**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT VAERA**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

After the seventh plague that God visited upon Egypt – the plague of hail – Pharaoh summoned Moshe and confessed his guilt, whereupon Moshe promised to bring an end to the plague. He told the king that he would leave the city and then outstretch his hands to the Almighty in prayer, begging Him to end the destructive storm: “Moshe said to him, ‘When I leave the city, I will spread my hands out to the Lord…’” (Shemot 9:29). Indeed, the Torah tells several verses later (9:33), “Moshe left from Pharaoh’s presence [and left] the city, and he spread his hands out to the Lord…”

The practice to spread one’s hands out during prayer is mentioned in other contexts, as well. In Sefer Melakhim I (8:54), we read that King Shlomo’s hands were spread when he recited his famous prayer at the time of the dedication of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. After Avraham’s successful battle to rescue Sedom, he told the city’s king, “I lift my hand to the Supreme God” (Bereishit 14:22), which Onkelos translates as a reference to prayer (“I lift my hand in prayer before the Lord”). And the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 60:14) describes Yitzchak as standing with “his hand outstretched in prayer” when Rivka saw him for the first time.

Rav Yissachar Ber Eilenburg, in his *Be’er Sheva* (responsum 71), raises the question of why this practice is not customarily observed. Although it is clear from the aforementioned sources that a number of righteous Biblical figures prayed with their arms outstretched, this practice is not mentioned in halakhic literature and is not commonly observed.

Rav Eilenburg suggests that this practice perhaps stopped being followed once it became common among followers of other faiths. He notes *Chazal*’s comment (cited by Rashi, Devarim 16:22) that the patriarchs erected monuments as religious symbols, but the Torah forbids doing so because this had become a widespread custom among pagans. Possibly, then, this is also why the custom of spreading one’s hands during prayer is also not commonly observed among Jews.

Rav Yaakov Emden, in the introduction to his *Beit Yaakov* commentary to the *siddur*, suggests a different theory based on the aforementioned comment in the Midrash regarding Rivka’s initial encounter with Yitzchak. Rivka saw Yitzchak with his hands outstretched in prayer, the Midrash relates, and she then recognized that he was a uniquely righteous individual. Rav Yaakov Emden thus concludes that this was a practice observed only by the exceedingly righteous, and it is possible that later generations felt unworthy of praying in this fashion.

Along somewhat similar lines, Rav Chaim Binyamin Pontremoli, in his *Petach Ha-devir* commentary to the *Orach Chayim* section of the *Shulchan Arukh* (89), suggests that outstretching one’s hands during prayer means avowing that one’s “hands” are pure and innocent of impropriety. The hands represent one’s professional activity, and one who outstretches his hand to God is proclaiming that he is innocent of any sort of wrongdoing, such as theft or dishonesty, in his work. If one prays in this fashion but is not truly innocent of impropriety, then he is called to task for his false avowal of innocence, and for this reason, Rav Pontremoli suggests, people stopped observing this practice, as they did not feel confident enough to proclaim their total innocence of impropriety in their jobs and their commercial pursuits.

(Based on Rav Asher Anshel Schwartz, [*Ma’adanei Asher*, Parashat Vaera, 5777](http://beinenu.com/sites/default/files/alonim/32_14_77.pdf))

Sunday

When God commanded Moshe to approach Pharaoh and warn him about the impending plague of blood, He specified that Moshe should confront Pharaoh “in the morning,” when Pharaoh was “going to the water” (7:15). Rashi, citing from the Midrash (*Shemot Rabba* 9:8), famously explains that Pharaoh arose early in the morning each day to secretly perform his bodily functions in the river. The Egyptian king claimed to have divine qualities, and told his subjects that he was a deity of sorts. He therefore needed to perform his bodily functions just once each day – early in the morning, before anybody was present to observe him – lest anyone recognize that he was human.

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz is cited as having noted the significance of the fact that Pharaoh, according to the Midrash’s description, subjected himself to considerable discomfort – relieving himself just once a day – in order to project this image. Although it was not critically important that people viewed him as a divine being, he nevertheless felt that this image was important enough to warrant the discomfort of restraining himself the rest of the day.

