

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Bo

“Then Hashem said to Moshe, “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.”

One of the classic questions which arises during this time of the year is the issue of Pharaoh’s free will. Seemingly, Pharaoh--evil as he is--is deprived by Hashem of the ability to do the right thing and free the Jews. How can it be that so basic a tenet of our religious philosophy as free will is denied to him? Furthermore, what is the point of the Torah’s detailed description of Pharaoh’s wicked conduct? There is nothing to be learned here! Pharaoh is only a puppet.

A famous answer is proffered by the Rambam (1138-1204). He explains that while free will is crucial, sometimes one can sin so gravely that he is punished by the removal of his ability to choose. When Pharaoh began enforcing his bigoted agenda against Israel, he became liable for this grievous punishment.

R. Ovadia Sforno (1475-1550) suggests a different approach. He says that it is impossible to contemplate even a punitive suspension of freedom of choice; Pharaoh, he says, is solely responsible for his own evildoing. What is meant by “I have hardened his heart” is that Hashem gave Pharaoh added strength with which he was able to withstand the pressure of the plagues. His choice to ignore their message and continue oppressing Israel was entirely his own. It is thus that (according to our Sages) Pharaoh himself would have gone on indefinitely resisting God’s Will! Only by the threat of popular revolt did he agree to release Israel.

Only on Earth is there any talk of free will.

Kurt Vonnegut

Shabbat Shalom
Rabbi Asher Coleman

