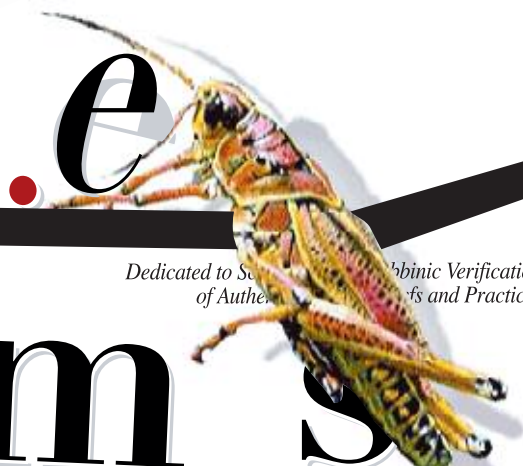


What was the goal of such complete devastation?



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all was eaten....

fruits, vegetables

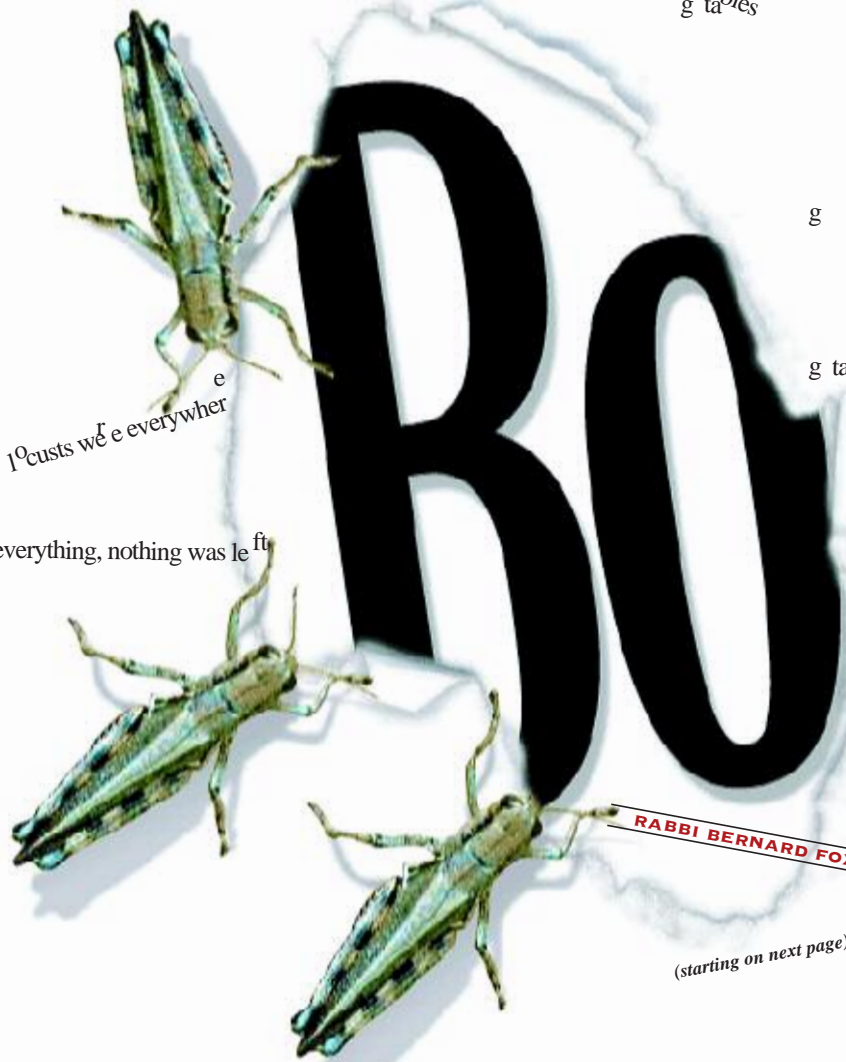
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locusts were everywhere

eating everything, nothing was left

the wind blew them in



RABBI BERNARD FOX

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Bo

RABBI BERNARD FOX

“And Hashem said to Moshe, ‘Go to Paroh. For I will make his heart stubborn and the hearts of his advisors so that I may place these wonders of mine in his midst, and so that you will retell to your children and grandchildren that I played with Egypt and the wonders that I placed among them. And you will know that I am Hashem.’” (Shemot 10:1-2)

This pasuk introduces the plague of Locust. Hashem tells Moshe that with this plague He will toy with Paroh and his nation. The apparent meaning is that Hashem will humiliate Paroh and the Egyptians. Why was this plague more degrading than those that preceded it?

