

# COVENANT & Conversation



A STUDY OF ETHICS IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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— RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS



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## Freewill

**Vaera - 17 January 2015 / 26 Tevet 5775**

The question is ancient. If God hardened Pharaoh's heart, then it was God who made Pharaoh refuse to let the Israelites go, not Pharaoh himself. How can this be just? How could it be right to punish Pharaoh and his people for a decision – a series of decisions – that were not made freely by Pharaoh himself? Punishment presupposes guilt. Guilt presupposes responsibility. Responsibility presupposes freedom. We do not blame weights for falling or the sun for shining. Natural forces are not choices made by reflecting on alternatives. Homo sapiens alone is free. Take away that freedom and you take away our humanity. How then can it say, as it does in our parsha (Ex. 7: 3) that God hardened<sup>1</sup> Pharaoh's heart?

**“If God hardened Pharaoh's heart, then it was God who made Pharaoh refuse to let the Israelites go, not Pharaoh himself. How can this be just?”**

All the commentators are exercised by this question. Maimonides and others note a striking feature of the narrative. For the first five plagues we read that Pharaoh himself hardened his heart. Only later, during the last five plagues, do we read about God doing so. The last five plagues were therefore a punishment for the first five refusals, freely made by Pharaoh himself.<sup>2</sup>

A second approach, in precisely the opposite direction, is that during the last five plagues God intervened not to *harden* but to *strengthen* Pharaoh's heart. He acted to ensure that

<sup>1</sup> Three different verbs are used in the narrative to indicate hardening of the heart: *k-sh-h*, *ch-z-k* and *k-b-d*. They have different nuances: the first means 'harden,' the second, 'strengthen,' and the third, 'make heavy.'

<sup>2</sup> Maimonides, Hilkhot Teshuvah 6: 3.

Pharaoh kept his freedom and did not lose it. Such was the impact of the plagues that in the normal course of events a national leader would have no choice but to give in to a superior force. As Pharaoh's own advisers said before the eighth plague, "Do you not yet realise that Egypt is destroyed." To give in at that point would have been action under duress, not a genuine change of heart. Such is the approach of Yosef Albo<sup>3</sup> and Ovadiah Sforno.<sup>4</sup>

A third approach calls into question the very meaning of the phrase, "God hardened Pharaoh's heart." In a profound sense God, author of history, is behind every event, every act, every gust of wind that blows, every drop of rain that falls. Normally however we do not attribute human action to God. We are what we are because that is how we have chosen to be, even if this was written long before in the divine script for humankind. What do we attribute to an act of God? Something that is unusual, falling so far outside the norms of human behaviour that we find it hard to explain in any other way than to say, surely this happened for a purpose.

God Himself says about Pharaoh's obstinacy, that it allowed him to demonstrate to all humanity that even the greatest empire is powerless against the hand of Heaven. Pharaoh acted freely, but his last refusals were so strange that it was obvious to everyone that God had anticipated this. It was predictable, part of the script. God had disclosed this to Abraham centuries earlier when he told him in a fearful vision that his descendants would be strangers in a land not theirs (Gen. 15: 13-14).

These are all interesting and plausible interpretations. It seems to me, though, that the Torah is telling a deeper story and one that never loses its relevance. Philosophers and scientists have tended to think in terms of abstractions and universals. Some have concluded that we have freewill, others that we don't. There is no conceptual space in between.

In life, however, that is not the way freedom works at all. Consider addiction. The first few times you smoke a cigarette or drink alcohol or take drugs, you do so freely. You know the risks but you ignore them. As time goes on, your dependency increases until the craving is so intense that you are almost powerless to resist it. At that point you may have to go into rehabilitation. You no longer, on your own, have the ability to stop. As the Talmud says, "A prisoner cannot release himself from prison."<sup>5</sup>

Addiction is a physical phenomenon. But there are moral equivalents. For example, suppose on one significant occasion, you tell a lie. People now believe something about you that is not true. As they question you about it, or it comes up in conversation, you find yourself having to tell more lies to support the first. "Oh what a tangled web we weave," said Sir Walter Scott, "when first we practise to deceive."

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<sup>3</sup> Albo, Ikkarium, IV, 25.

<sup>4</sup> Commentary to Ex. 7: 3.

<sup>5</sup> Berakhot 5b.