As it so often does, the Midrash here depicts an extreme model that exemplifies a more moderate, and very common, characteristic. We are all capable – and likely guilty, to one extent or another – of the same kind of behavior which the Midrash attributes to Pharaoh, namely, going to exaggerated lengths in order to project a certain image and bring ourselves honor and admiration. Some people, for example, take on excessive workloads, beyond that which they need for their livelihood, so they could earn enough money to impress their neighbors and peers. More generally, many people feel pressured to conduct themselves in a manner which does not necessarily suit their personality, or engage in activities which they dislike, solely for the sake of their reputation and to earn other people’s esteem. Like Pharaoh, we are well-aware that we are human, that we are flawed and far from perfect, but we desperately try to project an impressive image, and to that end we are prepared to make our lives difficult and subject ourselves to a great deal of pressure.

The Midrash’s amusing depiction of Pharaoh warns us against this natural tendency. It reminds us not to compromise our own happiness and satisfaction for the sake of winning the respect and admiration of our peers, and to instead live the life that best suits us without overly concerning ourselves with what other people think of us.

Monday

On several occasions throughout the story of the ten plagues and the Exodus, the Torah speaks of God “hardening” Pharaoh’s heart. This is mentioned first in God’s prophecy to Moshe just before he left Midyan to return to Egypt and confront Pharaoh, when God told Moshe, “…*va-ani achazeik et libo ve-lo yeshalach et ha-am*” – “I will harden his heart, and he will not send the nation” (4:21). Likewise, after Pharaoh rejected Moshe’s initial demand that he release *Benei Yisrael*, God instructed Moshe to return to the king, and said, “I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and I will make abundant my miracles and wonders in the land of Egypt” (7:3). This is mentioned on several other occasions, as well.

Much has been written about the subject of God’s “hardening” Pharaoh’s heart, which is commonly understood to mean that God actually forced Pharaoh to refuse Moshe’s demand that he free *Benei Yisrael*. The obvious implication of this understanding is that God interfered with Pharaoh’s free will, and denied him the intellectual or emotional capacity to yield and to do the right thing. Such a notion, of course, gives rise to the question of how a human being’s free will – the existence of which constitutes a fundamental tenet of Jewish faith – could possibly be lost. The most famous answer given to this question is that of the Rambam, who, both in *Hilkhot Teshuva* (6:3-4) and *Shemona Perakim* (chapter 8), controversially writes that one who commits a grave sin or numerous sins can be punished by having his free will taken from him.

Among those who argue on the Rambam’s theory is Rav Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenberg, author of the *Ha-ketav Ve-ha’kabbala* commentary to the Torah. In a characteristically bold and innovative passage in this work (to Shemot 4:21), Rav Mecklenberg asserts that the Rambam and other writers misunderstood the meaning of the verses that speak of God “hardening” Pharaoh’s heart. He cites the Midrash’s comment in *Shemot Rabba* (13:6), “Why did the Almighty gave time for the plagues…and did not being [them] upon [the Egyptians] immediately? In order that they change their minds and repent.” This would certainly suggest that God wanted Pharaoh and his countrymen to repent – not the opposite, as the Rambam claimed. (It should be noted, however, that other Midrashic passages, as cited by the Ramban (7:3), strongly support the contention that God withheld Pharaoh’s ability to repent.) According to Rav Mecklenberg, when the Torah speaks of God “hardening” Pharaoh’s heart, it actually refers to the severity of the punishments brought upon the king and his nation, expressing the pain and distress the plagues caused. And thus, for example, when God told Moshe in Parashat Vaera, “I will harden Pharaoh’s heart…and Pharaoh will not listen to you” (7:3-4), he meant that despite all the calamities that God will bring upon Pharaoh, he will nevertheless refuse to yield. Likewise, whenever the Torah in the Exodus story tells that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart and he refused to release *Benei Yisrael*, it means that Pharaoh refused to release them despite this “hardening,” even though he and his country suffered immensely from the plagues. The Torah repeatedly emphasizes this point, Rav Mecklenberg explains, to underscore the extent of Pharaoh’s obstinacy and arrogance, how his insistence on the correctness of his position was so firm that nothing, not even supernatural plagues, could convince him otherwise.