There is another interesting issue raised by the plague of Locust. The essential affect of this plague was that locusts would consume all grain and produce that had survived the plague of Hail. Egypt would experience severe famine. In order for Paroh to rescue his people from this plague, he would need Moshe’s immediate intercession. Once the crops were consumed, the devastation of the plague would be complete.

As the damage of the plague was afflicted, Paroh withstood calling for Moshe and Ahron. Only after the crops had been totally destroyed, did he beseech Moshe and Ahron to pray on his behalf. Paroh had already persevered through the worst of the plague. Why break down at this point?

One interesting approach to these problems posits that these two questions are interrelated. Let us begin by understanding Paroh’s reason for seeking relief from the plague after the locusts had already consumed the crops and produce of the land.

Paroh withstood the destruction of the plague without weakening. However once the locusts had ravaged the land, he was confronted with a scene of total destruction. This landscape of devastation overwhelmed Paroh. Paroh knew he could not reverse the damage of the plague. But he had to have relief from the sight of locusts. This was his reason for beseeching Moshe and Ahron to pray on his behalf.

This is not the behavior of an individual who is in control. It is characteristic of an emotionally shattered person, unable to bear even a reminder of his misfortune.

Now we can answer our first question. In what

way was this plague more degrading than those that preceded it? The first seven plagues never broke Paroh emotionally. He was able to retain his self-respect. On occasion, the pressure of a plague forced him to promise Bnai Yisrael freedom. But with the cessation of each plague, Paroh quickly regained his confidence and sense of control.

The plague of Locust was different. The devastation of this plague shattered Paroh. He called for Moshe and Ahron even though he could no longer reverse or even suspend the damage. He needed Moshe and Ahron to relieve the pain of seeing the locusts – the reminder of his folly and demise. This is the degradation referred to in the opening pesukim.

“But among Bnai Yisrael a dog will not bark at a man or animal. This is so you will know that Hashem has distinguished between the Egyptians and the Israelites.” (Shemot 11:7)

Moshe tells Paroh of the final plague. Hashem will strike the firstborn of the Egyptians. This terrible plague will fall upon Paroh’s own son. It will even destroy the firstborn children of the Egyptians’ servants. Only the firstborn of Bnai Yisrael will be spared.

Moshe adds that at the time of the plague, complete peace will prevail among Bnai Yisrael. He asserts that even the dogs will refrain from snapping at other animals or strangers. Moshe explains that the unusual behavior of the dogs will demonstrate that the Almighty distinguishes between the Egyptians and Bnai Yisrael

Moshe’s comments are difficult to understand. Moshe explains that Hashem will destroy the firstborn of the Egyptians. The plague will extend from the firstborn of Paroh to the firstborn of the Egyptians’ servants. Only Bnai Yisrael will be spared. Clearly, the exclusion of Bnai Yisrael from this horrible plague will demonstrate Hashem’s special treatment of Bnai Yisrael. However, Moshe adds that, among Bnai Yisrael, even an unfriendly dog will not disturb the peace. He then asserts that the unusual docile behavior of the dogs will demonstrate the Almighty’s preferential treatment of Bnai Yisrael. True, this animal behavior is unusual. However, it is not nearly as remarkable as the pattern of the plague. The fact that this pervasive death would not touch Bnai



Yisrael is far more remarkable than the silence of the dogs! Why does Moshe insist that the behavior of the canines is so impressive?

We will consider two approaches to answering this question. The first approach requires that we carefully consider the impact of this plague upon the Egyptians. What effect would the plague of the firstborn have upon the Egyptian people? Obviously, this plague would bring widespread death upon the Egyptians. However, Moshe stresses another impact. He explains that the Egyptian people will be thrown into a state of complete panic and despair. He tells Paroh that the cries of the people will exceed anything in the past or future. Total chaos will reign. In short, Moshe described two impacts. First, the firstborn will die. Second, the Egyptians will be thrown into a state of complete panic and despair.

Now, we can provide an explanation of Moshe’s comments. Why did Moshe refer to canine behavior? Moshe wanted to contrast the experience of Bnai Yisrael during the plague of the firstborn to the experience of the Egyptians. As we have explained, the plague would impact upon the Egyptians in two ways. It would bring widespread death. It would create intense panic and despair. Moshe contrasted the experience of Bnai Yisrael to that of the Egyptians in both of these areas. He explained that while the firstborn of the Egyptians would die, the firstborn of the Jewish people would pass the night unharmed. Then, he explained that, whereas panic and despair would overrun the Egyptians, Bnai Yisrael would experience complete calm and peace. Moshe contented that this contrast would demonstrate the complete separation between Bnai Yisrael and the Egyptian people.

