

Flip-Flopping

We all get criticized for “flip-flopping.” I know I have. Yet this is precisely what Pharaoh does in this week’s portion. On multiple occasions, beginning with the plague of frogs, he says ¹העתירו אל ה, “plead before G-d,” to let the plague end. Yet when it does end, at first he hardens his heart ²והכבד את לבו whereas later on his heart his hardened for him by G-d ³ויחזק ה את לב פרעה. Why can’t Pharaoh just stay the course and allow Israel to go? Wouldn’t this have made his life far less complicated?

At the end of Parshat Vaera, Pharaoh says one of my favorite lines: ⁴חטאתי הפעם, ה הוא הצדיק ואני ועמי הרשעים, “I have truly sinned this time! G-d is the righteous one and I and my people are the wicked ones.” He begs Moses for an end to the hail. Moses intercedes with G-d causing the hail to end and the rest is the familiar story that you know: “When

¹ Exodus 8:4

² Exodus 8:11

³ Exodus 9:12

⁴ Exodus 9:27

Pharaoh saw that the rain and hail and thunder had ceased, he became stubborn and reverted to his guilty ways.”⁵

Why is Pharaoh flip-flopping, saying that Israel can go and then changing his mind? Why couldn't he have just let Israel go the first time? What's he afraid of? Why after saying that he'd let Israel go does he relent again and again and again? Is this struggle unique to him or one that each of us shares?

Rashi comments that the hardening of Pharaoh's heart in the final five plagues is a punishment for the first five, where Pharaoh's own obstinacy is what led him to refuse to let Israel go.⁶ Sforno however offer the opposite interpretation: G-d hardened Pharaoh's heart to restore his free will. After all, the plagues devastating Egypt put Pharaoh under overwhelming pressure to let Israel go. Had he done so, it would not have been out of free will but rather under *force majeure*. G-d therefore

⁵ Exodus 9:34

⁶ Rashi on Exodus 7:3 ד"ה ואני אקשה. In Rabbi Jonathan Sacks *Covenant and Conversation: Exodus* (New Milford, CT: Maggid Books, 2010), p. 49.

toughened and strengthened Pharaoh's heart so even after the first five plagues he was still genuinely free to say yes or no.⁷

Seforno's interpretation intrigues me because if Pharaoh really had free will, why in his right mind would he continue to say no to letting Israel go? Was he just "prisoner of the moment," automatically resisting as soon as there was no plague afflicting Egypt? Was he so dependent on a free, corvee labor force that he couldn't put his money where his mouth was and risk Israel's departure? We often say in life "better the devil you know than the devil you don't." Perhaps the uncertainty regarding Pharaoh's release of Israel was a strong enough fear to trigger him breaking his word time after time and causing Israel to be forced to stay.

Rabbi Shai Held writes in his new book *The Heart of Torah* that "most of us are not Pharaoh; even if in certain situations change becomes impossible, it is nevertheless crucial to emphasize that such cases are extremely rare. Most of us are faced with the daily struggle of

⁷ Seforno on Exodus 7:3 ד"ה ואני אקשה. In Rabbi Jonathan Sacks *Covenant and Conversation: Exodus* (New Milford, CT: Maggid Books, 2010), p. 49.

exercising our freedom in the midst of very real limitations, not least the limitations we ourselves have created.”⁸ I read Rabbi Held as saying that often we resist change because we will need to transcend what we perceive to be our limits. As we know from Sir Isaac Newton’s third law of physics, every action has an equal and opposite reaction. We can exercise our freedom but how will that choice impact our reality?

As counterintuitive as this might sound, I am much more sympathetic to Pharaoh as I get older. I recognize how easy it is to make promises and then retract them as well as how we might feel one thing at a moment of pressing urgency and another when that urgent matter has abated. Thank G-d no one has forced us into slavery or taken away our free will yet in different ways we can feel a similar tension to that of Pharaoh keeping his people free from plague yet concurrently not wanting to let go of his labor force.

Today we are honoring CPAs who have been very hard at work with new tax legislation, trying to advise their clients as best as possible

⁸ Rabbi Shai Held, *The Heart of Torah Volume 1: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion-Genesis and Exodus* (Philadelphia: JPS, 2017), p. 143.

while becoming abreast of the frenetic changes that they will need to implement. We honor them not only for sponsoring today's Kiddush but more importantly for their hard work and dedication in a challenging profession, as well as for their devotion to the Jericho Jewish Center. We are so proud of the work that they do for JJC, especially our President Richard Cepler, our Immediate Past President Martha Perlson and our Chairman of the Board and fellow Past President Jay Kaplan. Thank you to all our CPAs for being who you are and for leading our congregation forward with strength.