



## Parashat Shemot

The Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart

By David Silverberg

Parashat Shemot introduces the story of *Benei Yisrael's* bondage in Egypt and Moshe's designation as the nation's leader and representative who would confront Pharaoh and demand the slaves' release. In this *parasha* we encounter for the first time a theme that runs consistently throughout the entire narrative of the Exodus: the concept of the "hardening" of Pharaoh's heart. In speaking to Moshe before he leaves for Egypt to confront Pharaoh, God tells the newly appointed prophet, "See all the wonders that I have placed in your hand, and perform them in Pharaoh's presence; I will harden his heart, that he will not release the nation" (4:21). Later, before the onset of the ten plagues that would befall Egypt, God similarly informs Moshe, "I will harden Pharaoh's heart, that I will make many My signs and wonders in the land of Egypt" (7:3). And we read that after the sixth plague, the plague of boils, "the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart and he did not listen to them, as the Lord had told Moshe" (9:12). The Torah makes additional references to God's "manipulation" of Pharaoh's heart on several other occasions, as well (10:1, 10:20, 10:27 and 14:4).

Writers throughout the ages have struggled to reconcile this account with the fundamental doctrine of free will, which affirms man's independent ability to choose between right and wrong. As Maimonides discusses at length both in *Mishneh Torah* (Hilkhos Teshuva, chapter 5) and *Shemona Perakim* (chapter 8), no concept of reward and punishment could be possible without the presumption of free, unrestrained human will. Yet, the Torah quite clearly indicates that God intervened in Pharaoh's decision-making faculties, injecting the Egyptian king with a sense of disobedience and obstinacy that prevented him from making the moral choice of freeing the subjugated people. God even spells out the reason for this intervention, telling Moshe, "for I have hardened his [Pharaoh's] and his servants' hearts, in order that I may place these signs [miracles] of Mine in his midst" (10:1). It appears that God intentionally hardened Pharaoh's heart and withheld free will from him in order that He may continue to cast plagues upon Egypt and thereby display His limitless power and control over nature. How could the Almighty punish a human being from whom He has withheld free choice?

Maimonides' answer to this question is perhaps the most famous of the solutions offered to this difficulty. We cite here from *Mishneh Torah* (Hilkhos Teshuva 6:3):

It is possible that a person will commit a grave sin or many sins to the point where it will be deemed appropriate by the true Judge that the retribution from this sinner for these sins that he committed willfully and intentionally is that repentance is withheld from him, and he is not given the ability to repent from his evil, so that he will die and be condemned for the sin he had committed... It therefore says in the Torah, "I will harden his [Pharaoh's] heart." Since he first sinned of his own volition and acted wickedly towards Israel who were residing in his land, as it says, "Let us deal wisely with them..." (Shemot 1:9), it was fitting that repentance be withheld from him until he is punished. The Almighty therefore hardened his heart.

Maimonides boldly asserts that the doctrine of free will is not absolute. In some situations of repeated or grave violations, God will punish the violator by denying him the wherewithal to repent. In *Shemona Perakim*, Maimonides elaborates and remarks that just as God can punish a person by

disrupting physical functions such as eyesight (as in Bereishit 19:11) and the voluntary movement of limbs (as in Melakhim I 13:4), so can He interfere with a person's mental faculties and control his decisions. Whereas generally the Almighty does not interfere and grants an individual complete authority over his decisions between right and wrong, He will intervene as a punishment for those who have sinned willfully and intentionally. Pharaoh brutally enslaved *Benei Yisrael* and even killed their children in an effort to curb their reproduction; all this he did with his power of *bechira chofshit* (free will) perfectly intact. God punished the monarch for this prolonged period of mistreatment by denying him the freedom to change his policy and emancipate the Hebrew slaves.

After positing this explanation for the "hardening" of Pharaoh's heart, Maimonides turns to the obvious question of why God repeatedly sent Moshe to demand the slaves' release if Pharaoh's refusal had already been divinely predetermined. Both in *Mishneh Torah* and *Shemona Perakim*, Maimonides answers that God sought to inform all mankind of precisely this notion – of a sinner being punished with the inability to repent. Pharaoh's persistent and inexplicable refusal to set the slaves free even after the devastation wrought by his refusal showed the world that God will occasionally deny a person the possibility of repentance.