The second approach requires that we briefly discuss the concept of contrast. Contrast is the greatest between opposites. For example, we can contrast a brilliant person with an individual of normal intelligence. A certain degree of contrast does exist between these two individuals. However, greater contrast emerges when we compare opposites. In our example, if we compare the brilliant person, and an extremely dull-witted individual, a greater level of contrast emerges.

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Bo

 RABBI BERNARD FOX

Hashem wished to create the greatest possible level of contrast between Bnai Yisrael and the Egyptians. Some level of contrast would emerge simply because Bnai Yisrael would be excluded from the plague. However, this is not the highest possible level of contrast. A greater degree of contrast emerges, when opposites are compared. Therefore, Hashem created an uncommon climate of peace among the people of Bnai Yisrael. This is the opposite of the state that would exist among the Egyptians. This would enhance the contrast between the experiences of the two nations.

“This month shall be for you the first of the months. It shall be for you the first of the months of the year.” (Shemot 12:2)

This passage introduces the commandment to establish a calendar. Each festival is assigned a date on this calendar. Hashem tells Moshe that the first month of the calendar is Nissan. This is the month that Bnai Yisrael will leave Egypt.

There is an interesting midrash on this pasuk. An introduction is needed to understand the midrash's comments. The calendar established by the Torah is lunar. This means that new months are declared on the basis of the appearance of the new moon. Ideally, the new month is declared on the basis of the testimony of two witnesses. These witnesses appear before the high court in Yerushalayim and declare that they have seen the crescent. It is true that the appearance of the new moon can also be calculated mathematically. However, in the ideal situation the mathematical calculations only play a secondary role. The primary basis for declaring the new month is through eyewitness testimony.

Today we do not have a high court. Therefore, we cannot determine the advent of a new month on the basis of testimony. Instead, we rely on mathematical calculations. The Jewish calendar is the result of these calculations.

The midrash explains that Moshe had difficulty understanding this mitzvah. In order to solve Moshe's problem, the Almighty showed Moshe

the exact crescent shape that must be seen by the witnesses. He explained to Moshe that when this is seen, the new moon is declared.[1]

The apparent meaning of the midrash is that Moshe could not visualize the amount of a crescent that the witnesses must see. He wondered, “How much of a crescent must be seen in order for the new month to be declared?”

This interpretation of the midrash and Moshe's question presents a problem. It seems from this interpretation that the new month cannot be declared on the basis of the appearance of a minimal crescent. However, this interpretation of the midrash is not possible! Any minimal appearance of the moon is adequate. There is no standard that must be met. If the witnesses testify that they have seen the new moon, a new month is declared. There is no requirement regarding the size of the crescent![2]

Let us consider a related issue. Now, that there is no court in Yerushalayim the new month is determined through mathematical calculations. This raises an interesting question. What is the exact definition of a new month? The obvious answer is that the new month is defined by the appearance of the new moon. Therefore, the new month begins on the first evening that the new moon appears. The calendar need only calculate this date. However, this answer ignores an important problem. In order to understand this problem, some background information is needed.

The moon does not generate its own light. The light of the moon is actually the reflected light of the sun. When the moon and sun are exactly in alignment, the illuminated side of the moon faces away from the earth. As the moon begins to distance itself from this alignment with the sun, the crescent of the new moon appears. However, the crescent does not appear immediately. Some amount of time is required after the disjunction of the sun and moon for the crescent of the new moon to appear. The amount of time depends on the location of the observer on earth. In Yerushalayim, six hours are required.

Therefore, if the disjunction occurs before midday, the crescent will appear immediately with

nightfall. If it occurs after midday the crescent will not appear immediately at nightfall.[3]

Now, we can appreciate the problem posed by mathematically calculating the date of the new month. When does the new month begin? This requires an exact definition. Is the new month initiated by the disjunction of the moon and sun? Alternatively, is the new month determined by the actual appearance of the new crescent in the skies above Yerushalayim?

Maimonides deals with this issue. He explains that the calendar calculations determine the moment that the crescent appears. This answers our question. The new month is not defined by the disjunction of the sun and moon. It is defined by the appearance of the crescent.[4]

Rav Yitzchak Zev Soloveitchik Zt"l explains that this was Moshe's question. What is the precise definition of the new month? Hashem showed Moshe the crescent of the new moon. He told Moshe you must see this and then sanctify the new month. The Almighty explained that the disjunction of the sun and moon does not create a new month. The actual appearance of the new crescent creates the new month.[5] □

[1] Michilta, Parshat Bo, Chapter 1.

[2] Rav Yechiel Michal HaLeyve Epstein, Aruch HaShulchan HaAtede, Hilchot Kidush HaChodesh 88:12.

