

א ביסל תורה!

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ה' שבט תשפ"ו · בא

Don't We Have Free Will?

By Theo Fraenkel '28

In Parshat במדבר, Hashem commands Moses to go to Pharaoh and ask him to let the Jews go worship Hashem in the wilderness. In doing so He says that He has "הכבדתך" "את לפָנֶיךָ וְאַתָּה לְבָבֶיךָ לְמַעַן שְׁתִּי אֶתְתִּי אֶלְהָה בְּקָרְבָּךְ" "I hardened [Pharaoh's] heart and the hearts of his courtiers, in order that I may display these My signs among them" (שמות יא:ג). This is odd as we generally believe that people have free will to think and act as they choose. However, here it seems that Hashem is controlling Pharaoh's emotions and feelings. Why did Hashem do this? Don't humans have free will?

According to the Rambam, when someone frequently or egregiously sins, once they reach a certain point Hashem holds back their ability to repent (הלכות תשובה וג). The Rambam learns this from a פסוק in השׁמַן לְבָבֵךְ הַעַם הַזֶּה וְאַתָּנִי הַכְּבָד וְעַנְנִי הַשְׁעָר פָּנָן יְרָאָה: "ישעיהו: "Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and smear over their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and return, and be healed" (ישעיהו יז). The Rambam says that Pharaoh had done such evil to the Jewish people that he no longer deserved the ability to do תשובה. Hashem does this so that Pharaoh can experience the full punishment for his actions. So in reality 'hardening Pharaoh's heart' means that Hashem took תשובה, not necessarily free will.

However, the idea that תשובה can be taken away is strange to us, as we know "כִּי קָרוֹב אֵלֶיךָ הַדָּבָר מִאֵד בְּפִיךָ" "the thing [תשובה] is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it" (דברים יג:ג) addresses this concern by saying that תשובה can only be taken away if a person is warned of his sins three times. In the case of Pharaoh, one can not say that he was deprived of the ability to repent, as Moses went to him five times asking him to change his ways and policies regarding the Jewish people.

ספורנו provides an alternative answer, that the object of Pharaoh's heart being hardened is not to add to his punishment. Rather, it is to prevent him from repenting for the wrong reasons. Before this point, if Pharaoh had given in and let the Jewish people go, it would have been for the genuine reason that he came to know the true Hashem as the true G-d. Now, as the plagues intensify, Pharaoh is likely to let the Jewish people go, but not because he fears G-d. Instead he would let them go to end the suffering caused by the plagues. By hardening Pharaoh's heart Hashem can prevent him from repenting with the sole aim of ending the suffering. A proof for this is how Pharaoh's servants react to Moses telling him about the plague of ארבה. They tell him to submit to Moses's requests in order to avert the suffering the plagues will cause. As for why Hashem would want the plagues to continue, most opinions agree that it was to show Hashem's might and strength, so that perhaps some Egyptians would be inspired to fear G-d and that Jews should

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tell their children. As the passuk states, “לְמַעַן תִּסְפֶּר בְּאֹזֶן בָּנֶךָ וּבָנֶיךָ” “that you may recount in the hearing of your child and of your child’s child” (שְׁמֹות י:א)

We should not take for granted that Hashem gave us the ability to repent as according to the רַמְבָ"ס and מַדְרָשָׁה, פָּרָעָה’s ability to do תשובה was taken away. Although we hopefully will never get to the level of רַשְׁעָה, we should be aware of our actions and realize when we need to do תשובה.

The Last Three Plagues

By Dean Schreiber '28

In this week's פָּרָשָׁה, the תורה discusses the last three מִכְוָתָה which were considered the most devastating ones and were also the מִכְוָתָה that lead to the Jews being freed. These last three (Locusts, Darkness, and the Death of the Firstborns) were the מִכְוָתָה that caused the stubbornness of פָּרָעָה to finally break, indicating the strength of them.

The plague of Locusts came after the plague of Hail, which damaged Egypt a lot but not fully. When this plague came in, the locusts swarmed everything eating all types of crops and seeds. Now, when Egypt had no seeds, this meant they were not able to grow more plants, making food basically impossible to get. This means that this plague was not just a warning, it was weakening Egypt by making them helpless. It was so intense that officials of פָּרָעָה begged him to let the Jews free in advance of the plague, which he refused to do.

The next plague, Darkness, was very terrifying; The Egyptians were stuck unable to move or see for days

which was very frightening for them. This plague was not random, it was an attack against Egypt's most powerful god: Ra, the sun god. The Darkness showed that Ra was powerless, and the claim of פָּרָעָה that he had divine power among the gods was disproved. It also made it impossible for the Egyptians to help each other: mothers could not help their babies; they were left suffering alone for days. The Darkness shows פָּרָעָה that even with his power, he could not compete with Hashem.

The next plague, the Death of the Firstborns, was the breaking point of פָּרָעָה. This plague was a bit different from the rest, because פָּרָעָה was told exactly what would happen that night, making him very anxious and building up his fear. This plague was very symbolic: the firstborn is the authority; this plague shows that his authority over the Jews has been taken away.

In the end, these three plagues were the ones that showed פָּרָעָה that it is over and forced his stubbornness to break and resulted in him begging משה for mercy. The plagues which this פָּרָשָׁה include are not merely meant to prove that Hashem exists. They directly affect the life of the Egyptians and preclude them from living a sustainable life. This demonstration of Hashem's Ultimate Strength is successful, as פָּרָעָה lets the Jews go.



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