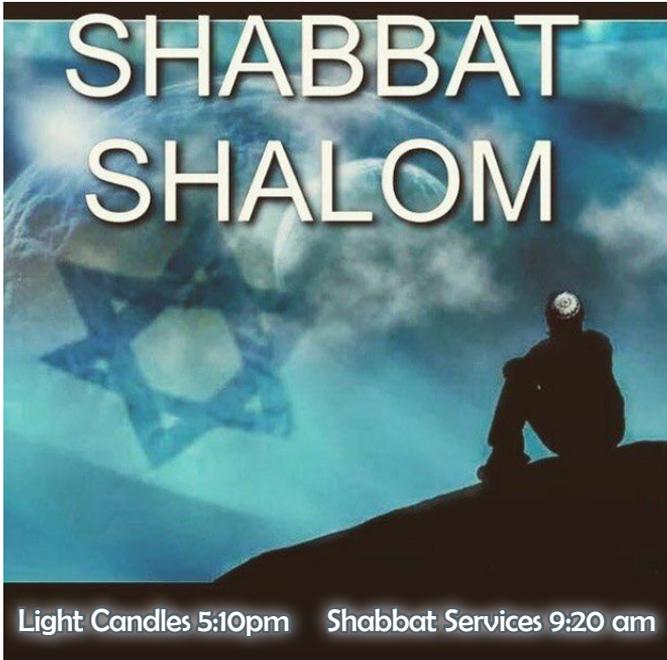




Carnegie Shul Chatter

January 22, 2020



Free Will — Or Not

Did you ever wonder why, when Moses said, “Let my people go,” Pharaoh didn’t comply — especially when a plague or two was unleashed upon Egypt?

Why, as the Torah says, did God harden Pharaoh’s heart instead of softening it, so that Pharaoh would let the people go? And what about Pharaoh’s free will? Did God’s hardening of Pharaoh’s heart nullify free will?

Well, this week’s parshah, Vaera, recounts this very issue, and below is an explanation from the most learned Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, that answers these questions.

Did He Have a Choice?

As an old song says, “It’s not often easy, and not often kind. Did you ever have to make up your mind?” And so people sometimes say, “I had no choice.”

Did they really have no choice, or were the consequences so dire that they felt they had no choice?

Sometimes the choice is horrible. Sometimes your health or safety, or the health or safety of your family, may be at stake. Sometimes your reputation may be at stake.

But don’t you always have a choice?

You may not like the alternatives, and there may not be any really good option. In fact all of the options might be horrible, but don’t you always have a choice?

God gives us free will and the ability to make our own choices.

Pharaoh may not have liked the economic and political consequences of freeing the Israelite slaves, but he did have a choice.

He made the most expedient choice for himself, and he had to pay the consequences.

As the song says, “It’s not often easy, and not often kind. Did you ever have to make up your mind?”

The Weighing of the Heart

Parshat Vaera in a Nutshell

Pharaoh was bathing in the River Nile when Moses and Aaron delivered their message and warning from God. Pharaoh refused to listen and so the Ten Plagues began. First the Nile turned to blood, then millions of frogs appeared, and then all the Egyptians were affected by lice. But still Pharaoh refused to listen. So the plagues continued. Wild animals roamed the streets, pets and farm animals died from disease, and the people suffered with boils. Each time Pharaoh became more stubborn and denied the Israelites their freedom.



Vaera tells of seven terrible plagues, ending with large hail stones (containing fire inside) and each time, Pharaoh refused to let Moses lead his people to freedom. But soon he would. The Exodus story had finally begun.

Question to ponder: Why do you think God needed to send so many plagues to take the Israelites out of Egypt?

The core idea: In this week's parsha, before even the first plague has struck Egypt, God tells Moses: "I will harden Pharaoh's heart and multiply My miraculous signs and wonders in Egypt." (Shemot7:3)

The hardening of Pharaoh's heart is mentioned twenty times during the story of the Exodus. Sometimes it is Pharaoh who is said to harden his own heart. At other times, God is said to have done so. The Torah uses three different verbs in this context: *ch-z-k*, to strengthen, *k-sh-h*, to harden, and *k-b-d*, to make heavy.

Throughout the ages, our Rabbis have pondered over the following question: If God hardened Pharaoh's heart, how could he have been criticized for not letting the Israelites go? He had no choice in the matter, because it was God's doing, not his. So why was he punished?

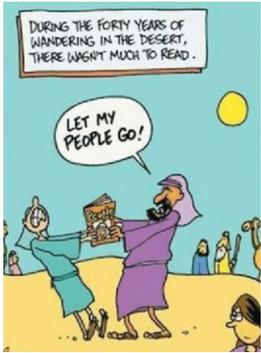
Look carefully in Vaera, and you will see that Pharaoh was the one hardening his heart for the first five plagues. So for quite a while, his stubbornness and refusals are all his choice. Then, starting with the sixth plague, God hardened Pharaoh's heart. Noting this, our commentators made several points. Rashi says that the hardening of Pharaoh's heart for the final five plagues was a punishment for the first five, when it was Pharaoh's own obstinacy that led him to refuse to let the people go. Rambam says that his heart was hardened so he could not repent. He was no longer deserving of the freedom to "turn away from his wickedness".

Albo and Sforno offer the opposite interpretation. God hardened Pharaoh's heart precisely to restore his free will. After the series of plagues that had devastated the land, Pharaoh

was under overwhelming pressure to let the Israelites go. Had he done so, it would not have been out of free choice, because who could resist the power of direct miracles from God?! God therefore strengthened Pharaoh's heart so that even after the first five plagues he was genuinely free to say Yes or No.

It may be that all three answers are right, and each one responds to a different verb. *K-sh-h*, "hardening," supports Rashi's reading. Pharaoh was hard on the Israelites, so God was hard on him. *K-b-d*, "making heavy," supports Rambam. Pharaoh lacked the energy, the strength, to repent. *Ch-z-k*, "to strengthen," supports Albo and Sforno. What is important to note here is that God did not find a quick, rushed solution. He was interested in the process more than the result.

The world was watching and God was sending out a message.



Yahrzeit Plaques

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