[3] Mesechet Rosh HaShannah 20b.

[4] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Kiddush HaChodesh 7:2. See also Rav Yechiel Michal HaLeyve Epstein, Aruch HaShulchan HaAtede, Hilchot Kidush HaChodesh 88:12.

[5] Rav Yitzchak Zev Soloveitchik, Chidushai MaRan RIZ HaLeyve on the Torah, Parshat Bo.



Moses' Mission

and Pharaoh's Free Will

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

I thank my friend Abe for raising this issue last Shabbos, Rabbi Reuven Mann for his insights, and Rabbi Pesach for directing me to essential sources on this matter.

Two Purposes of the Plagues

Exod. 7:1-5:

"And G-d said to Moses, 'Recognize, I have positioned you as a judge to Pharaoh, and Aaron your brother will be your prophet. You speak all that I command you, and Aaron your brother will speak to Pharaoh to send the Children of Israel from his land. And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, [1]and I will increase My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt. And Pharaoh will not listen to you, and I will place My hand to Egypt and I will take out My hosts, My people the Children of Israel from the land of Egypt with [2]great judgments. And Egypt will know that I am G-d when I stretch forth My hand on Egypt and I take out the Children of Israel from their midst."

G-d instructs Moses to speak to Pharaoh that he should free the Jews. G-d tells Moses that he knows Pharaoh will not free them as He will harden Pharaoh's heart. G-d states the goal of hardening Pharaoh is to create wonders in Egypt, that Egypt will know G-d. One goal is for [1]Egypt's edification and hopefully, repentance. The verse also indicates that there is another goal, [2]"great judgments". What are these "judgments"?

(An important principle is spelled out by the Sforno on Exod. 7:3. He states that G-d's plagues are to allow Egypt to "recognize His greatness and goodness and repent in a truthful repentance". We must recognize G-d's kindness in such an act: Man sins, and is justly punished. However, before meting out punishments, G-d educates the Egyptians to their sin via the plagues. He does one more act to afford the sinners a path to repentance, and to circumvent any punishment. We learn that G-d works additional kindness and gives man opportunities to correct his ways, before receiving punishment, or the loss of his soul.)

Just prior to the eighth plague, the Plague of Locusts, the Torah reiterates these two goals:

Exod. 10:1-2 :

"G-d said to Moses, 'Come to Pharaoh because I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants in order [1]that I place these signs of Mine in his midst. And in order to speak in the ears of your son and your grandson that which I have [2]mocked Egypt, and My signs which I have placed in them, and they shall know that I am G-d."

(Before proceeding, I wish to clarify the term "mock". When applied to, or used by G-d, we cannot understand it as G-d expressing human characteristics of derision. To "laugh at", or to "mock", in connection with G-d, means He is assured of the sinner's downfall. So "certain" is G-d, it is as if He laughs, like a human would when he warns another of a negative result, yet the other person does not heed the warning, and inevitably suffers. The one who warned will say "I told you so", as if to laugh at the ignorance of the other. G-d is said to "mock" Egypt, as their downfall is inevitable. G-d's warnings and knowledge are absolute, so one is wise to follow G-d exactly. Egypt didn't, so their devastation was certain.)

Here we see a new point, a "mocking" of Egypt, explained as G-d's withholding Pharaoh from repenting - the hardening his heart. Rashi says this means a laughing of sorts. Ramban says, "I (G-d) laugh at him (Pharaoh) that I harden his heart, and do vengefulness in him..." From these two verses, we learn two distinct purposes in the 10 plagues: Verse 10:1) that G-d multiply His wonders for Egypt to learn of Him, and verse 10:2) that the Jews repeat this to their descendants that G-d removes Pharaoh's (man's) ability to repent, and that He and His miracles are made known. Clearly, Moses continuously approaches Pharaoh, knowing all too well that Pharaoh will not free the Jews. But Moses is commanded by G-d to do so, as G-d's purpose is to [1]publicize His name and [2]demonstrate His justice as meted out in Pharaoh's inability to repent.

This 2nd point is not too well known. The plagues' spectacular nature attract our emotions to the visual phenomena. However, as 10:2 states, G-d also wished to "mock" Egypt. He desired that this principle of withholding repentance become clear. The Torah commentaries state, (paraphrased) "...it is unusual that a man can face such plagues of Hail, Locusts, and the like, and still remain obstinate. Man's nature is to be terrified, not to maintain his stubbornness." Such a steadfast attitude, even after receiving blow upon blow, is not natural for man, and must be by G-d's word. Pharaoh's resistance is to be a prime focus of the plagues. Moses' mission is to bring out into the open this aspect of G-d's justice: when man is too far gone, G-d will restrain him from repenting. The plagues are to demonstrate how G-d does not allow a terribly corrupt person to repent. Intuitively, we would think that any man who sins should be afforded the ability to repent. Why then in such a deviant person, does G-d withhold repentance? What is the justice in this restraint?

