



In the sixth chapter of *Hilkhot Teshuva* (*halakha* 3; see also *Shemona Perakim*, chapter 8), Maimonides presents his famous and controversial theory concerning the "hardening of Pharaoh's heart" of which the Torah speaks on several occasions throughout the Exodus narrative. According to Maimonides, despite the centrality of *bechira chofshit*, free will, within Jewish theology, nevertheless, God will, in rare instances, deny a person his free will: "It is possible for a person to commit a grave sin or many sins to the point where the judgment passes before the True Judge that the punishment for this sinner...is that repentance is withheld from him, and he is not allowed to repent from his iniquity." Certain sins, Maimonides claims, are punishable through the inability to repent, the denial of free will. Pharaoh had committed such grievous sins against *Benei Yisrael* that God denied him the wherewithal to repent.

Later in this passage, Maimonides addresses the question of why, if Pharaoh had no possibility of repenting, God repeatedly sent Moshe to demand the release of the Hebrew slaves. If Pharaoh had already lost control of his senses, and was no longer capable of ending his crimes against *Benei Yisrael*, Moshe's ongoing demands appear futile. Maimonides explains that God sought to publicize this very precept, that He will, at times, withhold from a sinner his ability to repent in situations of multiple or particularly grievous offenses. By bringing plague after plague upon Egypt, after which Pharaoh continually refused to release the slaves, God demonstrated the power He has over free will, a power that He exerts in rare instances such as in the case of Pharaoh.

In this vein, Maimonides would likely interpret the opening verse of Parashat Bo, where God commands Moshe, "Come to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants..." Moshe was to go to the Egyptian king and demand the release of the slaves specifically because "I have hardened his heart," and God wishes to demonstrate to the world what can happen when God interferes with human free will.

Later in this chapter in *Hilkhot Teshuva* (6:4), Maimonides seeks to explain a number of verses from the Book of Tehillim as expressing David's wish to avoid this form of retribution. For example, twice in Tehillim (27:11, 86:11) David pleads, "*Horeini Hashem darkekha*" – "Show me, O Lord, Your way." According to Maimonides, David here asks that his sins not prevent him from returning to the "way" of righteous conduct. Similarly, in the Psalm composed after the incident with Batsheva (51), David cries (verse 14), "*ve-ru'ach nediva tismekheini*" ("sustain me with a generous

spirit"). Maimonides explains this petition to mean, "Allow my spirit to perform Your will, and let my sins not cause me to be denied repentance."

The obvious question arises, did David really fear that he perhaps transgressed a sin of such a severe nature that warranted such drastic means of retribution? Did he suspect that God placed him in the category of Pharaoh and the other sinners whose crimes were so grievous or so numerous that they were denied the possibility of repentance?

Rabbi Avraham Gurwitz, in his work on *Hilkhot Teshuva* entitled *Or Avraham* (Jerusalem, 5743), suggests that the principle Maimonides establishes here affects our perspective on all transgressions, and not merely those of the severity of Pharaoh's cruelty. According to Maimonides, any violation of God's will yields some effect on a person's soul; even the "lightest" transgression leaves its mark and imprint on one's character. The story of Pharaoh serves as a rare, extreme case of a far more common phenomenon: the corrosive effects of sin on a person's spiritual being. In the most extreme cases, such as that of Pharaoh, the individual is denied the possibility of *teshuva* altogether. More commonly, however – and this is what concerned David – misdeeds have a way of triggering a process of steady spiritual deterioration; each wrongful act makes it more difficult for the perpetrator to find his way to spiritual perfection. David did not fear suffering the same fate as Pharaoh, but he was concerned about the obstacles he created as a result of his wrongdoing.

If so, then we can perhaps understand more clearly why Maimonides afforded such great importance to this theory, to the point where in his view, God repeatedly sent Moshe to Pharaoh specifically to deliver this message, of the possibility of a sinner being denied *teshuva*. Although these cases are rare, they serve as a paradigm for the general notion of the spiritual effects of sin, for the increased difficulty in repenting that results from each misdeed. Like King David, then, every sinner must implore the Almighty to "sustain" him "with a generous spirit," to ensure that his spirit remains intact even after being tarnished by sin.