

# DO WE HAVE FREE WILL?

## THE SOURCE

וְאֲנִי אֶקְשֶׁה אֶת לֵב פַּרְעֹה וְהִרְבִּיתִי אֶת אֹתֹתַי וּמוֹפְתֵי בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם.  
שמות ז:ג

AND I WILL HARDEN PHARAOH'S HEART, AND INCREASE MY SIGNS WONDERS IN THE LAND OF EGYPT.  
SHEMOT 7:3

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) If God hardened Pharaoh's heart, why was he punished for not setting the Jews free?
- 2) If God told Avraham that his children will one day be oppressed and put into slavery, why were the Egyptians punished?

### Insight #1

God never declared which nation would put the Jews into slavery. The Egyptians exercised their own free will and chose to enslave the Jews.

*Rambam Hilchot Teshuva 6:5*

### Insight #2

The Egyptians deserved punishment for oppressing the Jews above and beyond what was decreed by the prophecy to Avraham.

*Ramban, Bereishit 15:13*

### Insight #3

Pharaoh deserved all ten plagues as a punishment for his earlier cruelty towards the Jews. Therefore, God continually hardened Pharaoh's heart, so that he may endure the punishment for his previous crimes.

*R. Yitzchak Aramah, Akeidat Yitzchak, Va'era (no. 36)*

**Digging Deeper:** When Pharaoh agreed to let the Jews go after the death of the firstborn, was that an expression of free will?

## CASE STUDY

*A woman was walking down the street when a man grabbed her arm and said "give me your wallet." The woman complied and gave her wallet to the thief. She immediately called the police and they found and arrested the thief, wallet in hand. The thief responded "I didn't do anything wrong. I asked her for the wallet and she gave it to me willingly."*

**Do you agree with thief's argument? Did the woman give the wallet of her own free will?**

## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

**If someone does the right thing because he/she is afraid of being punished by God, is that an expression of free will?**

Answer: While good deeds that are performed out of fear of punishment are praiseworthy, true free will is expressed when one realizes that each of us are empowered to be who we want to be. We control our own destiny and define our own legacy.

*R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Al HaTeshuva pp. 239-244*

# For Further Exploration

According to the path that one wishes to follow, one will be directed.

**Makkot 10b**

בדרך שאדם רוצה לילך בה מוליכין אותו.

**מכות י:**

**When the Gemara states "one will be directed," who do you think is providing the direction?**

*Free will is granted to all people. If one desires to turn himself to the path of good and be righteous, the choice is his. Should he desire to turn to the path of evil and be wicked, the choice is his ... A person should not entertain the thesis held by the fools ... that, at the time of a man's creation, The Holy One, blessed be He, decrees whether he will be righteous or wicked. This is untrue. Each person is fit to be righteous like Moses, our teacher, or wicked, like Jeroboam. [Similarly,] he may be wise or foolish, merciful or cruel, miserly or generous, or [acquire] any other character traits. There is no one who compels him, sentences him, or leads him towards either of these two paths. Rather, he, on his own initiative and decision, tends to the path he chooses.*

**Rambam, Hilchot Teshuva 5:1-2 (adapted from Moznaim Translation)**

רשות לכל אדם נתונה אם רצה להטות עצמו לדרך טובה ולהיות צדיק הרשות בידו ואם רצה להטות עצמו לדרך רעה ולהיות רשע הרשות בידו אל יעבור במחשבתך דבר זה שאומרים טפשי ... שהקב"ה גוזר על האדם מתחלת ברייתו להיות צדיק או רשע אין הדבר כן אלא כל אדם ראוי לו להיות צדיק כמשה רבינו או רשע כירבעם או חכם או סכל או רחמן או אכזרי או כילי או שוע וכן שאר כל הדעות ואין לו מי שיכפהו ולא גוזר עליו ולא מי שמושכו לאחד משני הדרכים אלא הוא מעצמו ומדעתו נוטה לאי זו דרך שירצה.

**רמב"ם, הלכות תשובה ה:א-ב**

**If a person was born into a family that is particularly righteous or evil, will that affect who that person becomes?**

*The hardening of heart that is mentioned regarding Pharaoh and Sichon is not that God influenced their ability to listen to Moshe, which would have been an inherent hardening of the heart. Rather, the hardening was a result of the way the plagues were orchestrated. When he saw the plague of blood and saw that it went away soon after and didn't continue, he thought that the plague was not a Divine command, but a natural occurrence or a result of the constellations ... Therefore, the cause for hardening Pharaoh's heart was triggered by the numerous times that the plagues came and went ... The idea is not that God hardened his heart and prevented him from doing the right thing, heaven forbid, but that the plagues (and their subsequent removal) caused Pharaoh to feel empowered and confident.*

**Abarbanel, Shemot, Ch. 7**

שאינו ענין קושי הלב הנז' בפרעה ובסיחון שהש"י הטה את לבבו שלא ישמע לדברי משה כי הוא קושי לבבו בעצם אבל היה קושי לבבו נמשך מהמכות במקרה כי בראותו מכת הדם ושסרה מיד ולא התמידה חשב בלבבו שלא היתה המכה היא דבר אלהים אלא דבר טבעי או מפאת המערכה ... והנה אם כן לא היתה סבת קושי לב פרעה כי אם רבוי המכות והסרתן אחר היותן ... אין ענינו שה"בה הקשה את לבו ומנעהו מעשות מצות חלילה אלא שנתן בו אותן המכות שמפניהן בא לבו לידי קושי וכבודות.

**אברבנאל, שמות פרק ז**

**When God places us in various situations, whether they are challenging or simple, is He influencing our free will? Why or why not?**

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We'd love to hear your feedback on the Shabbat Table Discussion Project. Please be in touch at [shabbattable@yu.edu](mailto:shabbattable@yu.edu)