

Devar Torah (sermon) for Va'era
 "Getting in the Habit"
 Temple Israel of Long Beach 1/8/05

Note: This sermon is largely based on Etz Chayim Chumash commentary on Exodus 7:3 and "Pharaoh's Hardened Heart: Cruel and Unusual Punishment and Covenantal Ethics" by Shaul Magid, accessible at <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/ssr/issues/volume2/number2/ssr02-02-e01.html>

The story of the plagues presents one of the great theological challenges for a reader of the Bible. This week we read God's words: "וַאֲנִי אֶקְשֶׁה אֶת לֵב פַּרְעֹה וְהִרְבִּיתִי אֶת אֹתוֹתַי וְאֵת מוֹפְתָי בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם *and I will harden Pharaoh's heart, so that I might make my signs and wonders numerous in Egypt*" (Ex. 7:1). Is this fair? If Pharaoh's heart, under normal circumstances, would have succumbed to the first plague, and he would have let Israel go, is it fair for God to give Pharaoh unnatural resolve simply so God could show off, all the while causing increased pain, anguish, and destruction to the people of Egypt?

There are many answers given to this question, perhaps each one as less than satisfactory than the next. One could argue that the evils of Pharaoh and Egypt were great enough that they deserved all that punishment. (See e.g. Nachmanides on Ex. 7:3). That suspending Pharaoh's free will so that he could get the punishment he and his people deserved was fair. In which case, why not just send all the plagues? Why resort to the ultimatums?

One could also argue that it was, indeed, Pharaoh's desire to hold out, and that God just helped Pharaoh do what he wanted to do in the first place. But that begs the question of what it really means to "want" to do something.

The list of answers to this question is long.

Rashi, the great medieval commentator observes in commenting on our verse, that for the first five plagues, we are not told "ויחזק לב פרעה *and Pharaoh's heart was hardened.*" Not until the sixth plague are we told "ויחזק ה' את לב פרעה *and God hardened Pharaoh's heart,*" implying that through the first five plagues, Pharaoh resisted of his own free will. So, the ethical dilemma is resolved for five plagues. Five to go.

Maimonides (*Mishneh Torah* Law of Repentance chapter 6), speaks about the individual's capacity to repent. According to Maimonides (id. 6:6), this capacity is not without its limits:

ואפשר שיחטא אדם חטא גדול או חטאים רבים עד שיתן הדין לפני דיין האמת שיהא הפרעון מזה החוטא על חטאים אלו שעשה ברצונו ומדעתו שמונעין ממנו התשובה ואין מניחין לו רשות לשוב מרשעו כדי שימות ויאבד בחטאו שיעשה, . . . לפיכך כתוב בתורה ואני אחזק את לב פרעה, לפי שחטא מעצמו תחלה והרע לישראל הגרים בארצו שנאמר הבה נתחכמה לו, נתן הדין למנוע התשובה ממנו עד שנפרע ממנו, לפיכך חזק הקב"ה את לבו,

It is also possible that one commit a grave sin or many sins so that the true judge (God) determine that just punishment for such sins, done willfully and knowingly, is preventing the sinner from the way of repentance. God prevents the individual from repenting so that he dies and is destroyed in the sins that he committed. Therefore, it is written in the Torah I will stiffen Pharaoh's heart (Ex. 14:4). Trans. Shaul Magid "Pharaoh's Hardened Heart: Cruel and Unusual Punishment and Covenantal Ethics."

For Maimonides, if a person's sins are too great, or are too plentiful, God may suspend the person's free will to repent, so as to insure that the person would receive just punishment for the

person's prior wrongs.

Psychologist Erich Fromm (quoted in Etz Chayim Chumash on Ex. 7:3) looks at Pharaoh's experience from a similar perspective, "Pharaoh's heart hardens because he keeps on doing evil. It hardens to a point where no more change or repentance is possible. . . . The longer he refuses to choose the right, the harder his heart becomes . . . until there is no longer any freedom of choice left him."

From says in psychological terms, what Maimonides says in religious ones. The longer a person goes along the wrong path, the worse a person's behavior, the worse it will be for a person to reverse that behavior. Perhaps God had an active role in hardening Pharaoh's heart. Or, perhaps, Pharaoh's heart hardened naturally, as a result of humanity's God-given psychological makeup.

So, to read these thoughts together with Rashi: for the first five plagues, Pharaoh resists changing his ways. After that, either by force of habit or by force of God's will, Pharaoh becomes incapable of change.

There is, perhaps nothing in this world more difficult than breaking a bad habit. On the other hand, none of us, I hope, has reached the point with our bad habits that we are incapable of change. But the longer we go without reviewing our lives and identifying the areas of wrongdoing, the more difficult it becomes. As we read the story of Pharaoh, we should all think about what we have done wrong in the past, and start to change, before, God forbid, it becomes too late.

We should also remember that there is a flip side to this. Because just as we can have bad habits, we are also capable of teaching ourselves good habits. Just as repeating bad behavior over and over makes it more difficult to go back, repeating a good deed over and over makes us more accustomed, and more likely to continue that behavior. So, I ask you in the days to come to start thinking about habits. Start to break a bad one, and pick up one more good habit. There are lots of good habits to pick up. Synagogue involvement, regular attendance of daily minyan, or enhancing our Shabbat observance, perhaps by attending additional services for the Sabbath on Friday or Saturday evening or by enhancing our observance of traditional Sabbath laws. Of course, good habits can go beyond ritual life as well. We can try to establish better habits for how we treat others around us or how often we give to charity.

May we all be blessed with the resolve to reverse some of the bad facets of our behavior, and to create many new good habits to replace them.