

EIGHT CHAPTERS □ CHAPTER 8:9

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

It's upsetting, though, to think that G-d would prevent someone from repenting. Isn't repentance vital to the soul, and wouldn't we lose hope for true spiritual excellence if we couldn't depend on it? After all, while we might make every effort to be the kind of person we'd like to be, there's still no denying that we falter. Take away our chance to restock and restart, and all would be lost, wouldn't it?

We already pointed out that the people who experienced this really didn't deserve a second chance, but there's more to be said about this. For in fact it touches upon the whole idea of reward and punishment, so we'd need to dwell on that for a while in order to clear this up.

At a certain point G-d explained His ways in the world ... by saying they were inexplicable. "*My thoughts*" He said, "*are not your thoughts*"; and "*your ways*", humankind, "*are not My ways*" (Isaiah 55:8). His point was that we should always be leery of assuming things about G-d Almighty that we'd expect of others. For we anticipate quick responses and clear outcomes from others we contend with. But G-d doesn't necessarily work like that-- and most especially when it comes to the esoteric realm of reward and punishment.

As Rambam puts it, G-d, who always "metes out our punishments wisely and justly" nonetheless "sometimes punishes a person in this world, other times in the World to Come, and now and then in both". That's to say that Divine justice sometimes requires that we learn our lessons openly and above-board; other times in secret, in the Afterlife; and sometimes in both planes.

Why? We really don't know. And in fact, we're no more encouraged to ask that, Rambam contends, than we are to ask "why a certain species was configured one way rather than another", why the earth is round, and the like. G-d's ways are oftentimes hidden and not our ways, as we said. All we know is that "*All of (G-d's) ways are just*" (Deuteronomy 32:4).

In any event, Pharaoh's this-world retribution of being prohibited from repenting "served as a great and public wonder for all mankind" which we can deduce. And it's here that Rambam makes a point that restores our own hopes. For G-d's having taken away Pharaoh's free will affirmed the fact that "G-d can punish a person by withholding his free will ... and that that person would be aware of that, and yet be unable to reassert his free will."

That means to say that it became clear to all that Pharaoh's inclinations were getting the better part of him and that he could no longer hold himself back -- i.e., that his free will was no longer in place.

And it also became clear that Pharaoh knew that, and yet he kept it up. And it thus became clear that everyone else -- who's not so nefarious -- can get a handle on things before they get out of hand, and can take a deep breath, stop what he or she is doing, and only do good. If they really want to, that is!

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