Questions on the Loss of Repentance

1) In his laws of Repentance, chapter 5, Maimonides teaches that man is always the cause of his free will. If so, what did G-d do to Pharaoh that prevented him from freeing the Jews and from repenting? How does G-d "harden" Pharaoh's heart?

2) If G-d harden's Pharaoh's heart, and therefore, Pharaoh does not free the Jews, is it just that G-d punish Pharaoh??

3) In his Laws of Repentance, chapter 6, Maimonides states that a person may sin a very evil sin, or sin many times, until the sentence from G-d will be to remove his ability to repent, and that the sinner die in his sin which he did knowingly with his will at the outset. Maimonides states that Pharaoh's stubbornness is an example of this principle. What is the justice in this principle of "removal of repentance"?

4) In law 6:3 of his Laws on Repentance,

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Moses' Mission and Pharaoh's Free Will

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Maimonides repeats eight times that the sinner sinned with on his own. What is Maimonides driving at? Ramban too states in Exod 7:3 that Pharaoh was punished with the loss of his repenting ability, as he initially sinned with his own free will. How does this help us understand G-d's justice?

5) Ramban offers two reasons for the justice of Pharaoh's inability to repent. One reason given is that Pharaoh's repentance would not have been genuine, but merely a tactic to remove the ever increasing pain of each successive plague. As the plagues progressed, Ramban teaches that Pharaoh became more inclined to free the Jews, and he would have, after the fifth plague. However, G-d removed his ability to repent, and he did not free them. We must ask: If Pharaoh's repentance would not have been genuine, then what is the difference if he does or doesn't verbalize his repentance? Why does G-d deem it necessary that Pharaoh not utter his repentance, if it would be meaningless, as Ramban states?

6) In law 6:2, Maimonides says that repentance acts as a "shield" against punishment. Does Maimonides' statement have bearing on this Ramban above? Is repentance an absolute protection against punishment, and therefore G-d "had" to prevent Pharaoh from uttering even ungentuine words?

The Plagues' Purpose: A Point of No Return

Despite Pharaoh's inability to concede to Moses' demand, Maimonides states that Moses' repeated approach to Pharaoh is to teach an important lesson: "In order to make known to those who enter the world, that when G-d holds back repentance from the sinner, he is not able to repent, but [rather] he dies in his evil that he initially committed with his own will." We are taught a crucial lesson: Man can sin to the point of no return.

Part of our human design - our free will - allows us to steep ourselves in corruption, to the point that we can no longer extricate ourselves. This was G-d's lesson to the world

through restraining Pharaoh from repenting. He is the prime example of man's ability to reach a point with no hope for repentance. G-d publicized Pharaoh's corruption as an act of kindness to "all others who enter the world", as Maimonides states. G-d teaches an invaluable lesson. If we forfeit this lesson, tragically, we can lose our eternal life.

Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart

There are a few ways to understand G-d's restraint on man's ability to repent: Man reaches the point of no return, so G-d merely "reflects" man's own corruption by withholding an ungentuine repentance. Rabbi Mann suggested a second theory: that man can do some form of repentance, but G-d does not allow him, as G-d's mercy grants repentance to man, but only up to a point, and no further. Accordingly, man is punished for the sins he initially committed on his own. G-d is kind to allow man repentance, but G-d determines for how long repentance remains available. So we must look at G-d's ultimate restraint on repentance in an opposite light: It is not a cruelty that He removes repentance, but a kindness that He tolerates sinners for so long. According to theory #1, man sins to the point where he is completely and irrevocably corrupt. He has the ability to go through the motions of repenting to avoid pain, but G-d does not allow him this right. In this case, G-d mirrors the sinner's exact corruption - he cannot truly repent, so G-d does not allow the act of a useless repentance.

Ramban: Preventing Ungentuine Repentance

Ramban indicates that repentance is a shield against punishments - the question is how. To reiterate, Ramban's second answer for G-d restraining Pharaoh from repenting is as follows: "Pharaoh's repentance would not have been genuine, but merely a tactic to remove the ever increasing pain of each successive plague." Therefore, he was not allowed to repent. Had he repented - even for this wrong

reason - Ramban indicates it would have been effective in some manner. Thus, G-d prevented his repentance. How may we explain this Ramban?