### Other Examples

Maimonides points to other instances where we likewise find that God took away the power of free will from a person or group of people. The first is a verse in the Book of Yeshayahu (6:10), where the prophet proclaims, "The nation's heart is dull, its ears are stopped and in its eyes sealed, lest it see with its eyes, hear with its ears and understand with its heart, and repent and cure itself." According to Maimonides, this means that God "dulled" the people's hearts and shut their eyes and ears so that they would be unable to "see," "hear" or "understand." *Am Yisrael's* iniquity had reached the point where the Almighty no longer offered them the option of repentance, and He therefore manipulated their mental faculties in such a way that they could no longer change their hearts and their conduct. Maimonides also cites in this context a verse from the end of Divrei Hayamim II (36:16), where the prophet describes the reason for the Jews' exile from their land: "They would scorn God's messengers [the prophets], ridicule His words and taunt His prophets, until the Lord's rage was aroused against His people to the point where there was no cure." The point "where there was no cure" means – according to Maimonides – that God withheld from the people the possibility of repentance, effectively denying them the power of *teshuva* – the one cure that could extricate them from accountability for their misdeeds.

Similarly, we read in two places that God "hardened the hearts" or "hardened the spirits" of enemy nations so that they would attack *Benei Yisrael* (Devarim 2:30, Yehoshua 11:20). Here, too, Maimonides explains that the nations had sinned to such an extent that God denied them free will so that He could destroy them. Finally, Maimonides cites the prophet Eliyahu's exclamation to God at Mount Carmel, "Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so that this nation will know that you are the Lord God, and that You have led their hearts astray" (Melakhim I 18:37). Maimonides explains that during this time period, the reign of the infamous King Achav, the Kingdom of Israel betrayed God to such an extent that they were unable to repent, such that it was God who, in a certain sense, "led them astray."

Rabbi Meir Simcha Ha-kohen, in his *Or Samei'ach* commentary to *Mishneh Torah*, points to yet another example, from the beginning of the Book of Shemuel I (22:25). There we are told that Chofni and Pinchas, the corrupt sons of the high priest Eli, paid no heed to their father's criticism, "because the Lord wished to kill them." Rabbi Meir Simcha explains this verse on the basis of Maimonides' theory: their consistent pattern of sin and corruption had reached the point where God withheld the possibility of change so that they would deserve death. The *Or Samei'ach* also refers us in this context to a verse in the Book of Yechezkel (24:13): "Because I have purified you but you have not been purified, you will no longer be purified from your impurity, until I cast My anger upon

you." *Benei Yisrael* refused to repent when God afforded them the opportunity to do so, and they were therefore punished by losing this opportunity of *teshuva* (repentance).

## Midrashic Sources

Nachmanides, in his commentary to Parashat Vaera (7:3), accepts Maimonides' approach to understanding the "hardening" of Pharaoh's heart (though he suggests an additional explanation, as well), and cites two Midrashic passages that appear to likewise express this theory. The Midrash *Shemot Rabba* (5:6) comments that God informed Moshe ahead of time that "He would ultimately harden his [Pharaoh's] heart in order to mete out punishment against him for having subjected them to slave labor." Elsewhere in *Shemot Rabba* (13:4), the Midrash cites Rabbi Shimon Ben Lakish's comment that "once the Almighty sent to him five times, and he paid no heed to His words, the Almighty said to him: 'You stiffened your neck and hardened your heart – behold I will add impurity to your impurity!'"

