

## CHAPTER 6, LAW 3 - THE POINT OF NO RETURN

*by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld*

***It is possible that a person will sin a terrible sin or many sins to the extent that the true Judge's justice dictates that the punishment for such a sinner for committing such sins willingly and knowingly, is that they (i.e., the members of the heavenly court) withhold from him teshuva (repentance), and they do not give him the ability to repent his wickedness, in order that he will die and eternally perish together with his sins he committed.***

***This is as G-d said through Isaiah, 'Fatten the hearts of this nation, make its ears heavy, smear over its eyes, lest it see with its eyes and hear with its ears, and its heart will understand, and it will repent and be healed' (6:10). So too it is stated, 'And they mocked the messengers of G-d and despised His word and scoffed at His prophets until the wrath of G-d rose against His nation, till there was no healing' (II Chronicles 36:16). Meaning, they sinned willingly and increased rebelliousness until they became culpable of having repentance withheld from them, [repentance being] the 'healing'.***

***Therefore, it is written in the Torah, 'And I will harden the heart of Pharaoh' (Exodus 4:21). Since Pharaoh sinned on his own at first and mistreated Israel who was dwelling in his land, as it is written, 'Come let us outsmart him [Israel]' (Exodus 1:10), logic dictated to withhold repentance from him until he be paid back. Therefore, G-d hardened his heart.***

***Now, why did G-d send to Pharaoh through Moses, saying to him, 'send and repent,' while G-d had already said [regarding Pharaoh] that he would not send, as it is stated, 'And you and your servants I [Moses] know [that you do not yet fear the L-rd G-d]' (ibid. 9:30). 'Nevertheless, on account of this [did I preserve you, in order to show you My strength and in order that you will relate My Name in all the land]' (v. 16)? In order to make known to the inhabitants of the world (lit., 'to the comers into the world') that when G-d withholds teshuva from a sinner, he cannot repent but will rather perish in the wickedness that he earlier did willingly.***

***So too Sichon (King of the Emorites; see Numbers 21:21-25), on account of his sins he became guilty of withholding from him repentance., as it is stated, 'For the L-rd your G-d hardened his spirit and made obstinate his heart' (Deuteronomy 2:30). And so too the Canaanites on account of their abominations, He held back from them teshuva until they battled against Israel, as it is stated, 'For it was from G-d to harden their hearts in preparation for the war with Israel, in order to destroy them...' (Joshua 11:20). And so too Israel in the times of Elijah, since they greatly increased sin, G-d withheld from those 'increasers' repentance, as it is said, 'And You turned their hearts backwards' (I***

***Kings 18:37), meaning You held them back from teshuva.***

***It thus may be concluded (lit., 'it is found to say') that G-d did not decree on Pharaoh to wreak evil on Israel, nor on Sichon to sin in his land, nor on the Canaanites to act depravedly, nor on Israel to serve idols. Rather, all of them sinned on their own and became culpable of withholding from them repentance.***

This week's very long paragraph addresses the issue the Rambam raised at the start of this chapter. If, as he discussed earlier, man is granted free will, how is it that many verses in Scripture state G-d withheld a person's or a nation's ability to repent? Isn't that a denying of the person's free choice to improve his ways? Instead, various people were forced by G-d to remain in their sinful state, and be destroyed as a result. How is that compatible with free will?

The Rambam's response above is quite clear. The basic point is that such is a last resort. Very rarely does G-d go so far as to deny a person his freedom of choice. Only one who has repeatedly and brazenly flouted G-d's will does G-d at times force to remain in his sinful state. G-d has given up on such a person, so to speak. And, in the case of the Egyptians, rather than forcing them to "repent" due to the sheer agony of the plagues, G-d thought it better to show the world His great power, to use the hapless (but thoroughly wicked) Pharaoh to demonstrate to the world once and for all just who G-d really is.

[As I've pointed out in the past, I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that the majority of the world believes in a single, all-powerful G-d today because of the Exodus. The cataclysmic events of the Ten Plagues, the splitting of the sea, and the Revelation at Sinai entered the collective memory of mankind, never to be forgotten. G-d saw need to reveal Himself, in all His glory, to His human subjects one time in world history -- in order to remove the slightest doubt about His existence. And the memory of that epochal period would not soon be forgotten. (We've discussed in the past why it would NOT be a good idea for G-d to reveal Himself regularly to His subjects, see Pirkei Avos [3:10](#).)]

One very important corollary to this is that teshuva (repentance) is really a gift from G-d. The fact that G-d generally gives us time to reconsider our wickedness and return to Him is an undeserved gift from Heaven. By rights, He could destroy us right then for flouting His will. He likewise has every right to withhold from us the ability to repent. We really owe it to G-d the moment we defy Him. G-d does not have to wait until we "get around" to regretting our sins and repenting. Nor does He have to give us the free will to change our minds altogether. It is all a Divine favor -- one G-d may well decide to withhold if we have tried His patience too long.

