

CATS VS.KIDS

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

This week's LifeLine is dedicated in memory of Morty (Menashe) Cohen.

"G-d said to Moshe... I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and I will increase my signs and my wonders in the land of Egypt." [7:1, 3]

At first glance, it seems that Pharaoh was denied free choice - and if so, many ask, how could Pharaoh be held liable for his actions? What was his sin?

The *Ramban* (Nachmanides) and the *Seforno* both offer the following explanation (the *Ramban* actually provides two answers, saying that both are true). It is clear, they say, that Pharaoh did not want to repent. When the *Torah* recounts the first five plagues, it does not say that G-d hardened Pharaoh's heart - only that it was hardened, meaning that he did it himself. If at any time Pharaoh had desired repentance, then he certainly would have been given the opportunity to do so.

Why, then, did G-d harden Pharaoh's heart? Because after being struck with the first five plagues, Pharaoh would have been forced to release the Israelites not because it was G-d's will, but because he was unable to withstand further punishment. He would have been unable to resist, as his servants said to him, "do you not yet realize that Egypt is lost?" [10:7] And this, concludes the *Seforno*, is not repentance at all.

If last week's *Dvar Torah* discussed free will as the distinction between human beings and other creatures, the *Seforno* this week helps to point out what - in Jewish philosophy - "free will" really entails. For as one subscriber quite correctly pointed out, animals do many things only "because they feel like it," such as playing games. "And there are indications that cats," continued the writer, "will hunt or not because they feel like it - as long as they have sufficient food." All of this is true.

The Jewish understanding of free will, on the other hand, is not our ability to choose between any two random actions. Rather it is the opportunity to decide for ourselves whether to do good, or bad. My family once owned a cat that preferred hunting over playing with yarn. I will save you the details; suffice it to say that it brought an unusual assortment of small trophies home through the cat door. Now did my father punish the cat? Of course not - it's "the predatory instinct" that "comes naturally" to all cats in some degree. But were we to see a child harming an animal, we would say that he is "being cruel", and must be taught to be kind.

"The heavens and the earth give testimony for Me upon you this day, that life and death I have placed before you, the blessing and the curse, and you will choose life..." [Dev. 30:19] Even if he had tried to do so, Dr. Dolittle could not have made this verse meaningful to the many animals he spoke with in the series of childrens' books. And the verse, according to Jewish sources, explains why it is that humans alone must have free choice: in order that G-d be able to reward us, for choosing life.

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