

Shabbat 16 January 2016 – Parshat Bo

An essential of Jewish thought and a pillar of the Torah is what we call the freedom of choice. The Torah says “Behold I am placing before you today life and goodness, death or evil; and you shall choose life:” G-d has placed before each and every one of us choices, and if we want to be good, upright, decent people; living lives permeated with fulfilment and purpose; If we want to deal honestly in business, we desire to sit, study Torah and interact with our fellow beings in a just and charitable way – the choice is in our hands. Conversely, if we G-d forbid want to turn our backs from the Torah, sever our connection with the Jewish community, or act deceitfully in our dealings-the choice is in our hands. In every aspect of life, the choice is there. Take away that freedom to decide between right and wrong, good and bad; we would become mere automatons, fulfilling God’s will with no meaning or choice in the matter.

However, at the outset of this week’s Sedra we come across a statement which at first glance seems to dispute that view. “God said to Moses; “Come to Pharaoh, *for I have made his heart and the heart of his servants stubborn* so that I can put these signs of mine in his midst... and you will know that I am God”” (Ex 10; 1)

In other words God is saying that, the case of Pharaoh is different and in order to demonstrate the miracles and wonders of God with the ten plagues and the Exodus from Egypt it was necessary to put Pharaoh in a position of suspended animation and force his “heart to become hardened” so that the freedom to choose would be taken away from him. If so, why should Pharaoh be punished for something that was beyond his ability to prevent?

Indeed this question is somewhat aggravated by the fact that from even before the beginning of the ten plagues God says to Moses “*But I will harden Pharaoh’s heart and multiply My miraculous signs and miracles in Egypt.*” (Ex.7; 4)

I would like to suggest a novel interpretation of this question based on the words of Nachmanides and other commentaries. He says that it was only after the first five plagues that God hardened the heart of Pharaoh. Before that time he made his own choices. It was his own decision to ignore Moses’ initial warnings and it was he who hardened his own heart. Even as miracles were demonstrated before him and he felt the effects of the early plagues, he could not turn back from his original opposition to

the Children of Israel's release from slavery. To do a turn-around at this stage was almost impossible. The reason was because it had become second nature to him. He was bound by the decisions he had made previously which had become ingrained into his being. Rather than taking away his free choice, God implants in Pharaoh and indeed in all of us the mechanism that once it becomes a habit it becomes, not impossible but more difficult to change- and that is how God hardens the heart, not by taking away the free choice but by one's own force of nature implanted by God into every single one of us.

We all face choices in life. We all want to change. But sometimes we are held back by habit forming choices that make the task all that more difficult. The Medrash tells us that Pharaoh survived the Splitting of the Sea and eventually returned to God. Even a Pharaoh whose heart was hardened, can change.