

Do We Have Free Will?

Parashat Vayeira



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Passover is one of the main feasts in The Scriptures due to its motif of redemption, salvation, and the creation of God's people. Passover is the connection between God and a nation, "...you will be my people, and I will be your God." On Passover we drink four cups of wine which describe and represent the four stages of redemption from Egypt. This is based on the first verses from this week's Torah portion:

...I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God... – Exodus 6:6b, 7a [NIV]

From being a nation of slaves without any natural chance of attaining freedom, we became a nation that bears the banner of faith throughout the ages. During the Lord's Supper, I believe that Yeshua took the third cup, the one called "Redemption" and said, "This is me, I am the Redemption." The

Lord's Supper is based on the redemption of Yeshua the Messiah, who brings us out of slavery to sin and redeems us with His blood.

I'd like to share a thought regarding the ten plagues that started in Parashat Vayeira. We understand from the portion that after the plagues occurred, Egypt changed drastically. It was no longer a place of refuge in the event of a famine. In fact, post-plague Egypt was a broken country.

I think that 99% of all commentators have tried to find the answer to the following question: Why was there a need for ten plagues, instead of one particularly devastating plague, in order to set the people of Israel free? The answer that the Torah offers is:

... That you may tell your children and grandchildren how I dealt harshly with the Egyptians and how I performed my signs among them, and that you may know that I am the Lord. – Exodus 10:2 [NIV]

The reason was simple, during the ten plagues, the Egyptian superpower was humiliated together with its idols, before the creator of the world. God says:

... So you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth. – Exodus 9:14 [NIV]

Everyone witnessed the might of an all-powerful God, a God who controlled nature and even death. God's intent is evident, today we still discuss and learn about the Exodus from Egypt, even after about 3400 years. For instance, every week during Kabbalat Shabbat:

... As a reminder of the Exodus from Egypt.

A Theological Challenge

In the Exodus, God revealed His mighty hand, His strength, His utter dominance, to us as well as to our future generations. I want to ask a deeper question, beyond the focus of the ten plagues. When I read our Torah portion as well as next week's, I immediately encounter an invigorating theological challenge. One of the most well-known sentences regarding the

plagues of Egypt is:

...For I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his officials... – Exodus 10:1b [NIV]

But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart and he would not listen to Moses and Aaron... – Exodus 9:12a [NIV]

We run into an issue at this point, what exactly happened to Pharaoh's free will?

Does God interfere with the heart and mind, deciphering for us how to act?

The question therefore arises: What will we be judged for? For our sin or for a hardness of heart that God chose for us? In fact, the question is, if God hardened Pharaoh's heart – what is He punishing him for?

There are believers who claim that God chooses who exactly will believe in Him from the beginning, there is no free will, everything is decided by the Almighty. It's been decided ahead of time who will be saved and who will not, which is known as predestination.

Our belief is that every person has the power and the ability to choose whether to follow the path of God or not. We have free will, which is a gift from God. This idea is supported in the book of Deuteronomy:

See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. – Deuteronomy 30:15 [NIV]

...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]

Why would God say "choose" if indeed we have no free will? I believe that sin is our free choice, that we are the ones who seek out the sin and open ourselves up to all kinds of temptations.

One of the elders of our congregation once told me a humorous story that I want to share with you: A known rabbi and teacher entered a classroom in order to lecture and he saw that his students were in the middle of a

conversation that abruptly stopped when he entered the class. The rabbi was interested in what the conversation was about, but the students did not want to let the rabbi know, and only after much prodding did the students let the rabbi in on their conversation. It turns out that they were talking about how the evil inclination (yetzer hara) is chasing them, and always trying to tempt them. The rabbi simply smiled and answered, “You have nothing to worry, for now you are the ones chasing after the evil inclination.”

Sin exists inside each of us, and we will be judged for our actions. The fact is, we have the ability to overcome sin, because if not, what then will we be judged for?

Do We Have Free Will?

Every person is responsible for his or her own actions, and we cannot blame others for our choices, mistakes, or sins.

...But you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die. – Genesis 2:17 [NIV]

In Genesis we read that God commands Adam not to eat from the tree. This means that there is a prohibition, but this presents two options. God created man with the ability to choose and decide – even if it is not always what’s best for man. God gave us the option to sin, but I want to emphasize the fact that God also gave us the option to choose what is right and holy.

Let’s go back to Pharaoh – how did God harden Pharaoh’s heart without harming his right to free will? Some say that the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart was a punishment. Pharaoh was a evil king and he enslaved the people of Israel. Perhaps he had reached such a threshold of evil and sin that God punished him and hardened his heart in order to bring down all ten plagues on the Egyptians.

I read an insightful commentary. It opened my eyes to the fact that we tend to forget how Pharaoh actually made efforts to reach a compromise with Moses. During the negotiations, Pharaoh offered suggestions that seemed reasonable, but they contained only a partial answer to Moses’ demands. Moses rejected every suggestion, after pointing out why each one did not meet the needs of his people. This exchange between Pharaoh and Moses

may seem unnecessary, but if we read it carefully, we come to the answer of how Pharaoh's heart was hardened.

We will delve further into this topic during the coming week. Until then, Shabbat Shalom.

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