

PARSHA VA'EIRA

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RESCINDING FREE WILL

Rabbi David Pinto Chlita

It is written, "Go to Pharaoh in the morning. Behold, he is going forth to the water, and you shall stand opposite him on the bank of the Nile, and the staff that was turned into a serpent you shall take in your hand" (Shemot 7:15).

In his commentary, Rashi explains why Hashem ordered Moshe to the riverbank in the morning, saying that Pharaoh claimed to be divine, having no need to relieve himself. Hence he would get up early and go to the Nile and relieve himself in secret. Hashem ordered Moshe to go out to the river to show Pharaoh that he knew of his secret, and that he was deceiving his people by proclaiming to be divine. In fact Pharaoh should have felt shame before Moshe, and he should have repented of his stubborn refusal to release the Children of Israel. Moshe already knew of Pharaoh's deception in claiming to be divine, and yet he still hardened his heart, continuing to proclaim himself a god without shame.

We can explain something else according to this view. Someone I know asked me the following question: Why did Hashem harden Pharaoh's heart during the last five plagues, since He only punishes a person when he acts out of free will, when he has the ability to choose between good and evil? It would seem, therefore, that Pharaoh did not deserve to be punished! This question is answered by the Ramban in his commentary on the verse, "I will harden Pharaoh's heart" (Shemot 7:3). Here the Ramban states that Pharaoh exercised free will during the first five plagues, the fifth being the plague of pestilence. During these plagues we read, "Pharaoh's heart was hardened" (v.13), "Pharaoh hardened his heart" (8:28), etc.

For the remainder of the plagues, however, the Torah uses the expression: "Hashem hardened Pharaoh's heart." The Ramban explains that Pharaoh hardened his own heart during the first five plagues. Yet after the plague of pestilence, Pharaoh would have tried to repent and not harden his heart. At that point it was Hashem Who hardened it at the end of each plague, until the plague of the firstborn. That being said, why was Pharaoh punished? After all, it was Hashem Who hardened his heart!

According to this explanation, we must say that during the first five plagues, Pharaoh hardened his heart after each plague, arrogantly claiming to be a god before Moshe, who surprised Pharaoh when he caught him relieving himself by the river. Even after the first five plagues – during which Hashem saw Pharaoh consistently choosing the path of evil, hardening his heart, and not once trying to choose good, to see what it was like – all that Pharaoh wanted to do was evil. Hashem then punished him by rescinding his free will, the result being that Pharaoh continued to act in accordance with the forces of

evil that dwelled in him. According to what a person decides to do on his own, Heaven decides the rest of his conduct by removing, if necessary, his free will and committing him to the path that he himself chose at the outset.

I also found the following in the Midrash: "Rabbi Yochanan said, 'Does this not provide heretics with grounds for arguing that [Pharaoh] had no means of repenting, since it says: For I have hardened his heart [Shemot 10:1]?' To this Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish replied: 'Let the mouths of the heretics be closed! If it concerns scoffers, He will scoff them [Mishlei 3:34]. When G-d warns a man once, twice, and even a third time – but he still does not repent – G-d then closes his heart against repentance so that He can exact vengeance from him for his sins. So it was with the wicked Pharaoh. Since G-d sent him [a warning to let His people go] five times, but he paid no attention, G-d then said: "You have stiffened your neck and hardened your heart; I will add defilement to your defilement" ' ' (Shemot Rabba 13:3).

Heartfelt Repentance

It is written, "Whoever among the servants of Pharaoh feared the word of Hashem chased his servants and his livestock to the houses. And whoever did not take the word of G-d to heart – he left his servants and livestock in the field" (Shemot 9:20-21). This occurred during the plague of hail, when Moshe warned Pharaoh and his servants that whoever wanted to be spared from this plague should bring everything inside. Those who believed in Hashem brought everything inside and did not suffer any damage, whereas those who did not believe in Hashem brought nothing inside and suffered serious damage. Now it's difficult to understand how some people still did not believe in Hashem, since during the plague of lice the Egyptian sorcerers had told Pharaoh: "This is the finger of G-d" (Shemot 8:15).

