

## Did Pharaoh Have Free Will?

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Our Torah Portion this week, part of the Exodus story, starts out saying, "Then God said to Moses, 'Go to Pharaoh. For I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his courtiers, in order that I may display these My signs among them.' "

What does it mean that God hardened Pharaoh's heart? The phrase "hardening one's heart" is seen in this story nearly 20 times.

If we look back to last week's Torah portion, with the first five plagues, Pharaoh hardened his own heart. Now, God is hardening Pharaoh's heart.

This has different implications. If God hardened Pharaoh's heart, does that mean he stopped having free will? If he didn't have free will, is it Pharaoh's fault that he didn't let the Israelites go during the later plagues?

These are questions that our commentators ask. Just like when I read it and did a bit of a double take, so too do our commentators. Our God is supposed to be a God of free will, a God of justice. However, in this very verse, it says that God hardens Pharaoh's heart and then is going to display God's signs, or plagues, essentially punishing Pharaoh for God hardening his heart.[1]

The commentators then go and try to answer this question, and many of them come to the same conclusion.

Pharaoh had multiple occasions to use his free will for good. For the first five plagues, God did not intervene; it was Pharaoh that hardened his own heart. He was warned of the next plague and still did not change his mind. Only after this cycle happened five times did God step in and harden Pharaoh's heart.[2]

Pharaoh was already a sinner, already known to do evil, so he had forfeited his right to do *teshuva*. Therefore, he would always be a sinner no matter what God did. He showed his cards earlier when he tried to kill all the male Hebrew babies and the way that he had been treating the Hebrew slaves. This means that he no longer had the right to his free will. He was judged according to his past actions.[3]

In Pirkei Avot 4:2, it says "מִצְוָה גּוֹרֶרֶת מִצְוָה, וְעִבְרָה גּוֹרֶרֶת עִבְרָה", a commandment leads to another commandment and a sin leads to another sin. I don't know about you, but this was a song I have sung 1,000 times at camp and never really spent the time thinking about its meaning. When you do a good deed, it leads to another good deed; but when you do something bad, it leads to another thing that is bad.

The Tur HaAroch uses this logic to explain why Pharaoh does not have the option of doing *teshuva*. He has a character flaw where he is a sinner, and he is punished for that flaw.[4]

Today, I taught a class on Aaron, Moses's brother, and how he was a pursuer of peace. Maimonides tells a story that even when Aaron was told someone was bad, he approached first with peace in a friendly manner. The person would be embarrassed and say that if Aaron thinks I am good, I should prove him right and be good.[5]

Aaron seems to be the opposite of Pharaoh. He is perpetually good. He approaches everyone with a smile; and according to Pirkei Avot, everyone should "be like the students of Aaron, love peace and pursue peace." [6]

In our class, we talked about how it is important to interact with someone in a kind manner. Even if the other person might be bad, if we approach them with kindness, it is more likely to end in kindness. If we approach with malicious intent, the outcome is going to be negative.

One commentator saw God hardening Pharaoh's heart in a completely different way. In *Sefer Halkkarim*, author Joseph Albo explained that God hardened Pharaoh's heart to counteract the softening effect of the plagues, giving him his normal free will. God didn't want Pharaoh to give up just because of the plagues, God wanted Pharaoh to let the Hebrews go because he wanted to.

This explanation still shows Pharaoh as evil since he made all the decisions with free will, but it also acknowledges that when Pharaoh chose to let the Hebrews go, he chose out of his own free will so his repentance was truthful. [7]

So, back to this question: If God hardened Pharaoh's heart, does that mean he stopped having free will? I don't know if we will ever have an exact answer. Our commentators found a way around it, saying that Pharaoh was inherently evil or that the hardening of the heart actually led to free will.

I think the better question is: What can we learn from this story? For me, it is to not be like Pharaoh but rather be like Aaron.

In the Exodus story, Pharaoh is perceived as the epitome of evil. He is seen as the villain in the story and is punished accordingly. On the other hand, Aaron is seen as one of the heroes in our story, and the community mourns for him when he dies.

Like I told my students today, I hope we can be more like Aaron, show kindness to those around us, approach others with a smile and, ultimately, be a pursuer of peace.

[1] Ibn Ezra on Exodus 7:3:1

[2] Ramban on Exodus 7:3:1

[3] Rabbeinu Bahya, Shemot 7:3:1-4, Ramban on Exodus 7:3:1

[4] Tur HaArokh, Exodus 7:3:1

[5] Rambam on Avot 1:12

[6] Avot 1:12

[7] Sefer Halkkarim, Maamar 4 25:9