



TORAH in MOTION
Stimulating Torah Virtually Everywhere

Can People Change?: Freud, Pharaoh and Freedom

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Hardening Pharaoh's Heart - The Philosophical Problem

1) On several occasions in the Bible, God “hardens the heart” of individuals. “Victims” of divine hardenings include the Egyptian king Pharaoh; the Moabite king Sihon (Deuteronomy 2:30), and the army of Canaan in the time of Joshua (Joshua 11:20)... Cases like these generate formidable philosophical problems. To harden someone’s heart is, apparently, to interfere in the person’s motivational system so as to cause the person to act in a way different than he or she would have otherwise acted. Consequently, the most obvious problem posed by hardening of the hearts pertains to the loss of free will incurred by the hardened agent...When an agent *S* interferes directly to affect agent *V*’s motivational system in a way that does not involve rational persuasion–brainwashing, hypnosis–such interference will normally preclude *V*’s freely performing and bearing responsibility for acts that the intervention caused. It would seem, therefore, that, by hardening, God deprives certain people of a significant good, free will. We may call this the “free will deprivation problem.” Prof. David Shatz, “Freedom, Repentance, and Hardening of the Hearts” Faith and Philosophy (1997, 14:4).

The Biblical Text

2) Then God said to Moses, “You are to say everything I command you, and your brother Aaron is to tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his country. But I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in Egypt, he will not listen to you. Exodus, 7:1-4.

Pharaoh’s heart became hard [after the plague of blood stops]; he would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the LORD had said. Exodus, 7:22.

When Pharaoh saw that there was relief [after the plague of frogs stops]; he hardened his [own] heart and would not listen to Moses and Aaron. Exodus, 8:15.

Then God said to Moses, “Go to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his officials so that I may perform these signs of mine among them that you may tell your children and grandchildren how I dealt harshly with the Egyptians and how I performed my signs among them, and that you may know that I am Hashem.” Exodus, 10:1-2.

Solutions to the Problem in Jewish Thought (I) - The Nature of Biblical Language

3) In early Hebrew idiom, it was customary to attribute every phenomenon to the direct action of God. e.g: of a barren woman, it is said 'God shut her womb.'... every happening has a number of causes, and these causes, in turn, have other causes, and so the world. Now the philosopher examines the long and complex chain of causation, whereas the ordinary person jumps instantly from the last effect to the first cause, and attributes the former instantly to God. This is how the Torah which employs human idioms, expresses itself. Consequently, the expression "but I will harden his heart" is, in the final analysis, the same as if it were worded: "but his heart will be hardened." R. Umberto Cassuto [Italy/Israel; 1883-1951] Commentary on the Book of Exodus.

4) Know that all acts are ascribed to God, since He is their ultimate cause, some by absolute decree, and others through the operation of human choice granted by Him...In the sense that He is the author of all acts, He hardened Pharaoh's heart." R. Shmuel David Luzzato [Italy; 1800-1865], Commentary on Exodus.

5) In that case, one may ask, why does the Torah not ascribe all that happens, not to their immediate authors but directly to the ultimate one - God? Why do we then read of how so-and-so performed a certain act... Nehama Leibowitz, Studies in Exodus.

Solutions to the Problem (II) - Loss of Free Will as Punishment for Sin

6) Were God to decree that an individual would be righteous or wicked or that there would be a quality which draws a person by his essential nature to any particular path [of behavior], way of thinking, attributes, or deeds, as imagined by many of the fools [who believe] in astrology - how could He command us through [the words of] the prophets: "Do this," "Do not do this," "Improve your behavior," or "Do not follow after your wickedness?" [According to their mistaken conception,] from the beginning of man's creation, it would be decreed upon him, or his nature would draw him, to a particular quality and he could not depart from it. What place would there be for the entire Torah? According to which judgment or sense of justice would retribution be administered to the wicked or reward to the righteous? Shall the whole world's Judge not act justly! Maimonides [Spain; Egypt. 1138-1204], Laws of Repentance, 5:4.

7) There are many verses in the Torah and the words of the prophets which appear to contradict this fundamental principle. [Thus,] the majorities of the people err because of them and think that the Holy One, blessed be He, does decree that a person commit evil or good...Behold, I will explain a great and fundamental principle [of faith] on the basis of which the interpretation of those verses can be understood.