In his book *Kesef Mezukak*, the gaon Rabbi Yoshiyahu Pinto, may his merit protect us, explains that starting from the first plague, feelings of repentance were already beginning to stir in Pharaoh and his servants. However this repentance was superficial, devoid of any heartfelt sentiment. Hence they did not bring their livestock inside following Moshe's warning. When a person's repentance is superficial, he maintains his negative attitude and believes that he has repented. In reality, however, his "repentance" was never accepted in the first place.

On the verse, "Come to Pharaoh, for I have made his heart and the heart of his servants stubborn, so that I can put these signs of Mine in his midst" (Shemot 10:1), the Rif explains that when Hashem saw that Pharaoh's repentance was completely superficial, He hardened his heart so he could tolerate additional plagues – locusts, darkness, and the plague of the firstborn – until he would truly repent.

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Hashem again hardened Pharaoh's heart after the plague of the firstborn so he would pursue the Children of Israel to the sea, the reason being that Pharaoh's repentance during the plague of the firstborn was only due to a fear of punishment, not because he was yielding to G-d.

This contains a great lesson, namely that it is not enough to repent

superficially. Rather, we must sense repentance in our heart. To do this, we must engage in deep soul-searching to see if the repentance we are doing is also present in our heart. When repentance is only superficial, not being accompanied by a broken heart, we remain in our transgressions and our repentance is not true teshuvah. Hence we are unable to fear or respect G-d's word.

Real Life Stories

Resolving the "Problems" We Encounter

It is written, "I shall take you to Me for a people" (Shemot 6:7).

In our time, the desire to repent raises halachic issues for those who work in organizations dedicated to teshuvah. The following story illustrates such issues.

An avrech from the Lev L'Achim kollel in Haifa went to the home of a certain family to study with the man of the house, his wife, and their children. The voice of Torah that emanated from their home stirred the interest of one of their neighbors, a restaurant owner, who asked their "guest" to study Torah with him as well.

The avrech agreed. However the restaurant owner was very busy with his business, and he did not want to leave it for an instant. Hence he asked the "Rav" to teach him at his restaurant instead: "We'll find a quiet spot where you can teach me Torah," he suggested.

The restaurant itself was very nice, and they agreed to study there together. Yet as soon as the avrech arrived, he sensed that something wasn't right. A few minutes after sitting down with the owner, he realized that treif meat was being sold there.

In a state of shock, the avrech hesitated to continue teaching him Torah, fearing that the presence of a man such as himself in this restaurant would constitute a desecration of the Divine Name.

On the following day, when he returned to the kollel in Haifa, he told his colleagues about his misfortune. According to them, it was very likely that the restaurant would soon become kosher on account of the avrech's influence on the restaurant owner: "In the time required to find a solution, the problem will resolve itself," they said to him.

The avrech therefore continued his "work" in the non-kosher restaurant. However a few days later, he found himself faced with a situation that rattled him: As he was studying with the owner, a man wearing a kippah entered the restaurant and ate a meal of treif meat that was served to him.

Incapable of doing nothing, the "Rav" approached this religious Jew and asked him how he could possibly eat in such an establishment.

Stunned, the observant Jew stared at the avrech, unable to understand the question. He said to him, "I've known about this restaurant for years, and I know that treif meat used to be sold here. But when I passed by and saw you, an Orthodox Jew, sitting here, I was 100% certain that it had become fully kosher!"

The problem that now arose was particularly serious, for it no longer concerned a desecration of the Divine Name alone – it was also causing other Jews to transgress! Even if learning with the avrech would one day lead the restaurant owner to make his restaurant kosher, numerous people were liable to stumble by seeing the avrech in the restaurant!