One might, however, challenge this theory in light of the account in Sefer Devarim of *Benei Yisrael*’s battle against the Emorite kingdom. In Parashat Devarim, amidst Moshe’s brief review of the *Benei Yisrael*’s experiences after leaving Mount Sinai, he recalls how *Benei Yisrael* requested rights of passage from Sichon, the king of the Emorites, who promptly refused and launched an attack against *Benei Yisrael*. The ensuing conflict resulted in *Benei Yisrael*’s conquest of the territory east of the Jordan River, which several tribes decided to make their permanent home. Moshe tells the people that Sichon refused to allow *Benei Yisrael* pass through his country “because the Lord your God hardened his spirit and strengthened his heart, in order to give him into your hands” (Devarim 2:30). It seems very difficult to interpret this verse – which is formulated similarly to the descriptions of Pharaoh’s heart “hardening” – as referring to anything other than God luring Sichon to attack *Benei Yisrael* by making him especially stubborn and unyielding. Rav Mecklenberg’s approach to explaining the concept of Pharaoh’s heart being “hardened” would have to account for the description of Sichon’s heart’s “hardening” when *Benei Yisrael* requested passage rights through his territory. Somehow, he would need to show how his understanding – that the “hardening” refers to the severe punishment – could be applied to the Torah’s description of Sichon, as well. Rav Mecklenberg makes no comment in his work to this verse in Sefer Devarim, and thus we cannot know how he would explain the description of Sichon’s heart being “hardened.”

Tuesday

The Rambam, in *Hilkhot Teshuva* (6:3) and in *Shemona Perakim* (4), advances the theory that although all people are given the free will to choose to act nobly or sinfully, a person could lose this ability as a punishment for his misdeeds. It is possible, the Rambam writes, for a person to lose the ability to repent as a punishment for an especially grave sin or for his having committed numerous sins. On this basis, the Rambam explains the verses in Sefer Shemot (4:21, 7:3 and elsewhere) that speak of God “hardening” Pharaoh’s heart. The Rambam explains that Pharaoh had committed such grave crimes against *Benei Yisrael* that he was punished by losing the possibility of repenting, and this is why he repeatedly refused to yield to God’s demand to release *Benei Yisrael*, even after witnessing God’s miraculous plagues – because he was denied the wherewithal to yield.

The Maharsham (Rav Shalom Mordechai Schwadron of Berezhany) wrote a lengthy essay about the Rambam’s theory, which he entitled “*Ma’amar Ha-teshuva Ve-ha’tefila*” and is printed in the beginning of one the volumes of his *Da’at Torah* (O.C. vol. 4). He begins by expressing the reaction that many likely feel upon hearing of the possibility of a person being denied the possibility to repent:

Now these words of our rabbi [the Rambam] are very frightening, and can, seemingly, lead to despair, Heaven forbid. After all, all the hope of people like us on earth is repentance! Without it, which person can live and say, “My soul is at peace; I did not sin or commit iniquity or misdeeds’? If through one sin or many sins that a person commits he can reach a situation where repentance is prevented from him and he is not given the ability to repent from his evil, as stated, then he will despair, Heaven forbid…

The Maharsham emphasizes this point by citing the prophecy of Yechezkel (33:10-11) in which God told the prophet of the people’s feeling that since they have sinned, they no longer have hope and will die in their state of iniquity. This assumption led the people to despair and make no effort to change and repent. God instructed the prophet to convey to them the message that God does not want evildoers to die in a state of sin, but rather to repent. This prophecy appears to call into question the Rambam’s theory, according to which, seemingly, lifelong sinners could legitimately conclude that they should not bother trying to change, since they have likely forfeited the opportunity to repent, as Pharaoh did.