Discussing this issue with Rabbi Mann, we agreed as follows: Had G-d allowed Pharaoh to repent an ungentuine repentance, Pharaoh would justly deserve continued plagues, as the plagues' purpose of Pharaoh recognizing G-d would not be realized. However, Egypt would see Pharaoh "repenting" and would have a gripe against G-d's justice. They would not know that Pharaoh repented a false repentance, and would feel G-d is unjust to continue plaguing Egypt. We may suggest this explanation for the Ramban: for this reason, G-d did not allow Pharaoh's false impression of repentance. Such a repentance would be of no use to Pharaoh's perfection, but it mattered to others, to Egypt. Rabbi Mann stated that Moses too was concerned that if G-d justly killed the Jews when they sinned with the Golden Calf, Egypt would say that G-d failed and smote his people in the desert. Due to the concern that all mankind recognize G-d as just, Moses asked G-d, "Why should Egypt say, 'with evil He took them out of Egypt to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from off the face of Earth...'" (Exod. 32:12) Moses did not desire Egypt to possess a false impression of G-d. What perfection Moses displays....even after hundreds of years of bondage, Moses has concern for G-d's reputation in his oppressors' eyes. Moses teaches that we must be concerned that G-d's reputation be completely just. We care that all mankind obtain the truth.

Maimonides: Free Will and a Hardened Heart - a Contradiction?

Maimonides states in his Laws of Repentance, chapter 5, G-d never removes one's free will. He calls this a "great fundamental". This makes sense, as the Torah is a system where 'reward and punishment' is a cornerstone. Thus, man must always be the sole cause of his actions. How then do we

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Moses' Mission and Pharaoh's Free Will

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

understand Maimonides' theory on G-d hardening Pharaoh's heart? In his Laws of Repentance 6:3, Maimonides writes, "And it is possible that man sin a great sin, or many sins, until the judgment is given before the True Judge that the punishment for this sinner on these sins that he did with his will and his knowledge, is that repentance is prevented from him, and he is not allowed permission to return from his evil so that he should die and expire in his sin that he did....Therefore it is written in the Torah, 'and I will harden Pharaoh's heart.' Since he sinned initially by himself, and did evil to the Jews living in his land, as it says, 'come, let us be wise', Judgment was passed to prevent repentance from him, until punishment was exacted from him. Therefore, G-d hardened his heart." If free will is a fundamental, how can G-d seemingly violate this principle by preventing Pharaoh from repenting?

Free will is always under man's control. But free will "to do what"? This is the key point: it is the free will to "select evil or good" that G-d places in man's hand unconditionally. However, G-d will - in extreme cases - remove our free will to decide another matter: repentance. Eight times Maimonides stresses that man chooses to do good or evil, of "his own will." He wished to clarify this point, that free will is never taken away from man in this single area of choosing good or evil. Man will always be the sole cause of this choice. The Torah says this openly, (Deut. 30:15, 19) "See I place before you today, life and good, death an evil.....and choose life." Moses tells the people that they may choose between good and evil. This is the area where man is always in control. But in the area of repenting, if man already selected evil, and corrupts himself so grievously, G-d will prevent his free will from selecting repentance,....."so he may die and expire in the sin that he did."

There is no contradiction in Maimonides' words. G-d gives man free will to do good and evil, and never removes this freedom. In one area however, G-d does compromise man's free

will: the area of repentance. Restricting Pharaoh from repenting does not equate to G-d making him sin. Pharaoh sinned of his own free will, and so grievously, that G-d's justice demands he be removed from the system of repentance. Had Pharaoh been free to repent, he would avoid punishment he truly deserved. Maimonides argues with Ramban and Sforno on this point. Maimonides holds Pharaoh's repentance would have been genuine. This brings us to our next question.

If Pharaoh's repentance would be a genuine, why did G-d not allow him to repent? G-d allows others to repent! Perhaps it is possible that man sin with so much evil, that the normal repentance does not outweigh the evil. Let me explain: In normal cases, man sins, but then it is possible that his remorse for his evil is so genuine, that he is in fact not the same person who sinned. He has complete regret, and resigns himself to never sin this sin again. This is true repentance, when the new state of good in man completely erases any taint of the evil formerly held on to. As man learns the fault of his crimes, and sees clearly how hurtful his action was to himself or others, he now regrets his actions. In such a case, G-d completely forgives man, and "none of his sins will be remembered." (Ezekiel 18) But it can also happen, that a person sins, and repents, but any repentance does not completely correct his evil. Repentance can only correct a person up to a point. Repentance can be an injustice, if someone sins so harshly, and would be let off. Just as free will to select good or evil is an institution that G-d never compromises, so too repentance is always accepted before G-d. Maimonides states this in law 6:2. This being so, the only solution is to remove repentance so Pharaoh and those like him pay for their crimes. It would be unjust to allow Pharaoh to escape punishment through repentance. How odd it may sound, repentance is not just in this case. The basic concept is that G-d forgives man, but only up to a certain level of corruption. Man may exceed forgiveness - a point of no return.

