

BO (EXODUS 10:1-13:16)

If I Could Only Be Like ...

2003 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz

Did you ever have an experience that affected your whole way of looking at things? A life-altering event that changed you forever?

Pharaoh did. (Or so it seems.)

Moses kept demanding the release of the Hebrew slaves. Pharaoh kept refusing. Egypt was bombarded with six devastating plagues, and he still didn't get it. As we read last week, it took until the seventh plague, the Plague of Hail, to bring the Pharaoh to his knees. There was lightning and thunder. The hail was a miraculous mix of ice and fire that killed any man or beast that was outside. The hail fell throughout Egypt, except in Goshen, the "Jewish neighborhood."

Pharaoh sent word and summoned Moses and Aaron. He said to them, "This time I am guilty. G-d is righteous! My People and I are wicked! Pray to G-d. There has been enough of G-d's thunder and hail. I will let you leave. You will not be delayed again." (Exodus, 9:27-28)

He finally got it. Or did he? Last week's Torah Portion closed with yet another refusal to release the Israelites from Egypt. He still didn't get it!

This week's reading opens with a desperate plea from the king's advisors: *"Let them go! ... Don't you realize that Egypt is being destroyed?!"* (Ibid, 10:7)

What was the matter with this man? How could he be so foolish?

There is a fascinating passage in the Talmud (Sanhedrin, 102a). King Jeroboam was an evil man who led his entire nation astray. He is referred to as one of the very few people who have totally forfeited a share in the Next World. G-d, however, offered him a reprieve: "Repent, and I and you and (David) the son of Jesse will walk together in the Garden of Eden."

Sounds like a good deal. I'd say go for it! But Jeroboam wanted more information: "Who will walk in front?"

G-d responded, "The son of Jesse." Jeroboam wasn't interested.

How can a man be so foolish? He was receiving a prophecy from G-d! He was in direct contact with the Master of the World! How could he be so arrogant and stubborn as to turn down an offer of clemency from the Creator?!

The answer is that G-d gives us the power to defy Him. One of the primary concepts of the Torah is that we are given free will. We are granted the ability to choose between right and wrong. We are not robots who automatically do G-d's will. He doesn't "program" us to want to do what's right. If He did, there would be no point in rewarding good and punishing evil.

Even in the middle of a prophecy, Jeroboam's evil nature was allowed to penetrate the awe and aura of G-d's presence and say "no."

We see the same concept with Pharaoh:

In introducing Plague #8, G-d said to Moses, (AFTER his above-mentioned contrition) *"Go to Pharaoh, because I have made his heart stubborn ... so that you may relate ... that I made a mockery of Egypt and about My signs that I placed among them, so that you will know that I am G-d."* (Ibid, 10:1-2)

G-d then sent Moses and Aaron to say, *"How long will you refuse to be humbled before Me? Release My People! If you refuse... I will send locusts..."* (Ibid, 3-4)

Was this fair? It looks like a set-up! It looks like G-d is forcing Pharaoh to stubbornly refuse to release the Israelites, and then He plans to punish Pharaoh for being stubborn!

Why should Pharaoh be punished? He should plead "Not Guilty, by reason of Divine Coercion!" After all, as we saw above, Pharaoh had already agreed to let them go.

This is similar to what we saw in the case of Jeroboam. The Plagues were so relentless, so overpowering, that Pharaoh's free will disappeared. It would be impossible under such circumstances for a human to refuse to comply with G-d's demands.

In reality, G-d was not forcing Pharaoh to say "no." He was doing the exact opposite! He was removing from Pharaoh the pressure to say "yes." G-d restored to Pharaoh the ability to make a choice. G-d didn't FORCE Pharaoh to be stubborn; He ALLOWED him to be stubborn. To do otherwise would be unfair.

Some people seem to get all the breaks. It doesn't seem fair. They just have it easier:

"If only I could be as rich as Bill Gates! There would be no poverty. I'd take care of the homeless. I'd support my favorite institutions. It would be wonderful!"

"If only I had a more efficient metabolism! My food consumption would not affect me so negatively. My cholesterol (and weight!!) wouldn't be approaching 300! It would be wonderful!"

"If only I were as tall as Chaquille O'Neil! I'd be a basketball superstar! It would be wonderful!"

"If only my kindergarten teacher had smiled at me. I wouldn't be ... It would be wonderful!"

"If only Mom hadn't loved you best. I would have ... It would be wonderful!"

"If only I had received a better Jewish education as a child. I would find it much easier to be religious. I'd be fluent in all the prayers. It would be wonderful!"

Yes, it really seems sometimes that some people get a more manageable slice of Life on their plate. They find themselves in a better position to cope with life's physical, spiritual, financial and emotional challenges. It just doesn't seem fair. Why don't we start out evenly? How can we possibly expect to compete in life when the cards are stacked against us?

The answer, says the Talmud, is that everything IS even. The greater a person is, the greater his Evil Inclination is. (That's why Jeroboam was able to receive a prophecy and still choose to ignore G-d's will.) Every person has his own challenges. Those who are wealthy have their difficulties. Those who are talented and educated and privileged have their own issues that they need to deal with.

No one is entitled to make excuses. There is no free ride. Pharaoh and Jeroboam should have found it easy to do good. In spite of that fact, they utilized their free will and CHOSE to do the wrong thing.

We all have challenges. Yes, the apple pie covered with ice cream looks delicious. Yes, it would be easier to advance in the company if the boss was your father-in-law. Yes, it's easier to observe the Sabbath if you've been raised to do it all your life. But none of that changes our obligation to do the right thing.

We are required to make our dinner using the ingredients that life has provided. Sometimes it seems tough; sometimes it's easier.

The bottom line is: "He who comes to purify, (i.e., to be righteous) is assisted from Above. He who comes to defile, (i.e., to be wicked) is assisted from Above." (Gemorrah Shabbos, 104a)

What we ask for is what we get. G-d will help us serve Him, if we are so inclined. He will also "help" us defy him, if that's what we want to do. The Torah is, if you'll pardon the expression, "pro-choice!"

Have a great Shabbos.

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