

Free Will is Responsibility

Of all the questions surrounding the ten plagues of Egypt, none has captured the interest of commentators throughout the ages as much as the question of how can God disrupt Pharaoh's decision-making process, and then hold him accountable for it. This question fascinates believers because it has direct application to their lives in terms of the purpose and the value of their actions. In a classic system of reward and punishment, evildoers are punished and the righteous are rewarded, but what if our understanding of righteous and evildoers is wrong? What if all is directed by God for His own needs and purposes? If God can manipulate Pharaoh's decisions in order to show His great might, how do I know that when I make a certain decision it is mine only, and not part of a sophisticated Divine plan? It is the pressing question of theodicy, Divine Justice. When a terrorist decides to slam his truck into innocent pedestrians, when a driver decides to text while driving, or when a corrupt CEO presents false data regarding the airbags in his vehicles, how should we view all the people killed on the roads because of these actions? Are they victims of the decisions of those three, stemming from hatred, carelessness, and greed, or were they destined to die and God guided the actions of others to carry out His plans?

I believe we must answer first the question of divine justice and only then breach the issue of Pharaoh being controlled by God. Though at first sight the system of reward and punishment seems very logical, it has a major flaw: it does not educate, it trains! We do good not because we understand its intrinsic value and relate to it, and not because we want to benefit others, but rather because we are concerned with our well-being. We avoid evil deeds and crime not because we do not want to harm another person or because we think it is morally wrong, but rather because we are concerned with our own well-being. The belief in the eternal reward in the World-to-Come has become the central piece of every orthodox speech and educational campaign, and thus many observant Jews are more selfish and less affected by the good deeds they perform.

Already the sages of the Mishna anticipated this dangerous trend and warned their followers not to expect their daily paycheck from God. They also noticed that the direct result system described in most of the bible, according to which the sinners are smitten while the righteous rejoice, doesn't function. Their explanation of that phenomenon was that God is hiding His face from us because of our sins, and is not involved in micromanaging the world. This approach was not accepted by all, and it seems that the more people suffered, the more they tried to justify their suffering as a retribution for sins. When they were not able to do so, they understood the suffering as an expiation for the communal sins of the nation. This was a defense mechanism

which allowed them to survive the toughest times without losing their faith. But what will we say of those who are not part of the Jewish People? Does their suffering expiate for our sins or theirs? And what of people who perish in natural disasters or innocent children who are born ill?

I would like to suggest a different approach, which might cause some theological discomfort to those who rigorously observe all the Mitzvoth with the hope of being protected from danger and disaster. The real question is why did God create the universe. If we believe that God is immutable, unchangeable, then there was no difference between God without the universe and God with the universe. We will have to accept the fact that we have no answer to this question.

Evil, as we understand it, is a human concept. We ask why did God create a world plagued by evil, but when we want God to eliminate evil, how far do we go? A God-controlled, evil-free world, might not allow sports cars, carbon emissions, fast food, and ladders, which are the main cause of home accidents. We cannot ask God to prevent only the things that bother us, and so we must accept, as believers, that making the world a better place is up to us.

Why then do we read in the bible that God micromanages our life? It was written for marketing purposes. No one would have accepted the weird new religion which denounced idolatry, claimed that all humans were created in the image of an invisible God, mandated a day of complete rest, and expected masters to treat their slaves as human beings. The idea that if you do all these you will be rewarded with bliss and abundance, and that if not, fire and brimstone will turn your cities into Sodom and Gomorra, was the powerful incentive that brought followers to the new religion.

As the sun was about to set over the period of the First Temple, it was clear, however, that the Israelites viewed the system superficially. They felt that they could do whatever they wanted, offer a sacrifice, and start sinning again with a clean bill of health. That is when the prophets stepped in and explained to the people that from now on, God's miracles, which served as training wheels, are off. Since then, we live in the era of human responsibility. God does not intervene, and if He does, it is very rarely and only for some people. We consider, for example, the return to Israel and establishment of a state to be a miracle, but how many innocent people died on the path to statehood, including the Holocaust, with no miracle to save them. Or take my friend who told me excitedly how he was miraculously saved on 9/11 because he attended a later minyan – and what about the thousands of other victims? Did they not deserve a miracle? The prophets quietly fought to change this mentality, and none of them put it more poignantly than Jeremiah in the book of Job (35:6-8):

אִם-תִּטָּאָה מִהַתְּפִעָלִיבּוּ וְרַבּוּ פְּשָׁעֶיךָ מִהַתְּעַשְׂהָ-לּוֹ: אִם-צִדְקָתְךָ מִהַתְּמוּ-לּוֹ אִוּ מִהַמִּיַּדְךָ יִקָּח: לֹא-יִשְׁכַּחַם רִשְׁעֶךָ וּלְבָבְךָ
אֵלֶם צִדְקָתְךָ

When you sin, you do not affect God, and your numerous transgressions will not change Him. If you are righteous, what have you given Him, and what can you offer Him? Your wickedness affects humans like you, and so does your righteousness.