Interestingly, Rabbi Menachem Kasher (*Torah Sheleima*, Shemot, chapter 1, note 103) detects an allusion to Maimonides' theory in the Pesach *Haggadah*. In the main body of the *Haggadah's* "Maggid" section, the *Haggadah* goes through the verses in the Book of Devarim (26:5-8) that tell of the Exodus in retrospect, and for each phrase the *Haggadah* cites the corresponding clause from the original account in the Book of Shemot. When it addresses the verse in Devarim (26:6), "*Va'yarei'u otanu ha-Mitzrim*" ("The Egyptians acted wickedly towards us"), the *Haggadah* cites as the corresponding clause a verse from the first chapter of Shemot (verse 10), "*Hava nitchakema lo*" ("Let us deal wisely with them..."). This verse records Pharaoh's expression of concern regarding *Benei Yisrael's* rapid procreation, and his suggestion that measures be taken to curb their growth. Many commentaries on the *Haggadah* have wondered how this verse corresponds to the phrase in Devarim, "The Egyptians acted wickedly towards us." Other verses in Parashat Shemot describe much more vividly the oppression *Benei Yisrael* suffered at the hands of the Egyptians. Why would specifically this verse, which tells of Pharaoh's initial decision to oppress *Benei Yisrael*, most accurately embody the idea that "the Egyptians acted wickedly towards us"? (One popular answer, suggested by – among others – the Tosafists, in *Hadar Zekeinim*, explains that the *Haggadah* understood the phrase, "*Vayarei'u otanu ha-Mitzrim*" to mean, "The Egyptians made us out to be evil." It thus refers not to the mistreatment of the Hebrew slaves, but rather to the unfounded suspicions about their loyalty that prompted Pharaoh – as we read in this verse in Shemot – to launch his campaign of subjugation.)

Rabbi Kasher suggested that in light of Maimonides' theory, the answer becomes clear. According to Maimonides, Pharaoh was held accountable only for the initial stages of his subjugation of *Benei Yisrael*. He eventually reached the point where his free will was taken from him, such that he no longer acted freely. Therefore, in searching for a verse in the Book of Shemot that corresponds with the description in Devarim of the Egyptians "acting wickedly," the *Haggadah* selected this verse, which tells of Pharaoh's initial decision to enslave the foreign nation. Only this stage could be seen as expression of the Egyptians' "wicked" behavior, since thereafter Pharaoh and his people acted without free will, which God had denied them as part of the punishment for their crimes.

## Abarbanel's Objection

Don Isaac Abarbanel, in his commentary to Parashat Vaera (chapter 7), cites and rejects Maimonides' theory in explaining the "hardening" of Pharaoh's heart. Abarbanel's primary challenge comes from the instances recorded in Tanakh of even the most grievous sinners repenting and earning divine grace. Abarbanel points specifically to the wicked King Achav's humble and submissive response to the prophet's condemnation, on account of which God delayed his punishment (Melakhim I, end of chapter 21). Additionally, as recorded in Divrei Hayamim II

(33:12-13), the sinful King Menashe prayed to God from captivity in Babylonia, and God responded favorably and had him returned to Jerusalem. Abarbanel argues that if even these two kings, who are described as the most sinful of all kings and whom the Mishna (Sanhedrin 90a) condemns to eternal damnation, were allowed the opportunity to repent, then certainly no other sinner would be denied this privilege. In fact, Abarbanel notes, Maimonides himself, when he lists the sins on account of which one forfeits his share in the world to come (Hilkhos Teshuva 4:6), makes an exception for those who repent. Even the most grievous crimes lend themselves to expiation through the process of repentance, and it thus seems inconceivable that God would deny a sinner the opportunity to perform *teshuva* and earn forgiveness.

Abarbanel acknowledges Maimonides' attempt to address this question, in his treatment of this issue in *Shemona Perakim*. Maimonides there writes that it is futile to begin questioning or inquiring as to God's system in determining from whom He withholds free will and from whom He does not. Just as the limited human mind is incapable of understanding why God created certain objects in one form and others in a different form, Maimonides asserts, so will we never fully comprehend how God chooses the punishments that He does for violators. Certain transgressions are punished with suffering in this world and others in the next; likewise, God exacts retribution from some sinners through physical ailments, and others through the inability to repent. These questions, Maimonides claims, should not be asked, because they are simply unanswerable within the framework of the natural human condition. Abarbanel cites Maimonides' answer and remarks, "But all this is worth nothing to me, for we see with our own eyes that the analogy is not parallel to the topic under discussion." In Abarbanel's view, one cannot compare the mysterious intricacies of the natural world, which undoubtedly remain beyond the grasp of the human intellect, with the basic system of divine retribution. He contends that were it to be true that God punishes grievous or continuous sin by withholding free will, the general contours of this system should be more transparent, and it should be more obvious which particular sins bring on such punishment.

