

DIVINE TOOLS

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

In last week's Notebook, I differentiated between the concept of redemption and the concept of starting over. The exodus from Egypt was an act of redemption in contrast to the Mabul (Great Flood) that was an act of starting all over. Redemption presumes the potential for change in those redeemed and in those who would witness or hear about the redemption. Starting all over concludes that change is not possible for some or all of the participants involved.

The fundamental change between the pre and postdiluvian worlds was in the human life span. Humans in the prediluvian world lived the equivalent of many lifetimes, while the postdiluvian world of today limits human life to 120 years. G-d made this change in the natural law to provide for the possibility of transition and change from one generation to the next.

G-d could have accomplished the same end by alter the freewill that He instilled in the human race. However, in doing so He would have undermined His own purpose in creating the universe.

The universe is the setting that G-d provided for the human's potential to emulate the Creator. Emulating the Creator involves making the free-willed decision to do good and not do bad. Emulating the Creator involves making the free-willed decision to follow the Creator's commandments or not to follow His commandments. In either case, whether the human freely follows or freely does not follow, the human must accept the inevitability of consequence, both reward and punishment.

Had G-d decided to alter the fundamental human quality of freewill the human race would have been no different than the rest of G-d's creations. They, like all the rest would have had no other option but to follow His commandments. In essence, the human race would have been akin to the angels or the animals- neither have freewill, both are preprogrammed to do the will of G-d, and neither deserves reward or punishment.

The beginning of this week's Parsha presents us with a philosophical dilemma. "Go to Pharaoh because I have hardened his heart... so that I can do my wonders... and so that you will explain to your children andd grandchildren the wonders that I performed and you will recognize that I am G-d." On the one hand, we understand that freewill is fundamental to G-d's intentions for creating the universe and humankind. On the other hand, G-d stated that he had hardened Pharaoh's heart, meaning, interfered with his freewill.

There are many elaborate and creative answers offered to explain the seeming contradiction in the

way G-d dealt with Pharaoh. However, I would like to make a simple observation that is often lost in the discussion.

Freewill is a tool intended by G-d as the means for humans to emulate their Creator and accomplish the purpose of creation. Toward that end, G-d created only one species with freewill and a multitude of species without freewill. The exclusiveness of freewill within the spectrum of creation highlights its importance and value.

From the perspective of viewing freewill as a tool, it makes sense that G-d might decide that His intentions are better served by suspending an individual's freewill.

The beginning of this week's Parsha now makes sense. True, freewill is divinely ordained, uniquely human, and is for the most part inviolate. However, if it serves G-d's purposes to suspend freewill, G-d will do so. In Pharaoh's case, hardening his heart - suspending his freewill - resulted in a greater revelation of G-d's power than if Pharaoh had agreed to voluntarily release the Jews from slavery.

In past issues, I shared my Grandfather Zt'l's understanding of what would have been the greatest miracle of all. In brief, my Grandfather explained that the greatest revelation of G-d is when events occur in such a way that it is clear that they occurred for a reason. If, for example, Pharaoh would have said "yes" to Moshe's first demand of "Let My People go", it would have revealed to everyone that the 210 years of slavery were for a reason. It would have revealed that there is a G-d Who directs and controls all events.

It is interesting to note that the question of, "Why did G-d do it?" is less important and impacting than, "Is there a G-d Who did it?" Throughout history, events have challenged our belief in G-d's existence. Without definitive proof of His existence, our tendency is to assume randomness and occasional chaos in the running of the world. Without definitive proof, we are more comfortable attributing evil to the absence of G-d than the choices of man. Without definitive proof, we place human intellect at the top of the totem pole and conclude that what we do not understand is evidence of G-d's non-existence.

However, if there was conclusive proof that G-d did exist, we could accept the inherent limitations of our human intellect and live with the absence of knowing "Why?" So long as we believe / know that G-d exists, we can assume rhyme and reason in the workings of our world.

Had Pharaoh let us go the first time Moshe asked, it would have proven that there was rhyme and reason even if they did not know what His reasons were. However, that is not what happened. Instead, Pharaoh refused to let the Jews go and the rest of the story developed.

Every Shabbos we say in the Lecha Dodi (part of the Friday night prayers), "The end result is as was first intended." The end result of the episode in Egypt had to be the revelation of G-d to the extent that it would be relayed from generation to generation as proof positive of G-d's existence. (I am G-d... Who took you out of Mitzrayim.)

G-d's first plan was that time would eventually prove His existence. As events would unfold, they would culminate in proof of His ever-present controlling presence. However, now that Pharaoh elected to not participate in that form of revelation, G-d elected to use Pharaoh in His form of revelation.

A well-established proof of logic is that exception proves the norm. By using Pharaoh as the exception to freewill, it proves the divinely ordained norm of freewill. Many will conclude that freewill is as much the chance consequence of evolution as any other physical attribute. However, if G-d could select one human and turn off his freewill, that would prove that the uniqueness of human freewill was not random, but intended. The end result would be the further revelation of G-d's presence in the world.

Of course, the series of miracles that resulted from Pharaoh's obstinacy was clear proof of G-d's majestic power and dominion over all things. However, miracles are fleeting and momentary events soon to be rationalized or "legendized." On the other hand, the presence or absence of freewill will forever remain the stamp of the Divine on the soul of humanity.

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