In other words, the system of good and evil, reward and punishment, though presented as a religious system which flows between the individual and the divine, is a social system whose real focus is the relationships between humans. The reward for good deeds directed at others is the sensation of fulfilment and satisfaction, and the knowledge that someone's life is now better because of me. If we are relentless with our pursuit of this satisfaction, the world will become a perfect place, devoid of evil, not because of divine intervention which turns us all to robots, but rather because of deliberate actions performed by thinking, sensitive, deeply committed humans. When this happens, we will all benefit. Well, not us exactly, but more likely our great grandchildren, or the equivalent of a fourth generation. The divine system of reward and punishment, known to us as the Torah, does not guarantee perfect health and long life to the righteous, but as more people embark on the path of total righteousness, which includes and focuses on doing good for others, perfect health and long life could be guaranteed for future generations around the world.

Let us now go back to the stiff-hearted Pharaoh. In light of what was said so far, we can understand that the ten plagues, alongside the enslavement of the Israelites, are symbolic and educational. We should therefore look for a message which, beyond the supernatural miracles of the past, can resonate with our contemporary life and with the goal of improving and perfecting the world. That message, I believe, is delivered from both sides of the fence, the oppressed Israelites and the oppressing Egyptians, and it is that the power of nations and organizations lies in the hands of individuals, who are collectively responsible for the decisions and actions of the governing body, even in non-democratic systems.

On the Israelite side, the first attempt to prompt people to action was done by Moshe, who first killed the taskmaster and then tried to unite the people. They were not ready yet and he fled, frustrated, to the desert. God summoned him and insisted that he goes to Pharaoh, because even when assisted by God's miracles, the leader must have an inner conviction of the importance of his mission. The Israelites, who sat idly by during the plagues, were asked to perform an act of defiance against the Egyptians just before the exodus, by slaughtering an animal sacred to their oppressors and splashing its blood on their doorposts. By doing so they marked themselves as targets for their enemies, and showed their confidence in God and their readiness to leave this life of slavery.

On the Egyptian side, God did not want Pharaoh to let the people go, He wanted the people to let the people go. It had to be a decision of the Egyptians, in order to send a message to future generations that they cannot exempt themselves from responsibility by blaming it on the government. Note that God never intervenes with the Egyptian people. He only hardens the heart of Pharaoh, and at one point, of his counselors as well. Since mass enslavement would not have been possible without the active collaboration of the Egyptians, the stiffening of Pharaoh's heart was necessary to give the people a chance to decide on their own, and perhaps to oppose their ruler.

To prove this theory, let us examine two issues: 1. When did God harden Pharaoh's heart? and 2. What was the reaction of the Egyptians to the plagues?

Being stubborn was Pharaoh's choice after the first five and the seventh plague. After the sixth, eighth, and ninth plagues, God stiffened the king's heart. God had to intervene towards the end as Pharaoh's resistance was wearing out and as his counselors were putting pressure on him. The outlier, the sixth plague, can be explained by the nature of that plague, boils, which acted as an equalizer. We know from elsewhere in the bible that when people were inflicted with boils, they stripped themselves almost naked and scratched the boils with potsherds (Job 2:7-8). Pharaoh was willing to suffer through the inconvenience of other plagues, but the sixth one not only reduced him to a beggar, but made him lose his elevated status and become equal to all his subjects and even the animals. It was Pharaoh's arrogance which almost made him vulnerable, and God hardened his heart to give an opportunity to the people to react.

The people, meanwhile, collaborated with the king. After the first plague, blood, they dug for water around the Nile. After the invasion of the frogs ended, they piled the dead amphibians in odorous heaps instead of marching on the palace with torches and pitchforks. Before the plague of hail, heeding God's warning, some Egyptians brought their flocks from the fields into the homes, while others left them in the field, in defiance of God's word. Through their actions, the Egyptians displayed their belief that the enslavement of the Israelites is justified and that they are going to prevail in the war against God.

It was only after the last plague, the death of the firstborn, that all Egyptians were stirred to action. Death is the great equalizer, especially when it is the death of a child. The artificial barriers between the monarch and his subjects were removed, and for the first time, the Egyptians identified with the pain of the Israelites who lost many children to Pharaoh's evil schemes and to their harsh life conditions. This is when we read that the Egyptians took the decision and pressured the Israelites to leave the country (Ex. 12:33). True, it was because of their own suffering, but the point of the exile and the exodus was that the nation of slaves will seek freedom and the nation of oppressors will unanimously decide to send their slaves free.

The message for the contemporary reader is that we are not allowed to hide behind leaders at any level of the establishment. We must examine the world around us, search for injustice, wrongdoing, poverty, or disease, and strive to fight them. Those who choose not to take action cannot complain that their leaders are not doing enough, and those who do evil cannot blame it on the heads of government or institutions. The story of the Exodus is a call to action, suggesting that instead of rising to the occasion only when struck by disaster, we become proactive and always ask what is my personal responsibility, and how can I help in making the world a better place.

Shabbat Shalom