama Leibowits, *New Studies in Shemot I*, "I will harden Pharaoh's heart," pp. 149-160.

Rabbi Yaakov Medan, "I Shall Harden Pharaoh's Heart," <http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/parsha65/14-65vaera.htm>.