The Maharsham therefore proceeds to show that the Rambam did not intend that people could permanently lose the possibility of repentance. Even Pharaoh, he claims, could have been able to repent if he truly wished to change.

The Maharsham seeks to prove his claim from the following comments of the Rambam in *Hilkhot Teshuva* (6:4):

Regarding this matter the righteous ones and the prophets ask God in their prayers to help them…like [King] David said, “Teach me, O Lord, Your way” (Tehillim 27:11), meaning: Let my sins not block me from the path of truth… Similarly, that which he said, “and support me with a generous spirit” (Tehillim 51:14) – meaning: Allow my spirit to fulfill Your wishes, and my sins should not cause me to be prevented from repentance. Rather, I should always have the ability until I again understand and know the path of truth…

The Maharsham understands the Rambam’s description of King David’s prayer to mean that David feared that he may have been deserving of this punishment – the loss of the ability to repent. While one might have read the Rambam to mean that King David prayed for help so he avoids committing sins that would render him liable of such punishment, the Maharsham explains the Rambam’s formulation as indicating that King David refers to the possibility that he had already committed such sins. Accordingly, the fact that King David recited such a prayer clearly proves that even after God has decided to deny a person the opportunity for *teshuva*, he still has the ability to overcome this barrier and repent – and King David was praying for this ability. Even after suspecting that he might be deserving of this punishment, he beseeched God to mercifully allow him nonetheless to repent. Necessarily, then, the Rambam does not speak of a situation where there is no longer any chance whatsoever for repentance. Even when a person receives this punishment, that he is prevented from repenting, he can still beseech God to annul this decree, just as a person can plead with the Almighty to annul any other decree. And thus, according to the Maharsham’s understanding of the Rambam’s position, at no point is a person denied any possibility of repenting.

Wednesday

Yesterday, we noted the theory famously advanced by the Rambam in *Hilkhot Teshuva* (6:3) that when the Torah speaks of God “hardening” Pharaoh’s heart, it means that God denied Pharaoh the ability to repent as a punishment for his wrongdoing. Although the notion of free will, the ability granted to all people to decide whether to act virtuously or sinfully, constitutes a fundamental precept in Jewish thought, the Rambam asserts that God will, in exceptional situations, deny a sinner the ability to repent. The Rambam explains that this suspension of free will is sometimes the punishment that God decides that a sinner deserves on account of his wrongdoing, and this is what happened to Pharaoh.

The Ramban, in his commentary to Parashat Vaera (7:3), cites a passage from the Midrash that appears to corroborate this theory. In *Shemot Rabba* (13:4), the Midrash cites Reish Lakish as commenting in reference to Pharaoh, “He [God] warns him once, twice and three times, and if he does not repent, he locks the door to repentance in front of him.” The Midrash clearly expresses the view taken by the Rambam, that God prevented Pharaoh from repenting due to his continued refusal to obey His command.

This theory has a source in an earlier passage in *Shemot Rabba* (11:1), as well. The Torah tells that God instructed Moshe to appear before Pharaoh early in the morning to warn him of the plague of blood (7:15). The Midrash, surprisingly, comments that Pharaoh arose early in the morning to pray to God, and God therefore sent Moshe to Pharaoh early so that Pharaoh would not have a chance to pray:

After the Almighty waits for the wicked to perform repentance and they do not, then even if they eventually want to, he restrains their hearts so they would not perform repentance… Even though they want to return to the Almighty and seek to engage in prayer, they are unable to… Thus Pharaoh wished to engage in prayer, and the Almighty said to Moshe, go stand before him before he goes out [to pray].

This passage, too, clearly reflects the Rambam’s position, that God withheld from Pharaoh the ability to repent.