The members of the Lev L'Achim kollel presented this problem to Rav Zilberstein, who in response recounted a story brought in the Gemara (Taanith 22a):

Rav Beroka was walking in the market, where he met Eliyahu HaNavi. The Rav asked him, "Is there anyone in this market who has a share in the World to Come?" At first he said no, but in the meantime a certain man arrived, one whom Eliyahu HaNavi said did have a share the World to Come.

Rav Beroka observed this man, who was strolling about without tzitzit, wearing black shoes (a sin for which it is preferable to die rather than commit, since it constitutes a non-Jewish custom), and he asked him what he did for a living. The man replied that he was a jailer, responsible for making sure that Jewish prisoners acted with modesty, that men and women were separated, and that they did not transgress laws against indecency. "Why aren't you wearing tzitzit, and why do you have these shoes on?" Rav Beroka asked him.

"It's a disguise that I use so I don't appear to be a Jew. That would prevent me from entering the prison," he replied.

The man added that in this way, he was able to make his way among the non-Jewish authorities. As a result, whenever he heard of a harsh decree being enacted against Jews, he would inform the sages of Israel, who would make every effort to annul it.

Rav Zilberstein continued: "I thought that the avrech who studies with the restaurant owner should not go there dressed as an Orthodox Jew. As such, G-d's Name will not be profaned, and nobody will make the mistake of eating there. Furthermore, it's very likely that this scholar will be able to convince the restaurant owner to stop selling treif food.

"However when I spoke to my teacher and father-in-law, Rav Eliashiv, he said that it was forbidden for him not to wear the garments of an Orthodox Jew because of the prohibition against desecrating the Divine Name. I then asked him how he could explain the behavior of the man 'who had a share in the World to Come,' walking around without tzitzit and wearing black shoes. He relied that in the case cited by the Gemara, Jews knew who that man was, aware that he was filled with the fear of G-d. They understood that he was dressed in that way in order to encourage his fellow Jews. That's why he was allowed to do what he did. On the other hand, in the case of the avrech who isn't known, he would profane the Divine Name by not wearing the garments of a Jew who observes mitzvot."

Nevertheless, this story ends well. When this issue was raised during a Lev L'Achim congress, which was attended by great Torah scholars of the generation, Rav Menachem Kaplan, the director of the Haifa center, sent a message to the director general of the organization, Rav Sorotzkin, telling him that this issue was no longer relevant, since the restaurant had in any case become kosher.

Guard Your Tongue

Why Did You Tell People?

If we ask a friend for a favor, and he declines to help, we must be very careful not to say: "Then why did you help So-and-so? He told me himself that you helped him!"

In fact by saying this, the friend in question will resent the person whom he helped for having told people about it. By doing so, he has made it impossible for him to refuse help from beggars. – Chafetz Chaim

In the Footsteps of our Fathers

Bearing the Burden with Others

It is written, “These are the names of the sons of Levi in order of their birth: Gershon, Kohath, and Merari. The years of Levi’s life were 137 years” (Shemot 6:16).

Strangely enough, the expression “These are the names” appears only here, for the sons of the tribe of Levi, not for any other tribe. Why? The Shelah HaKodesh is surprised by this as well, and he explains by noting that the tribe of Levi did not endure the hardships of exile. Aware of this, Levi wanted to share in the suffering of all the Children of Israel. What did he do? He chose names for his sons that pertained to the exile: Gershon – for they were strangers [gerim] in a land not theirs; Kohath – for they did not have enough to eat [shinehem kehot]; and Merari, for the Egyptians wanted to embitter [vaymareru] the lives of all the Children of Israel.

The Shelah continues by stating that from here we learn that we must share in the misfortunes of the community, even if such misfortunes do not personally affect us. This is what G-d told Moshe by declaring, “I will be what I will be” (Shemot 3:14) – I will be with them in this sorrow, as I will be with them in other sorrows.