Maimonides, of course, could easily respond that even regardless of this issue, God's system of reward and retribution lies beyond human comprehension. The phenomenon of prosperous evildoers and suffering men of virtue has mystified thinkers of every faith in every generation, and ultimately the reasons behind divine judgment remain off-limits to the human mind. If we are willing to accept the seeming inconsistencies of divine judgment and trust that God rewards and punishes justly regardless of the practical manifestation of His judgment, then we can likewise trust that He, in His infinite wisdom, can accurately and justly determine that Pharaoh no longer deserved the privilege of repentance, whereas King Achav did.

## **A Just System?**

That said, one may nevertheless question the fairness of this system, which allows for the possibility of the suspension of a sinner's free will. After all, the concept of *teshuva* operates as an integral part of the divine system of reward and punishment. Divine judgment takes into account a sinner's feelings of remorse and his efforts to improve. Why should a violator be denied recourse to these assets? If a person's merits and demerits are calculated with the consideration of his *teshuva* efforts, every person should, seemingly, be granted access to this "clause" in the book of divine judgment.

This question was addressed by Rabbi Meir Michel, a great-great-nephew of the Gaon of Vilna, in his work *Ha'me'ir Le'olam* (*derush* 3), where he suggests an explanation by reexamining the nature of repentance. The Mishna in *Pirkei Avot* (4:11) describes *teshuva* as "a shield against catastrophe." Rabbi Meir Michel argues that just as a shield protects one from harm but does not eliminate the enemy, so does *teshuva* help a violator avoid punishment without erasing his debt altogether. Strictly speaking, even a repentant sinner is still deserving of punishment; after all, prior misdeeds cannot simply vanish. Repentance works merely to arouse divine compassion which suspends the implementation of the decreed sentence. Through sincere repentance and prayer, a

violator can appeal to God's attribute of mercy and compassion, and thereby escape punishment despite his sin.

In light of this perspective on repentance, Rabbi Meir Michel explains Maimonides' theory concerning the possible suspension of repentance. *Teshuva* is not an integral component within the essential structure of divine retribution. To the contrary, it operates only as a "shield," whereby one can protect himself from the punishment decreed upon him through the system of retribution. Therefore, if one commits a particularly grievous sin, or persistently repeats his sin and shows no signs remorse or compunction, God understandably will not show the type of compassion with which He responds to penitent sinners generally. A persistent sinner or violator of a grave misdeed loses recourse to *teshuva* because God no longer has any interest in showing pity or compassion to such an individual.

We might add a slightly different explanation for the justness of this system as developed by Maimonides. The institution of *teshuva*, integral as it is to Jewish faith, could, potentially, be abused by prospective sinners. The prospect of *teshuva* as a means of escaping punishment, the knowledge that God's compassion can be aroused after the fact and excuse a violation, could diminish somewhat from the deterring force of divine retribution. The flexibility of the system of reward and punishment that results from the availability of *teshuva* must be restricted in order for the prospect of punishment to deter potential violators. This concern, perhaps, explains the possibility of the suspension of *bechira chofshit* in the cases discussed by Maimonides. We must be aware that God will not always respond favorably to our appeals for compassion, that not every crime or series of crimes is forgivable. This awareness is necessary to preserve the integrity of the system of divine retribution, which helps enforce compliance with God's laws.

Thus, the denial of the possibility of *teshuva* is an inherent limitation within the very institution of *teshuva*, a limitation necessary to guarantee that the prospect of repentance will not erode the deterrent effect of divine retribution.