When an individual or the people of a country sin, the sinner consciously and willfully committing that sin, it is proper to exact retribution from him as explained. [Hashem] knows how to exact punishment...When does the above apply? When [the sinner] does not repent. However, if he repents, his repentance is a shield against retribution. Just as a person may sin consciously and willfully, he may repent consciously and willfully. It may sometimes happen that a person may commit a great sin or many sins causing the judgment rendered before the True Judge to be that the retribution [administered to] this transgressor for these sins which he willfully and consciously committed is that his repentance will be held back. He will not be allowed the chance to repent from his wickedness so that he will die and be wiped out because of the sin he committed...

For these reasons, it is written in the Torah [Exodus 14:4], "I will harden Pharaoh's heart." Since, he began to sin on his own initiative and caused hardships to the Israelites who dwelled in his land as [Exodus 1:10] states: "Come, let us deal wisely with them," judgment obligated that he be prevented from repenting so that he would suffer retribution. Therefore, The Holy One, blessed be He, hardened his heart... Maimonides, Laws of Repentance, 6:1-3.

8) Resh Lakish said: What is meant by, *Surely he scorneth the scorners, But he giveth grace unto the lowly?* (Proverbs, 3:34). If one comes to defile himself, he is given an opening; if one comes to cleanse himself, he is helped. Talmud, *Shabbat*, 104A

9) [Plagues are called] "the signs" (*hamofetim*)(Deut.29,2) because the plagues did tempt them (*mfatot otam*). How so? A plague would come every thirty days and last seven days and then depart. And they would have relief for twenty three days between the plagues and so did not repent. Thus, the plagues tempted them. *Devarim Rabbah* (7,9).

10) [I] argue against Maimonides' view that wickedness is cumulative, so that at some point the sinner forfeits his right to free will. The repeated missions to Pharaoh by Moses would have been wasted, had they not been intended to produce a change of heart in Pharaoh...The Ramban's approach, that having refused to repent during the first five plagues, Pharaoh was no longer entitled to repentance, is also not considered satisfactory...The proof for that view, i.e. the changes in grammar describing Pharaoh's obstinacy in the first five plagues as being self-induced, and that during subsequent plagues as being induced by God would force us to believe that Moses was told in advance that at some stage Pharaoh would no longer be a free agent; that because he only mouthed thoughts of repentance without meaning them, God would force him to act in accordance with his true feelings. The problem with this approach is that if God knows that the sinner does not plan to repent, why interfere with his decisions? His actions would automatically expose him to further punitive action by God...

The author prefers an approach supported by many Midrashim which state clearly that there had been no interference with Pharaoh's free will... All references made in the Torah to God hardening the heart of Pharaoh have to be understood as the recovery Pharaoh was allowed to make between the plagues, so he could be made to feel the full impact of the next installment...It is this aspect of God's justice that Resh Lakish has in mind when he said as a result of Pharaoh's obstinacy, God gave him additional opportunities to be still more obstinate, so that it appeared as if God Himself had hardened Pharaoh's heart. R. Isaac Arama [Spain, 1420-1494] *Akedat Yitzchak, Va'era*.

Solutions to the Problem (III) - Hardening the Heart Restores Pharaoh's Freedom

11) When a stricken villain turns righteous and repents on account of his punishment, like Pharaoh who admitted "I have erred this time; God is righteous" (9:27), this may appear to be the result of coercion rather than volition. God therefore hardens his heart by suggesting that the blow he suffered was the result of coincidence rather than providence . . . This was to eradicate the cowering effects of the plague itself, leaving his free will uninfluenced by any compulsion. Only then could it be demonstrated whether his repentance was freely motivated. Far be it from God to withhold from man his free choice to do good!..But God leaves man to his free choice, exercising no outward compulsion. R. Yosef Albo [Spain; 1380-1444], *Sefer Ha-Ikkarim* (The Book of Principles).

12) In the face of such impressive miracles and signs, had not Pharaoh's heart been hardened, the latter would have let the Israelites go, but his action would not have then been motivated by sincere repentance and submission to the Divine will, but merely because he could not bear the suffering of the plagues.... But this would not have constituted true repentance. Had Pharaoh wished to submit to God and sincerely return to Him, nothing would have stood in his way. But God hardened his heart, fortified his resistance to enable him to endure the plagues and refrain from letting the Israelites go... so that they might thereby acknowledge My greatness and goodness and turn to Me in true repentance. R. Ovadyah Sforno [Italy, 1475-1550], Commentary on Exodus.