Sforno

Sforno is of another opinion. He states that had Pharaoh desired to, he could have repented as "there is nothing preventing him." If this is so, how does Sforno understand the verse that G-d "hardened Pharaoh's heart"? Sforno explains this as G-d giving Pharaoh the ability to 'tolerate the plagues'. As Sforno states, if G-d did not harden his heart, Pharaoh would have freed the Jews, but not out of a desire to subject his will to G-d, performing a true, complete repentance. Pharaoh would have freed the Jews only to avoid any further pain, "and this is not repentance at all" as Sforno says. Sforno differs from Maimonides and Ramban, in that he contests that G-d ever inhibits one's path back to G-d via repentance. Sforno quotes Ezekiel 18:23, "Do I really desire the death of the wicked, so says G-d? Is it not in his repenting from his path and that he live?" Sforno proves from this verse that G-d always desires, and makes available, one's repentance. G-d did not remove repentance from Pharaoh, as suggested by Ramban and Maimonides.

In summary, Moses' mission was twofold: He was to assist in delivering the Plagues so Egypt and the Jews would recognize G-d. An idolatrous culture would be shown false, and G-d's system of reward and punishment would be made clear. Additionally, some of our Rabbis teach that Pharaoh's reluctance was publicized to teach mankind that we have the ability to sink into sin, so far, that we have no way of removing ourselves.

It is then so crucial that we all examine our ways, and not forfeit a true, eternal life, due to temporal emotional satisfaction, or false ideas. ■

For further reading of the original sources, see Maimonides' "Laws of Repentance", chapters V and VI; Maimonides' introduction to Ethics of the Fathers, the "Shmoneh Perakim", Chapter VIII, and sources noted herein.

Pharaoh's Failed Escapism

RABBI REUVEN MANN

Written by a Student

After Pharaoh's magicians use sleight of hand to imitate the blood miracle performed by Moses, we read (Exod. 7:23) "And Pharaoh turned and he came to his house and he didn't give heart also to this." Why do we need to know that Pharaoh returned to his house?

Later, we read (Exod. 7:28) that the frogs entered everywhere, including one's house. It would appear that this is not unrelated to Pharaoh's entering his house subsequent to the magician's performance of blood.

Pharaoh was disturbed by Moses' feat of blood, and sought to dilute the significance of Moses by having his own magicians do the same. Nonetheless, Pharaoh left, and "returned to his house". Why? He sought a place where he could deny the truth of Moses' miracles. He sought a geographical escape, to assist in his philosophical denial. As long as Pharaoh did not have to confront Moses' miracles, he felt a certain haven of security in his false beliefs. What was G-d's response? A plague wherein there was no escape, to help Pharaoh confront the truth of Moses' genuine miracles. The frogs entered Pharaoh's house, leaving him no further room for denial.

Death of the Egyptian Firstborns

RABBI REUVEN MANN

Quoting Rabbi Israel Chait

Rabbi Chait said Death of Firstborns was unique: Every other plague came through an angel, i.e., a visible, physical force. For example, a great wind preceded the Plague of Locusts, and the first plague (Nile River turning into blood) involved producing some change in the water and so forth. Every plague expressed itself via a change in some visible physical phenomenon. However, Death of Firstborns was direct. There was no medium through which it expressed itself, that was apparent to the Egyptians. Until now all they saw was that G-d had some type of control over the physical forces of nature, but that He was limited, in that He had to operate through them. Thus, there was some measure of safety and possible escape. "He couldn't just will me dead

with no apparent cause which I could not trace to some element in nature", the Egyptians thought.

Prior to the Death of Firstborns, G-d always operated within nature, so to speak. But in Death of Firstborns, He revealed an entirely new dimension - outside of nature - by which He can strike you down at will. Hence, the terror of that night was different than that which attended any other plague.

Pharaoh's Intimidation

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Reader: So I have looked through Rashi, and the Midrash, but there is no comment I can find on an interesting question: When Moses first appeared before Pharaoh why did not Pharaoh simply have him and Aaron killed, or after the first plague, or even the fifth? After that, I understand that Pharaoh had removed the element of free will from himself. Moses was, after all, according to Egyptian law, guilty of murder of an Egyptian, and Pharaoh knew this. Opinion please

Mesora: Pharaoh never lost his free will. G-d does not remove man's ability to make his own decisions. In another article I go to expound on what it means that G-d hardened Pharaoh's heart. Refer to Maimonides' Laws of Repentance, chapters 5 and 6 for much detail on free will, and Pharaoh.

