

PHARAOH: A TYRANT AND A PUPPET

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

God said to Moshe: Go to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart, and the heart of his servants . . . (Shemos 10:1)

Pharaoh had it coming to him. Ever since he said, "Who is God, that I should obey Him and let Israel go? I do not know God, nor will I let Israel go" (Shemos 5:2), he was on a collision course with the Almighty, and as they say, "Abuse it, lose it."

So he lost it, his free will that is. After that, he couldn't stop the roller coaster ride to destruction even if he wanted to, to the cheers of all those who saw it coming, or at least wished for it to happen. It was classic: Bad guy bullies innocent underdog, so hero comes along and puts bully in his place, allowing good to triumph over evil.

However, in this process of reaching this climactic turning point in the Jewish struggle for freedom, a major issue arises that has been the topic of discussion for many a commentator for many a millennium: What about Pharaoh's free will? If God took away his free will by hardening his heart, then why was he punished for refusing to let the Jewish people go?

The answer is embedded in last week's parshah, subtly but also profoundly. It was a message, not just for Pharaoh and his servants, but for the Jewish people then and now.

The Torah tells us that after Moshe Rabbeinu performed the first two plagues, Pharaoh's magicians were able to do the same. Consequently, Moshe failed to prove the point that he was making, that he had come on behalf of God and wasn't just another court magician with a cheap bag of tricks. Hence, understandably:

And the magicians of Egypt did similarly with their secret arts, and Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he did not listen to them, as God had said. (Shemos 7:22)

Based upon this, Pharaoh should not have been held accountable for the first two plagues. That is, until we learn the following:

Aharon stretched out his hand with his rod and smote the dust of the earth, and there was lice upon man, and upon beast; all the dust of the earth became lice throughout all the land of Egypt. The magicians did likewise with their secret arts to bring lice but they could not . . . Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God," and Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he didn't listen to them, as God had said. (Shemos 8:13-14)

Does that make sense? If Pharaoh's whole sense of encouragement was the fact that his magicians could use magic to match Moshe's miracles, then he should have become discouraged once they failed to do so. When even his own people were forced to admit that it was God Who was powering Moshe's supernatural acts, he should have become soft-hearted, not hard-hearted.

What do we learn from this? That it didn't make a difference what Pharaoh's magicians could or couldn't do to mimic Moshe Rabbeinu's signs and wonders. He was determined from the outset to break the Jewish people and their savior, and only used his magicians to justify his behavior.

Once they could no longer lend him their support after reaching the limits of their black magic, he was still left with his attitude towards the idea of letting the Jewish people go. On the contrary, the fact that Moshe bested his magicians forced Pharaoh to act even stronger, lest their weakness appear to be his too.

This is why he acted illogically in Parashas Shemos as well. After Moshe Rabbeinu came and demanded the release of the Jewish people, Pharaoh decided that it was the fact that they weren't working hard enough that they even listened to Moshe in the first place and began to entertain thoughts of freedom, even if only temporary.

Now, if you were a leader bent on building up Egypt with slave labor, and you felt that those slaves could be worked harder, would you give them additional supplies that would allow them to do so, or make them go out looking for their own supplies? The fact that Pharaoh did the latter shows us that what concerned him the most was controlling the Jewish people, not working them.

You could say that Pharaoh was a control freak, at least when it came to the Jewish people. More than likely he was a control freak across the board; ancient rulers usually were, having gained power as a result of entitlement and not personal merit. Even modern-day elected leaders can be this way when they tend to be narcissistic.

When people choose to control the quality of their lives by controlling others around them, forcing them to act in ways that satisfy their need for pleasure or security they tend to become obsessive. They may become so obsessive that they cannot see how absurd their behavior has become, and how damaging it can be. Worst of all, they can delude themselves into believing that they have control where they do not, and security where it does not exist. In their quest to become invulnerable they become the most vulnerable of all.

God didn't have to take away Pharaoh's free will. He did it to himself, as have so many other people throughout history the moment they became addicted to false sources of pleasure and confidence. We are hardwired to be open to such errors, but the world is hardwired to expose such people and their weaknesses, and if necessary, bring them down.

Thus, all God was doing was exposing Pharaoh for what he really was, using the plagues and his crazy obstinacy to reveal his true attitude toward life and higher values. And, he was making an

example of Pharaoh, to show the rest of mankind what happens to a person who tries to change the world instead of himself.

But, that is only one half of the story. The second half has to do with the Jewish people themselves, and how they deal with people who seem in control, but really are not.

To say that the Jewish people feared Pharaoh is, obviously, an understatement. He was a tyrant whose word could build or destroy countless lives in moments, like so many others before and after him. His decrees could free people or enslave them, and it did not take much for Pharaoh to decide the latter. So, who wouldn't fear such a human being?

Yet, as the Talmud points out, and Kabbalah makes perfectly clear, Pharaoh, and all the rest of history's tyrants, are but puppets of God, as are all leaders. Unwittingly, they are but ministers of God, exercising HIS will, and rarely their own, no matter how much they will argue to the contrary.

But, what made them make their decisions or decrees in the first place?

Circumstances that they did not create and which they could not control, and hence, to which they could only react. Who advised them to make such decisions? Usually advisers they put into office, whom Heaven made sure were available for the right job at the right time.

This is what the Talmud means when it says:

All is in the hands of Heaven except the fear of Heaven. (Brochos 34b)

To make this operating principle of the Jewish people eminently clear, then and for the rest of history, God allowed Pharaoh to become as powerful as any ruler might become, and then systematically stripped him of all of his might until he had none. In this way we could learn that when history does not go the path we prayed it would, the addresses to turn to are not the instruments of oppression, but to God Himself.

This is true whether we have to deal with an international leader, a member of our community, or a member of our household. The world is full of control freaks, people who would rather change us than change themselves when things go wrong, or when the going gets difficult, even when they are responsible for the results.

This does not mean that they should get off the hook for all the hurt and damage they cause to the world around them. They shouldn't, and won't. You can sue them, or divorce them, and simply turn your back on them. But ultimately, those whom they have affected have to ask themselves, and then God, "Why did I have to go through this? Why were they able to do what they did to me?"

The tyrants of history and everyday life are, ultimately, messengers. Getting rid of them might be top priority, but not before receiving the message that they are here to deliver. If we simply make them the focus of our complaints and ignore the message the crisis they create teaches us, then God will just find other messengers to succeed where these had failed. And, we've seen how far He has been

willing to go to do that.

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