The Maharsham, in his “*Ma’amar Ha-teshuva Ve-ha’tefila*” (printed in the beginning of his *Da’at Torah*, O.C., vol. 4), draws proof from this Midrashic passage to his claim (which we discussed yesterday) that God does not ever entirely deny a wicked person the possibility of repentance. As we saw, the Maharsham sought to demonstrate that even according to the Rambam, at no point does any person lose all chances of ever repenting. Just as a sinner can petition God to revoke any decree issued against him, he is likewise capable of having God revoke the decree that he cannot repent. The Maharsham further asserts that even when God punishes a sinner by denying him the ability to repent, He does not deny him the ability altogether. Repentance becomes more difficult for such a person, but not impossible. The Maharsham draws proof from the Midrash’s comment that Moshe was sent to disrupt Pharaoh was praying. By sending Moshe to speak to Pharaoh just then, as he prepared to pray, God did not actually prevent Pharaoh from praying. He merely created a distraction which necessitated stronger resolve on Pharaoh’s part to pray and appeal to God. Or, as the Maharsham understood the Midrash’s remark, when Moshe approached Pharaoh and accorded him honor, Pharaoh felt reassured and overconfident such that he felt no need to pray in submission to the Almighty. Regardless, it is clear that Pharaoh was not prevented from praying, but rather somehow discouraged from praying. The fact that the Midrash points to this incident as an example of how God sometimes denies the wicked the possibility of repentance thus proves that even when this happens, the wicked individual still has the opportunity to repent. Even when God makes it more difficult for a sinner to repent as punishment for his sins, the possibility of *teshuva* always exists and is never entirely taken away.

Thursday

Abarbanel, in his commentary to Parashat Vaera (7:3), takes strong objection to the famous view taken by the Rambam (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 6:3) that God interfered with Pharaoh’s free will in punishment for his crimes against *Benei Yisrael*. The notion that God would deny a sinner the opportunity for repentance, Abarbanel writes, is “*zar ve-kasheh me’od*” – “very strange and difficult.” He notes that the prophets emphasized the fact that God desires the repentance of sinners, and he points to examples of especially grievous sinners – such as King Achav and King Menashe – who repented and whose prayers were answered, making it difficult to imagine that God would ever deny somebody the ability to repent.

Abarbanel therefore offers other explanations for the verses in the story of the Exodus that speak of God “hardening” Pharaoh’s heart. His third approach, which he claims to be the most correct, explains that God did not actually impair Pharaoh’s decision-making capabilities, but rather created a situation whereby Pharaoh could deny God’s power. Each time a plague struck Egypt, it ended – usually after Pharaoh called to Moshe and ask that he bring an end to the destruction – and this misled Pharaoh. By ending each plague, rather than allowing it continue until Pharaoh actually released *Benei Yisrael*, God in effect “hardened” Pharaoh’s heart, allowing him a way to feel he could win such that he persisted in his intransigence.

Abarbanel applies this approach to explain the other instance in the Torah where we find a description of God “hardening” somebody’s heart. In Sefer Devarim (2:30), Moshe tells *Benei Yisrael* that when he requested passage rights through the territory of the Emorite kingdom, the Emorite king, Sichon, refused to grant the request and promptly attacked *Benei Yisrael* “because the Lord your God hardened his spirit and strengthened his heart, in order to give him into your hands.” It seems, at first glance, that God seized control of Sichon’s rational faculties and somehow forced him to decide to launch an attack on *Benei Yisrael*. Abarbanel, however, explains that God lured Sichon to attack *Benei Yisrael* by making him feel confident in his nation’s military superiority. Prior to *Benei Yisrael*’s arrival at the Emorite border, they had passed the borders of two other nations – Edom and Moav – who refused to allow them passage, as the Torah relates in Parashat Devarim. *Benei Yisrael* circumvented these territories, rather than engage these nations in conflict, and this led Sichon to believe that *Benei Yisrael* were weaker than Edom and Moav. As Sichon had recently conquered a large swath of territory from Moav (Bamidbar 21:26), he reasoned that if *Benei Yisrael* feared Moav, then he could certainly defeat them. The truth was that *Benei Yisrael* avoided military conflict with Edom and Moav in compliance with God’s command, not out of any sort of fear. Thus, Sichon’s heart was “hardened” by the misleading sequence of events, which gave Sichon the impression that he could easily defeat *Benei Yisrael*.