Regarding your question, I heard a Rabbi answer that the term "Elohim" applied to Moshe meant that God made Moshe greatly revered in Pharaoh's eyes. As such, Pharaoh was greatly intimidated by Moshe, to the point that he would not threaten him. Outwardly, Pharaoh had to maintain respect of his people, so he spoke harshly to Moshe and Aaron. Inwardly, he feared Moshe.

Firstborns

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Question: I have been told that Exodus 13:2 & 24:5 were originally interpreted to mean that the first born son of each Jewish family was intended to be deemed a Cohen to serve as his family's representative to the Holy Temple. I have read the passages and it seems a stretch, is this the way it was before Hashem changed it when only the Levites crossed

the line to accept the Torah? Thank you.

Mesora: Rashi says that when all the Jews sinned by the Golden Calf, except for the Levites, the Levites then replaced the firstborns' designation of Temple service. The firstborns received the priesthood to promulgate Torah ideology, much like the Egyptian firstborns carried the status of passing down their philosophy. We see that the Egyptian firstborns were killed, and as Rabbi once mentioned, it was in order to sever the lineage of those who would teach the corrupt, Egyptian philosophy.

Perhaps it is inherent in the position of first born male, that he commands respect and status. He is then the most fit to act as leader since he carries inherent reverence. Just as killing the Egyptian first born would terminate those leaders, G-d sought Jewish firstborns as natural Torah leaders. However, when they sinned, they were no longer fit to minister to G-d. They showed weakness towards alien G-ds. This contradicts the monotheistic perfection required in Temple worship. Only those perfectly devoted to G-d can relate to G-d in Temple service. Knowledge of His undeniable status as the only G-d is essential for relating to what is truly "Him".

Provocative: An Evil?

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Reader: I was almost inclined to show your "Letter to Students" to my son until I came to the part where you said: "You may find my answers are different or even go against what your parents or teachers tell you. But that's OK. The goal is to learn how to think properly, not necessarily to agree with everything you hear. It's OK to disagree with your parents and teachers on Torah issues." I think that when dealing with adolescents, a lot more tact and sensitivity needs to be used when discussing things that may be different than what they see at home. Teaching them to accept and deal with differences in a respectful manner is what's necessary. Your message seems to me provocative.

Mesora: I am sorry if you felt it was provocative in a bad sense, but it may well be provocative in a good sense. What I mean is that we must not shy away from an issue, even if it means we oppose our authorities. If you read some of the Talmudic debates, you will find that reputations play no role when one searches for truth. In no manner must one be disrespectful to those the Torah commands we honor, i.e., parents. However, if we disagree, we must say so. This is my point, that in learning and in all

areas, honesty is demanded.

Parents should also appreciate - not subdue - children who have matured, enough, so as to oppose parents and discuss their own opinions and feelings.

Being provocative or opposing authorities are not evils. Dishonesty is.

A Torah Purist

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Jewish leaders have more influence than they might know. As Pharaoh's servants said, "each man according to the interpretation of his dream..." Meaning, dream interpretations carry more meaning than the dream themselves. Yosef's interpretations were more impressive than the servants' own dreams.

So too are Jewish community leaders in a position where their congregants are influenced by their say so, more than other considerations. And this is the influence all leaders have on others.

One lesson that the Torah imparts is the following: "Maa-sseh avos siman libanim", "The forefathers' actions are signs for their children." Meaning, we are to look to our patriarchs for model behavior, and apply their morality and intelligence in each generation. If something was of no concern to them, it must not be to us. And if something was a concern to them, then we too must be concerned not to deviate. This principle is not time bound, and must be imbued to others.

Our society corrupts pure, Torah ideals labeling them as "unrealistic", when in fact, we must not follow society's lead if Torah tells us otherwise. "Realism" must be derived from Torah and Chazal alone, regardless of societal norms. Such norms are created by non-Torah individuals for the most part, no one fit to overshadow Chazal, our Rabbis. In all areas, our directives must have but one source. Even in Jewish communities, the flock succumbs to the need for cultural acceptance, and does not question each area of their lives, as it may cause some discomfort not to obtain accolades from neighboring religions.

Let us not veer from the patriarchs' lessons, gravitating to our society's nonsense and harmful philosophies. Rather, we must seek direction from no other source than Chazal and Torah. We must be Torah purists. G-d Himself commanded we not add or subtract. He also recorded the patriarchs' lives as lessons, not as historical data. At all costs, this must be taught, certainly when in Jewish communities, under the guise of "Judaism" of "frumkite", masses err tremendously.

