



## Controlling Others, Controlling Ourselves By Rabbi David Silverberg

Parashat Shemot begins the story of *yetzi'at Mitzrayim*, the process of *Benei Yisrael's* liberation from enslavement to Pharaoh. Already from the outset, God foresaw that Pharaoh would stubbornly reject His demands for the slaves' release – and that God would actually ensure Pharaoh's defiance. God told Moshe even before he went to Egypt to demand *Benei Yisrael's* release, "*Ve-ani achazek et libo*" – "I shall strengthen his heart" (4:21). It seems that God intervened in Pharaoh's decision-making process, denying him the ability to make the rational and moral choice of setting *Benei Yisrael* free.

In among the more famous passages in his *Mishneh Torah* (Hilkhos Teshuva, chapter 6), Maimonides addresses the obvious theological question that naturally arises from God's interference with Pharaoh's ability to chart his own course. Man's freedom to choose between good and evil constitutes among the fundamental bases of faith, as it is necessitated by the doctrine of human accountability. Moreover, God continued to visit calamities upon Pharaoh in punishment for his defiance, despite the fact that, by God's own admission, as it were, Pharaoh was forced to choose as he did. Maimonides resolves this question by boldly asserting that while free choice is a fundamental aspect of the human condition, people can forfeit their right to it. He writes:

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.

Pharaoh's ruthless crimes against the Israelites rendered him worthy of the ultimate punishment – the inability to choose between right and wrong. He subjugated and oppressed *Benei Yisrael* voluntarily, with independent free will, and for this he was punished with the loss of the ability to make moral choices.

It is perhaps significant that Pharaoh is the first and most famous sinner to have been punished in this way. As *Chazal* describe in numerous passages, Pharaoh's cruelty stemmed from megalomaniacal delusions of divine authority. He saw himself as a kind of divine power who was rightfully entitled to exert full control over his subjects without restraint. In his mind, the entire kingdom was his property and under his absolute

control. Just as a person can eat the food on his plate any way he wishes, Pharaoh figured, so he could use or abuse his subjects as he saw fit, and as it suited his needs.

Appropriately, God punished Pharaoh for his exertion of absolute control by denying him the most basic, elementary kind of control that is normally endowed to every human being. Even the poorest of people enjoy control over their own decisions, and have the ability to choose good over evil. Control over oneself is the single form of control that God grants to all people. But God demonstrated to Pharaoh that not only does he not have independent control over his kingdom – he does not even enjoy autonomy over himself. Even his control over his decision-making faculties is a gift endowed by the Creator, the only Being who truly exerts control. Pharaoh thought he could exercise control over the entire ancient world, and in the end was unable to exercise control even over himself.

“Who is mighty? He who restrains his inclination” (Avot 4:1). We all seek to control the things that happen around us, but ultimately, the only thing we should ensure to fully control, which might also be the most difficult thing to control, is ourselves. Our efforts should be focused upon being our own masters, rather than masters over the people around us. It is all too easy to allow ourselves to fall under the control of natural human instinct, rather than to bring those instincts under our control. We have all been endowed with the gift of free will, and it behooves us to make use of this power, rather than allow our impulses make our choices for us.

(See Rabbi Michael Hattin’s discussion of Maimonides’ comments at <http://vbm-torah.org/archive/intparsha/shemot/14-61vaera.doc>)