This approach was also developed [more recently](http://www.hatanakh.com/articles/%D7%95%D7%90%D7%A0%D7%99-%D7%90%D7%A7%D7%A9%D7%94-%D7%90%D7%AA-%D7%9C%D7%91-%D7%A4%D7%A8%D7%A2%D7%94) by the Rosh Yeshiva, HaRav Yaakov Medan *shelit”a*, who noted another instance of the “hardening” of hearts. In Sefer Yehoshua (11:20), we are told that God “hardened” the hearts of the Canaanite peoples, leading them to wage war against *Benei Yisrael.* Rav Medan explained that we would have expected the Canaanites to simply surrender to *Benei Yisrael*, whom they feared. As the Israelite spies heard during their stay in Yericho (Yehoshua 2:10-11), the Canaanites dreaded *Benei Yisrael*’s power, having heard of their miraculous triumphs over Egypt and the Emorites. Why, then, did they decide to wage war against the feared nation, rather than just surrender? The aforementioned verse answers this question by telling that their hearts were “hardened.” Rav Medan explained this as referring to the first battle waged by *Benei Yisrael* against the city of Ha-ai (Yehoshua, chapter 7), which resulted in *Benei Yisrael*’s defeat. Although *Benei Yisrael* later conquered the city, Rav Medan suggested that the first battle had the effect of eliminating *Benei Yisrael*’s aura of invincibility in the eyes of the Canaanite nations, who suddenly felt capable of meeting the challenge and defeating the threatening Israelites. It was this battle which “hardened” the Canaanites’ hearts and led them to try to resist *Benei Yisrael*’s conquest, rather than surrender.

Friday

As we’ve discussed this week, the Torah on numerous occasions throughout the story of the Exodus mentions that God “hardened” Pharaoh’s heart, which appears to mean that God made Pharaoh refuse to allow *Benei Yisrael* to leave. This concept gives rise to the difficult question of why Pharaoh would be punished for a decision which God somehow forced him to make, and, more generally, how it is possible that God would deny a person the free will to choose to do the right thing.

An answer cited in the name of the work *Imrei Yaakov* suggests that the suspension of Pharaoh’s free will was warranted due to one particular aspect of his crimes against *Benei Yisrael*. As we read in Parashat Shemot (chapter 5), Pharaoh reacted angrily to Moshe’s initial demand that he release *Benei Yisrael*, and decided to significantly increase the slaves’ workload. He ordered that the slaves would no longer be supplied straw for the production of bricks, and would instead have to find their own straw while still producing the same number of bricks each day. The Torah relates that as a result of this edict, the Israelite foremen were beaten by the Egyptian taskmasters on account of the slaves’ failure to meet their daily quota of bricks. The *Imrei Yaakov* notes that Pharaoh in effect created a situation where *Benei Yisrael* were punished for failing to do something they were incapable of doing. It was impossible for the slaves to search for straw and still meet the same rate of production as they had met previously, and yet they were punished for failing to meet the quota. In retribution, God created a situation where Pharaoh was punished for failing to do something he was incapable of doing. God withheld his ability to agree to release *Benei Yisrael*, and then punished him for his forced disobedience – precisely as he punished *Benei Yisrael* for their failing to complete the impossible task he imposed on them.

This insight perhaps serves to warn against having unrealistic expectations from the people around us. Pharaoh’s heartless cruelty towards *Benei Yisrael* is an extreme example of a more common form of cruelty – reacting harshly to people for mistakes and failures which they could not have been reasonably expected to avoid. We expect the people in our lives to produce a certain quota of “bricks” – to conduct themselves in certain ways, to speak a certain way, and to treat us a certain way – but not always do they necessarily have the “straw” they need to meet our expectations. Some people need more time than others to develop certain character traits, skills and abilities, and we need to take their limitations into account in making our expectations. Pharaoh’s punishment for his imposing unrealistic demands upon his subjects should teach us to ensure never to demand more from people than can be reasonably and realistically expected, to take people’s limited abilities into consideration, and to never criticize people for failing to do that which lies beyond their limits.

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