In a letter written by the gaon Rabbi Michel Yehuda Lefkowitz, he addresses this special characteristic:

“One of the riches of the Torah is to infuse us with the concept of ‘bearing the burden with others,’ meaning that we must condition ourselves to sense the needs of others just as our own, and to pray for the good of others – and especially to share in the suffering of the community. While the inhabitants of the Holy Land are immersed in their final exile, the animosity of rebels and leftists is expressed by persecuting the observant and hating Judaism, to the point of wanting to wipe out the name of Israel.

“It is therefore imperative to pray even more to our Father, in order for Him to take pity on His people, and especially on His children who reside in the land of Israel. We are also responsible for intensifying our study of the holy Torah. The more that prayer and Torah study increase, the more our merits multiply.”

The Needs of Others

The Alter of Slabodka, Rabbi Nathan Tzvi Finkel, educated and trained his students to develop compassion for others. During the First World War, the economic situation was extremely grave, and everyone was suffering from hunger. The poverty that reigned during that time was unimaginable. As Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchak Ruderman relates, “The shoes of the yeshiva students were made of rags that had been tied and glued together. At the time, I had clothes that had been cut from the coarse material of a potato sack.”

Rav Ruderman managed to save half of his meager allowance during that time, money that he used to purchase a new tallit katan so he could embellish a mitzvah. He showed his new purchase to the Alter of Slabodka, expecting to be praised and honored for it. However his teacher struck him with his “educational whip” in an attempt to uproot the trace of pride that had accompanied his student in the performance of the mitzvah, and to infuse a deep concern for others in him. He said to him, “What have you done? If you could forgo a small portion of your expenses, you could have given that amount to another Jew so he could purchase food, which is so scarce during this terrible time!”

Total Concentration

The gaon Rabbi Eliezer Goldschmidt confirmed: “The walls of Rabbi Meir Simcha Cohen’s house absorbed the tears and emotions of people

over the course of many years, as well as the complaints and groans of community leaders over the misfortunes of the community. Everyone who entered his home afflicted and defeated would leave filled with hope, faith, and confidence.”

The inhabitants of the city once asked a relative of the Rav, “What’s the source of Rabbi Meir Simcha’s great strength, which motivates everyone in distress to go and see him?”

He replied, “First of all, his heart is filled with love for Israel, and he is endowed with common sense and an open mind. But besides these qualities, he abandons all other concerns when someone comes to him with problems and seeks his advice. He concentrates and focuses entirely on the situation of the person before him. That’s why his advice is honest, precise, and fair.”

In the Light of the Parsha

Nothing Inhibits Free Will

It is written, “The necromancers of Egypt did the same by their incantations, so Pharaoh’s heart was strong and he did not heed them” (Shemot 7:22).

Our Sages and Rashi teach that the term belateihem (“by their incantations”) designates the work of demons. Yet how can we say that demons, which were created to obey G-d’s word, could have helped Pharaoh and the necromancers to dull and tarnish the revelation of G-d’s majesty and His mastery of Creation, as well as to scorn His emissaries Moshe and Aaron? Since we enjoy free will and choose everything that we do, we usually think we can act as we see fit, for better or for worse. Yet here, in the incident involving Pharaoh and the necromancers, it seems that our freedom is not limited to our own choices; it seems to extend to the forces of Creation that G-d created for His honor and the revelation of His Name. We therefore have the power to divert created beings from their primary objective. As such, we have the ability to act against G-d’s will by using elements that were created in order to obey Him. This is the great responsibility that lies on our shoulders: G-d, Who governs the world, is at the head of Creation, and yet we have the power to make Creation work for us, for better or for worse. Hence G-d warns us, “Be careful not to ruin My world!” In other words, man has the ability to destroy not only himself, but also the world, which belongs not to him but to G-d.