The Modern Assault on Freedom

13) Humanity has had to endure from the hands of science two great outrages upon its naive self-love. The first was when it realized that our earth was not the center of the universe...The second was when biological research...relegated [man] to a descent from the animal world...[And now] the third and most bitter blow from present-day psychological research which is endeavoring to prove to the 'ego' of each one of us that he is not even master in his own house, but that he must remain content with the veriest scraps of information about what is going on unconsciously in his own mind." Sigmund Freud [1856-1939], *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* [1915-17], Eighteenth Lecture.

14) "That's a common and firmly held idea...that people 'naturally' change as life goes on...I've had to remind myself of how rigidly determined our lives are-how predictable and repetitive, how resistant to change. If we changed as easily as it's claimed, there wouldn't be people going into analysis at forty and fifty; they would all have changed 'naturally' by then into wise, mature, moderately contented people. A person who goes into analysis later on, after his life has become hopelessly, repetitively unsatisfying, after he has seen himself make the same mistake over and over again, after he has come to feel how trapped he is and to understand how little freedom he has." Dr. Aaron Green [pseudonym] in Janet Malcom, Psychoanalysis: The Impossible Profession, 1979.

15) For behaviorists...concepts like "free will" and "motivation" are dismissed as illusions that disguise the real causes of human behavior. For B.F. Skinner these causes lay in the environment – in physical and psychological reinforcers and punishments. It is only because we are not aware of the environmental causes of our own behavior or other people's that we are tricked into believing in our ability to choose...All behavior is under stimulus control. Saul McLeod, "Free Will and Determinism in Psychology."

16) Many neuroscientists, armed with functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) argue that now that we can peer into the brain we can see that there is no "agent" there making choices...[But] How can a person make self-determined choices, make sense of the world, and even self-actualize when neuroscientific evidence seems to indicate that our brains are making decisions before we even realize it? Are we claiming responsibility for events that have little or nothing to do with conscious intention? Seth Schwartz, "Do We Have Free Will?" Psychology Today, November 2013.

17) Dr. Benjamin Libet at the U. of California, San Francisco used electroencephalography to look at brain activity during the process of making simple decisions such as when to move a finger. He showed that the process which leads to the act starts about three-tenths of a second before an individual is consciously aware of it. In other words, the observer is just that: an observer, not a decider. This may explain the feeling that most people have experienced at one time or another of having deliberately done something that they had not actually wanted or intended to do." The Economist, Dec. 23/2006

18) [Libet] measured when they reported having a particular conscious thought about an action [...] and when the actual action started. Astoundingly, the latter came first: subjects had actually made (unconsciously) the decision to act measurably earlier than when they became aware of it consciously. The conscious awareness, in a sense, was a "story" that the higher cognitive parts of the brain told to account for the action. It's as if

the conscious brain was not the decider but simply the spokesperson." Prof. Massimo Pigliucci [U. of Stony Brook] Skeptical Inquirer (2007 May/Jun).

19) Those supporting a purer view of free will argue that whether or not neuroscience can trace brain activity underlying decisions, making the decision still resides within the domain of an individual's mind. In this view, parsing unconscious and conscious awareness is less important than the ultimate outcome – a decision, and subsequent action, emerging from a single mind. David DeSalvo, "Can Neuroscience Debunk Free Will?" Time Magazine, 21 October, 2014

20) Man lives in bondage to his natural environment, to society, and to his own "character"; he is enslaved to needs, interests, and selfish desires. Yet to be free means to transcend nature, society, "character", needs, interests, desires. How then is freedom conceivable? The reality of freedom, of the ability to think, to will, or to make decisions beyond physiological and psychological causation is only conceivable if we assume that human life embraces *both process and event*...To believe in freedom is to believe in events, namely to maintain that man is able to escape the bonds of the processes in which he is involved and to act in a way not necessitated by antecedent factors." Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, God in Search of Man, 1955.

21) A Virginia jury convicted petitioner Terry Williams of robbery and capital murder, and, after a sentencing hearing unanimously fixed his punishment at death. Concluding that such punishment was "proper" and "just," the trial judge imposed the death sentence. The Virginia Supreme Court affirmed. In state habeas corpus proceedings, the same trial judge found, on the evidence adduced after hearings, that Williams' conviction was valid, but that his counsel's failure to discover and present significant mitigating evidence violated his right to the effective assistance of counsel.

