

Echoes of Eden

Rabbi Ari Kahn

Parashat VaEra 5774

Pharaoh's Conundrum

As the showdown between God and Pharaoh nears its apex, we are faced with a moral dilemma that has far-reaching ramifications. It may be argued that Pharaoh is no more than a pawn in a cosmic drama, since the enslavement of the Jews was pre-determined, and had been foretold to Avraham hundreds of years earlier. To what extent, then, did Pharaoh have free will? To what extent did he deserve the severe punishment meted out to him? Any competent defense attorney engaged to defend Pharaoh might choose between several different strategies. On the one hand, the defense could point out, Pharaoh was simply carrying out the will of God; if anything, he deserves kudos, not Divine wrath.

Alternatively, Pharaoh could claim a lack of culpability due to diminished capacity: God Himself had “hardened” heart; was he at liberty to have behaved any other way?

A close reading of the biblical text disqualifies both of these defense strategies: As far as diminished capacity is concerned, the text clearly indicates that Pharaoh’s heart was manipulated by God only after Pharaoh himself had displayed arrogance and a stubborn streak. Through the first five plagues, Pharaoh hardened his own heart. He needed no coercing to issue decrees that made the Israelites’ lives unbearable, nor did he come under any undue influence when he refused to heed Moshe’s calls before, during and after the plagues of blood, frogs, lice, wild beasts and pestilence. In fact, one could argue that by subsequently “hardening” his heart, God allowed Pharaoh to continue to travel down the path he had already chosen. Pharaoh had clearly indicated his attitude toward the Children of Israel; the plagues were events of such tremendous supernatural interference in the course of history that they effectively denied

Pharaoh was simply carrying out the will of God; if anything, he deserves kudos, not Divine wrath

him the ability to continue to conduct the affairs of state in the manner he had chosen. By hardening his heart, God allowed Pharaoh to continue to make his own choices in the face of crushing supernatural force. God's intervention, then, gave Pharaoh back his free will, as opposed to taking it away.

As for the contention that Pharaoh should have been rewarded because he was "on a mission from God", rather than punished for his treatment of the Israelites, Pharaoh's own words belie this claim: What sort of messenger of God, upon being confronted by Moshe, denies any knowledge of God and refuses to accept the word of His prophet? Moreover, the pre-determined slavery that had been foretold to Avraham did not specify where the slavery would take place or what its nature would be. Pharaoh could easily have abdicated the role of enslaver, refused to assume the morally reprehensible position of oppressor. Furthermore, the covenant that God forged with Avraham spoke of enslavement and suffering, but did not speak of infanticide. The sheer cruelty displayed by Pharaoh went far beyond the call of duty.

From the outset, Pharaoh expressed an objective problem with the Israelites.

Pharaoh could have chosen another way to solve the problem he perceived: Rather than victimizing or ostracizing these strangers, he could have co-opted them, subsumed them into the greater Egyptian nation

He regarded them as a fifth column, strangers, foreigners residing in "his" land, a people who could not be trusted. Ironically, the Israelites had been in the land of Egypt for generations, and the Egyptian economy had been saved by none other than an Israelite. Yet Pharaoh chose not to study history; he did not remember Yosef.

Pharaoh could have chosen another way to solve the problem he perceived: Rather than victimizing or ostracizing these strangers, he could have co-opted them, subsumed them into the greater Egyptian nation (a nation that had successfully subsumed waves of foreigners from the north). By affording them full rights, acceptance, appreciation, he could have turned his "adversaries" into allies. Throughout history, the Children of Israel have always been

susceptible to the seductive advances of alien cultures; the astounding rate of assimilation in the modern era speaks eloquently in favor of this strategy. By displaying his distrust of these strangers, by legislating their “otherness”, Pharaoh effectively insured their continued existence as a separate nation, while at the same time sealing his own fate and the fate of his kingdom. Pharaoh had shown his hand: It was not the Will of God that he wished to fulfill, it was his own paranoia and xenophobia that led him down the path he chose.

The Torah’s message regarding Pharaoh’s choice rings out loud and clear throughout the remainder of the Five Books: We are enjoined, time and time again, to learn from Pharaoh’s bad choices. We are commanded to treat the stranger with respect, love and acceptance. We are instilled with an acute sense of history, and taught to distill from the slavery experience what it is like to be disenfranchised. The Torah instructs us to redouble our efforts to see to it that others will not be treated as we were. Like Pharaoh, we are capable of choosing the path of hatred and suspicion or of peace and respect; one of the quintessential principles of Judaism is the moral imperative to choose the path of peace.

Pharaoh made the wrong choice, and neither a good cardiologist nor a sharp defense attorney could have changed the outcome. The choices he made were made freely, willingly, enthusiastically. His misdeeds were his own; his treatment of the emerging Jewish nation was criminal, and his punishment well-deserved.

For a more in-depth analysis see: <http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2013/12/audio-and-essays-parashat-vaera.html>