Even short of actually denying us free will, G-d has many means of making teshuva more difficult for the undeserving. If we are fortunate, Divine Providence may actually lead us to repentance -- say we have a close call or some other stark reminder of our mortality. The Talmud writes that when a person suffers affliction, he should examine his ways (Brachos 5a), in order to determine G-d's motive for afflicting him. Likewise, Rabbeinu Yonah ([Gates of Repentance](#) II:7) writes that we should

use our oncoming signs of old age -- our graying hair (if we're fortunate enough to still have some), as signs that our end is approaching, and to use such reminders to return to G-d while we are yet able.

However, the gift of such heavenly messages cannot be taken for granted. G-d may not be so patient with a sinner as to give him multiple wake-up calls. Perhaps G-d will take us from this world suddenly, with no advance warning allowing us time to reflect. Or who knows if we'll still have our marbles when our end is near? Or we may simply have smothered ourselves with so much apathy over the years that we will be unable to truly open our eyes to our faults when our time is running short (and we've become grumpy, short-tempered old men). G-d thus need not go so far as to deny us free will -- a punishment reserved for the most heinous of sinners -- to withhold our repentance. It may happen much less spectacularly -- and we may even do it to ourselves.

The Rambam additionally addresses a related question. If Pharaoh really had no free will to repent, why did Moses bother coming to him repeatedly asking him to repent? What was the point asking of Pharaoh something G-d Himself attested he would not do?

The Rambam answers that G-d did not really send Moses to Pharaoh for Pharaoh's sake. Pharaoh had no choice at that point but to refuse. It was rather to bring home this basic message to the rest of mankind. When G-d withholds a man's repentance, no force on earth can bring him to change his mind. No amount of plague nor suffering could bring Pharaoh to his senses -- no matter how absurdly and patently irrational his refusal had become. He had no choice. And G-d was going to use stubborn old Pharaoh, in all his hysterical obsessiveness, to teach the world that lesson.

Some of the other classical commentators offer a different explanation to this question (see Ramban and Sforno to Exodus 7:3). It does seem strange that Moses kept returning to Pharaoh asking him to concede if Pharaoh no longer had the ability to do so. Was it all a charade? Was Moses asking something of Pharaoh knowing there was no way on earth Pharaoh could acquiesce?

Further, more than once Pharaoh seemed to seriously waver, see for example Exodus 10:7-11. Was the "hardening" beginning to wear off until Pharaoh received his next dose of insanity?

And finally, we need to understand how this heart hardening works to begin with. Did Pharaoh know his mind was being controlled? Did he want to say "yes" but the word "no" came out of his mouth? Or did Pharaoh at least think he was making his own decision?

The commentators explain as follows. G-d really did not completely remove Pharaoh's free will. G-d wasn't simply controlling Pharaoh's mind and actions, making his mouth say "no" when he really wanted to say "yes". Nor was He making Pharaoh think he was acting rationally when his mind was clearly unhinged. Rather, what G-d really did, as the Torah itself attests, was **strengthen** Pharaoh's heart (this being the actual translation of the Hebrew word used some of the time). What does that mean?

Pharaoh did not truly want to repent. His entire life made it evidently clear that he had no interest in accepting G-d's will or acting kindly towards his subjects. There was, however, one problem. The plagues, in all their power and fury, would have **forced** Pharaoh to repent. There is no way a human being could have withstood that kind of torment. Pharaoh would have repented and done everything G-d asked of him, but it would not have been from his heart, from a sincere desire to reconcile with his Creator. It would have been the result of the simple, instinctive human need to avoid pain, succumbing to a Divine torture chamber. And G-d was hardly interested in that sort of repentance.

G-d therefore **strengthened** Pharaoh's heart. What He did was to give Pharaoh the strength to withstand the plagues -- at least after each of them passed. Pharaoh was thus able to remain true to his wickedness. The plagues did not force him to succumb. He was able to live out his evil convictions -- acting as he really did want to act -- in order that G-d could show mankind once and for all just who He really is.

Thus, theoretically at least, Pharaoh really could have repented had he so truly desired -- but only if he truly wanted to make it up to his Creator. Moses returned again and again to Pharaoh to give him the chance. But Pharaoh, true to his colors, revealed himself to be the stubborn old fool he had always been.

I will conclude this week's class by again pointing out the great lesson which emerges from the Rambam's words. Teshuva is not a given. It is really a gift from G-d. If we were fool enough to sin and defy G-d's will in the first place, we cannot simply take for granted that we'll one day be granted the luxury of repentance -- perhaps when we're much older and no longer really crave the sins we fell for in our youth. We may be so fortunate -- if G-d really feels we deserve it, but life is hardly so simple.

The Mishna in Pirkei Avos teaches us, "Repent one day before you die" (2:15). Well, when exactly is that "one day" before we die? G-d does not tell us -- for good reason. If G-d would be so forthcoming as to inform us of our death dates, we would have the convenience of waiting till a few days before then and repenting. But G-d does not grant us that luxury. We'd like to think that our "one day" is many decades away. We have much life to live before that -- before we have to worry about coming face to face with our Maker. But we don't have to look very far to realize that for many, that day of death was much sooner than anyone suspected. Sure, we don't want to live with the heavy sense of death hovering over our heads at any moment. But we must ever be aware of our mortality. The day will come in which every one of us will stand before G-d, where our every action will be reviewed and carefully measured -- and either rewarded or punished. Let us be sure to prepare ourselves while there is still time.

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