That is as far as individuals are concerned. When it comes to organisations, the risk is even greater. Let us say that a senior member of staff has made a costly mistake that, if exposed, threatens the entire future of the company. He will make an attempt to cover it up. To do so he must enlist the help of others, who become his co-conspirators. As the circle of deception widens, it becomes part of the corporate culture, making it ever more difficult for honest people within the organisation to resist or protest. It then needs the rare courage of a whistle-blower to expose and halt the deception. There have been many such stories in recent years.<sup>6</sup>

Within nations, especially non-democratic ones, the risk is higher still. In commercial enterprises, losses can be quantified. Someone somewhere knows how much has been lost, how many debts have been concealed and where. In politics, there may be no such objective test. It is easy to claim that a policy is working and explain away apparent counter-indicators. A narrative emerges and becomes the received wisdom. Hans Christian Anderson's tale, *The Emperor's New Clothes*, is the classic parable of this phenomenon. A child sees the truth and in innocence blurts it out, breaking the conspiracy of silence on the part of the king's counsellors.

We lose our freedom gradually, often without noticing it. That is what the Torah has been implying almost from the beginning. The classic statement of freewill appears in the story of Cain and Abel. Seeing that Cain is angry that his offering has not found favour, He says to him: "If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it" (Genesis 4: 7). The maintenance of freewill, especially in a state of high emotion like anger, needs willpower. As we have noted before in these studies there can be what Daniel Goleman calls an 'amygdala hijack' in which instinctive reaction takes the place of reflective decision and we do things that are harmful to us as well as to others.<sup>7</sup> That is the emotional threat to freedom.

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Then there is a social threat. After the Holocaust, a number of path-breaking experiments were undertaken to judge the power of conformism and obedience to authority. Solomon Asch conducted a series of experiments in which eight people were gathered in a room and were shown a line, then asked which of three others was the same length. Unknown to the eighth, the seven others were associates of the experimenter and were following his instructions. On a number of occasions the seven gave an answer that was clearly false, yet in 75 per cent of cases the eighth was willing to give an answer, in conformity with the group, he knew to be false.

Yale psychologist Stanley Milgram showed that ordinary individuals were willing to inflict what appeared to be devastatingly painful electric shocks on someone in an adjacent room when instructed to do so by an authority figure, the experimenter.<sup>8</sup> The Stanford Prison Experiment, conducted by Philip Zimbardo, divided participants into the roles of prisoners and guards.

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<sup>6</sup> On Enron, see Bethany McLean and Peter Elkind. *The Smartest Guys in the Room: The Amazing Rise and Scandalous Fall of Enron*. New York: Portfolio, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*. New York: Bantam, 1995.

<sup>8</sup> Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*. New York: Harper & Row, 1974.

Within days the ‘guards’ were acting cruelly and in some cases abusively toward the prisoners and the experiment, planned to last a fortnight, had to be called off after six days.<sup>9</sup>

The power of conformism, as these experiments showed, is immense. That I believe is why Abraham was told to leave his land, his birthplace and his father’s house. These are the three factors – culture, community and early childhood – that circumscribe our freedom. Jews through the ages have been in but not of society. To be a Jew means keeping a calibrated distance from the age and its idols. Freedom needs time to make reflective decisions and distance so as not to be lulled into conformity.

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Most tragically there is the moral threat. We sometimes forget, or don’t even know, that the conditions of slavery the Israelites experienced in Egypt were often enough felt historically by Egyptians themselves. The great pyramid of Giza, built more than a thousand years before the exodus, before even the birth of Abraham, reduced much of Egypt to a slave labour colony for twenty years.<sup>10</sup> When life becomes cheap and people are seen as a means not an end, when the worst excesses are excused in the name of tradition and rulers have absolute power, then conscience is eroded and freedom lost because the culture has created insulated space in which the cry of the oppressed can no longer be heard.

That is what the Torah means when it says that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart. Enslaving others, Pharaoh himself became enslaved. He became a prisoner of the values he himself had espoused. Freedom in the deepest sense, the freedom to do the right and the good, is not a given. We acquire it, or lose it, gradually. In the end tyrants bring about their own destruction, whereas those with willpower, courage and the willingness to go against the consensus, acquire a monumental freedom. That is what Judaism is: an invitation to freedom by resisting the idols and siren calls of the age.



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<sup>9</sup> Philip G. Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*. New York: Random House, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> It has been calculated, based on a ten hour working day, that one giant block of stone weighing over a ton, would have to be transported into place every two minutes of every day for twenty years.