Justice John Paul Stevens [served on the Supreme Court from 1975-2010] delivered the opinion of the Court, concluding that Williams was denied his constitutionally guaranteed right to the effective assistance of counsel when his trial lawyers failed to investigate and to present substantial mitigating evidence to the sentencing jury. [The five mitigating factors were a) defendant's background b) childhood physical abuse c) policy testimony that the defendant would not pose a risk while in jail d) testimony about the defendant's good behavior while incarcerated e) evidence of mental retardation]. The record establishes that counsel failed to prepare for sentencing until a week beforehand, to uncover extensive records graphically describing Williams' nightmarish childhood, to introduce available evidence that Williams was "borderline mentally retarded" and did not advance beyond sixth grade. *Williams v. Taylor*, United States Supreme Court 529 U.S. 362 (2000)

Human Freedom and Responsibility

22) In therapy, the patient strives mightily to coax or persuade the therapist to make decisions for him or her; and one of the therapist's chief tasks is to resist being manipulated into taking care of, or of taking over, the patient. To manipulate the therapist, a patient may exaggerate helplessness or withhold evidence of strengths from him or her...Regardless of their level of sophistication, patients secretly yearn for the therapist who will provide structure and guidance. The anger and the frustration that at some level occurs in every course of therapy stems from the patient's dawning recognition that the therapist will not relieve him or her of the burden of decision.

There are innumerable strategies by which one may find another to make the decision for one. Two acquaintances of mine recently divorced in such a manner that each believed the other had made the decision. The wife did not request a divorce but did inform her husband that she was in love with another man. The husband, predictably, automatically concluded... that they must divorce, and so they did. Husband and wife each avoided decisional pain (and post-decisional regret) by concluding that the other had made the decision. The wife had only stated her affection for another man and had not asked for a divorce. The husband felt that his wife had, by her declaration, *de facto* made the decision. One may avoid a decision by procrastinating until it is made for one by an outside agent or circumstance. Though such an individual may not apprehend that he or she is making a decision--for example, to fail a course--in fact, procrastination obscures the decision to fail by placing it in the hands of the instructor...[In another case] a woman expressed the wish to catch her husband in bed with another woman and thus be able to leave him. Obviously she wished to leave her husband but could not transform the wish into action: the pain of decision was too great. Therefore, she hoped that he, by breaking some definite rule of the relationship, would make the decision for her. Prof. Irvin Yalom [Stanford University], Existential Psychotherapy, 1980.

23) [Re: serial adulterers]. Once can be considered a slip up. An aberration. Twice or more is a pattern. Why should the serial cheater be forgiven or provided a third, fourth or fifth chance? Of course, this is for the person who was betrayed to decide. Some see their own unequivocal commitment to the relationship and love for the offending partner as reasons for either overlooking such bad behavior or for giving them repeated chances to change. This can become a kind of co-dependency, unintentionally enabling and perpetuating the problem. As with domestic violence, the victim may be bamboozled and confused by the offender's apparent heartfelt contrition and

proclamations of love and dedication. Or they come to see the offending partner as suffering from some mental disorder or substance or sexual addiction that both compels and excuses their abusive behavior. Dr. Stephen A. Diamond, "When Partners Cheat: Who Deserves Second Chances?" Psychology Today. March 28, 2010.

24) I may give the impression that the human being is completely and unavoidably influenced by his surroundings. (In this case the surroundings being the unique structure of camp life, which forced the prisoner to conform his conduct to a certain set pattern.) But what about human liberty? Is there no spiritual freedom in regard to behavior and reaction to any given surroundings? Is that theory true which would have us believe that man is no more than a product of many conditional and environmental factors-be they of a biological, psychological or sociological nature? Is man but an accidental product of these? Most important, do the prisoners' reactions to the singular world of the concentration camp prove that man cannot escape the influences of his surroundings? Does man have no choice of action in the face of such circumstances?

We can answer these questions from experience as well as on principle. The experiences of camp life show that man does have a choice of action. There were enough examples, often of a heroic nature, which proved that apathy could be overcome, irritability suppressed. Man can preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom, of independence of mind, even in such terrible conditions of psychic and physical stress. We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms - to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way. And there were always choices to make. Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom; which determined whether or not you would become the plaything of circumstance, renouncing freedom and dignity to become molded into the form of the typical inmate.

Seen from this point of view, the mental reactions of the inmates of a concentration camp must seem more to us than the mere expression of certain physical and sociological conditions. Even though conditions such as lack of sleep, insufficient food and various mental stresses may suggest that the inmates were bound to react in certain ways, in the final analysis it becomes clear that the sort of person the prisoner became was the result of an inner decision, and not the result of camp influences alone. Fundamentally, therefore, any man can, even under such circumstances, decide what shall become of him - mentally and spiritually. He may retain his human dignity even

in a concentration camp. Viktor Frankl [Austria; 1905-1997], Man's Search for Meaning. 1959.