

Do We Have Free Will? (part 2)

Parashat Bo



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Last week we concluded the weekly Torah portion with a thought-provoking question: What happened to Pharaoh's freedom of choice?

We talked about how each person has the power and the ability to choose whether or not to follow God's path. Free will is a gift from God; we've backed this up with several verses such as:

*...I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live... –
Deuteronomy 30:19b [NIV]*

God says "choose life" which means that God places the option in our hands.

We believe that sin, with all that this implies, is our choice. Yes, God has given us the possibility to sin, but we emphasized the fact that He also gave us the opportunity to choose what is right and holy.

Did Pharaoh Have Free Will? Do We?

The theological challenge stands out immediately at the beginning of our parasha:

Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Go to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his officials so that I may perform these signs of mine among them...’ – Exodus 10:1 [NIV]

Let’s focus on Pharaoh – how did God harden his heart without harming his right to free will?

God is omnipotent and human beings clearly are not. However, when a person thinks he is limitless and free of accountability, it usually results in hurting others.

History has known many such great and powerful leaders, who have hurt and destroyed millions of people.

In Egypt, Pharaoh was like a god. The pharaohs were part of the pantheon of Egypt, he was omnipotent, no one could criticize him, and no one could tell him what to do.

Pharaoh was revered as a god, and as such he was full of self-importance. It was his pride that eventually led to his downfall, and all of Egypt with him.

It was inconceivable that Moses would come, declare that he was a priest of God, and demand that the nation of slaves be released.

In fact Moses, acting on God’s orders, didn’t ask Pharaoh to release His people outright. Instead, he was instructed to say that God happened to be revealed to him, and that He asked the Israelites to go to the desert for three days in order to worship God. The intention was for this request to seem fishy, like it was a trick.

The elders of Israel will listen to you. Then you and the elders are to go to the king of Egypt and say to him, ‘The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us. Let us take a three-day journey into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to the Lord our God.’ But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless a mighty

hand compels him. – Exodus 3:18,19 [NIV]

Pharaoh sensed that Moses wanted to free the people of Israel. He also felt that Moses was lying to him by insisting that the trip would only be three days in the desert.

At first, Pharaoh didn't even listen to Moses, because God allowed the magicians of Egypt to perform the same miracles as him. In other words, Pharaoh simply viewed Moses as a very talented illusionist.

Pharaoh's Negotiations With Moses

When Pharaoh finally started listening, he tried to enter into negotiations with Moses regarding the terms of the deal: If they claim that they are going to worship God – then who is allowed to go? When will the trip take place and for how long? What will remain as a guarantee of their return? Pharaoh was testing out the situation.

Pharaoh's first proposal was for Moses to remain in Egypt and simply take leave in order so that they could worship God. However, Moses rejected this offer.

Pharaoh's second proposal came when the threat of locusts loomed over him, when he was under heavy pressure from his advisers, whose spirit was broken by the plagues that Egypt had suffered until then:

Then Moses and Aaron were brought back to Pharaoh. 'Go, worship the Lord your God,' he said. 'But tell me who will be going.' – Exodus 10:8 [NIV]

Pharaoh continued the negotiation. His previous proposal was rejected and he must make concessions with Moses. So he asked, "If I let you go, who will be going?"

Moses answered, 'We will go with our young and our old, with our sons and our daughters, and with our flocks and herds, because we are to celebrate a festival to the Lord.' – Exodus 10:9 [NIV]

Before Moses and Aaron were driven out of Pharaoh's presence, Pharaoh answered: 'No! Have only the men go and worship the Lord, since that's what you have been asking for...' – Exodus 10:11a [NIV]

Pharaoh was trying to play a psychological game with Moses. Moses demanded that all the people, including their belongings, go out to worship God. Pharaoh sensed that this was a trick, and suggested that only the men go and worship the Lord. Pharaoh was hoping that Moses would give in and agree to some kind of deal.

Pharaoh's offer was relatively fair, he was willing to send all the men to go worship the Lord. However, Moses cannot accept this offer.

After the plague of darkness, the desperate Pharaoh called Moses and laid out before him his latest offer:

Go, worship the Lord. Even your women and children may go with you; only leave your flocks and herds behind. – Exodus 10:24b [NIV]

Pharaoh was basically saying that if this was some sort of holiday, then take the whole family and the children too, but leave most of your livestock behind as a deposit to guarantee your return.

Moses answered Pharaoh with complete confidence:

Our livestock too must go with us; not a hoof is to be left behind. We have to use some of them in worshiping the Lord our God... – Exodus 10:26a [NIV]

Moses could have continued negotiating how much livestock to leave behind, how much to take to worship God, what percentages – all of the small details. Indeed, Pharaoh was already agreeing to send all the people of Israel.

Instead of focusing on the little details, Moses said the following:

...and until we get there we will not know what we are to use to worship the Lord. – Exodus 10:26b [NIV]

Moses was saying to Pharaoh, “I can’t leave anything here, because I don’t know what God wants, so I’m taking everything, just to be on the safe side.” Moses was speaking with honesty and sincerity, but to Pharaoh’s ears his words sounded like the most blatant lie he uttered so far. How did Moses not know? What kind of high priest doesn’t know how to worship his God?

Pharaoh was now convinced that Moses’ intentions were crooked, that he did not intend to worship his God. His plan was to run away with the people of Israel.

Let’s try to look at things from Pharaoh’s point of view: he has given up everything, he was willing to let the people go. The fact that Moses was not willing to leave a guarantee, that he as a priest didn’t even know how to worship his God, clearly showed that the people of Israel had no intention of worshipping their God. They were merely planning their escape.

These points are what hardened Pharaoh’s heart.

My argument is that Pharaoh had complete free will. When God hardened Pharaoh’s heart, he did not do this arbitrarily or in a supernatural way. Rather, He used Moses as well as a few psychological tricks to accomplish this. He caused Pharaoh to become suspicious and cautious.

Pharaoh’s problem was that he saw himself as a god, as a supreme ruler, and he was not used to losing in negotiations. It was beneath his dignity and status. Here we can refer to the familiar verse:

*Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall. –
Proverbs 16:18 [NIV]*

When we try to be like Superman, strong and independent, we usually fail. The desire to be independent is with us from birth, and it is a healthy desire, as long as it does not become an obsession and we are able to maintain balance in life.

It’s good to be self-sufficient, but it is crucial to remember that we have parents, family, friends, and a community, we are not alone. We live on a two-way street of give and take. If we build others up, then they will build you up, if we invest in others, then they will invest in you.

Pharaoh learned only how to take, he did not know how to give and especially how to give up, and that is what pushed the Egyptian army into

the Red Sea in the end.

Don't Hide the Light Inside of You

Before we finish, I want to add a final thought about this week's portion from a slightly different direction.

Before Moses was known as "Our Rabbi Moses", he had a stuttering problem and was tasked with the job of encouraging a nation of slaves to lift their heads and prepare to be free.

In addition, he had to stand before the strongest and cruelest king in the world and negotiate freedom for his people.

Moses had a stutter, but despite this, God used him to stand before Pharaoh, the supreme ruler, and lead the people of Israel to freedom. God used him to speak to the entire nation of Israel as well as to teach the Torah to them for 40 years in the desert.

God can use us all as well. We may also "stutter" in many aspects of our lives, but each one of us is called to be a leader and a teacher in his or her surroundings, family, and workplace.

God looks at what is inside of us, at what cannot be faked, at our renewed lives in Yeshua, who transforms us into the light of the world. It's best not to give in to our "stuttering", but rather to let the light of Yeshua shine from inside of us, from our lives, and from our families.

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