This reveals the power of free will, which was given to every person in order to justify his reward or punishment. In effect, if a person who wanted to do evil were to be constantly assaulted by the forces of Creation sent by G-d – thus preventing him from carrying out his intentions – his free will would be seriously affected. This is because such a person would realize that his actions were wrong and that none of his goals were fulfilled! In such a case, he would not be rewarded for having fulfilled the precept, “Distance yourself from evil and do good” (Tehillim 34:15), since he would have been forced to do good and prevented from doing evil, despite his intentions.

We can now understand how the necromancers could have used demons to weaken people’s faith in G-d, despite the fact that demons were created to punish sinners and demonstrate that there is justice and a Judge in the world. This is because free will and the principle of reward and punishment necessarily place man in absolute control of his actions, for better or for worse. This applies even if he uses the forces that fill Creation and this world, even those created to reveal G-d’s Name and increase His glory, as it is written: “Everyone who is called by My Name and whom I have created for My glory, whom I have fashioned, even perfected” (Isaiah 43:7).

Important to G-d

It is written, “Also, I have heard the groaning of the Children of Israel” (Shemot 6:5).

What does the term “also” signify?

In his book *Me'am Loez*, Rabbi Yaakov Kuli answers this question as follows:

The Gemara tells us that there was a drought during the time of Shemuel Hakatan. Shemuel then decreed a fast, and rain fell even before the fast occurred. However he warned the people not to feel proud of themselves, for the situation could be compared to that of a servant who asks his master for a favor, at which point his master exclaims: “Give it to him, but let me not hear his voice” (Taanith 25b).

The same applies to the community: When men are worthy, G-d answers their prayers only after they have recited them, thus demonstrating their importance to Him.

This is the meaning of the verse, “Also, I have heard the groan of the Children of Israel” – in addition to the forthcoming deliverance, it was important for G-d to hear the supplications of His children, thereby demonstrating that they are important to Him.

If G-d had helped the Children of Israel even before they had beseeched Him, people might think that He had no desire, so to speak, to hear their prayers.

Worse than 50 Plagues

It is written, “The blood was throughout the land of Egypt” (Shemot 7:21).

The Midrash recounts that the Children of Israel enriched themselves from the plague of blood that struck Egypt.

The book *Pninei Kedem* gives a nice explanation for why it was during this plague that the Children of Israel enriched themselves, noting that in the Gemara our Sages state: “Poverty in one’s home is worse than 50 plagues” (Bava Batra 116a).

Hence as soon as the plagues began to strike the Egyptians, the Children of Israel became richer. In fact if they had remained in their grinding poverty, their situation would have been worse than that of the Egyptians even after the ninth plague, since “poverty in one’s home is worse than 50 plagues.”

Slander

It is written, “The frogs will depart from you and your houses” (Shemot 8:7).

Here Moshe’s prayer was effective in removing the frogs from Pharaoh and his servants, contrary to the prayer that he later formulated to remove the fiery serpents that G-d sent upon the Children of Israel to kill a large number of them. In the latter case, G-d simply said to him: “Make yourself a fiery [serpent] and place it on a pole. It will be that anyone who was bitten will look at it and live” (Bamidbar 21:8).

The Chafetz Chaim explains things as follows: Everything can be rectified except for slander. An accusing angel that is created by the sin of slander will never stop accusing, and it is impossible to make it leave. Furthermore, just as the slanderer uses his mouth for an evil purpose, the accusing angel created by this false speech comes for an evil purpose, and it cannot be silenced.

Fiery serpents struck the people because they had complained against G-d and against Moshe. Hence Moshe’s prayer was not sufficient to make them leave. However G-d gave him some advice on how to heal a person bitten by the snake, as it is written: “Make yourself a fiery [serpent] and place it on a pole. It will be that anyone who was bitten will look at it and live.”

The First of All Mitzvot

It is written, “I shall take you to Me for a people, and I shall be a G-d to you; and you shall know that I am Hashem your G-d, Who takes you out of the burdens of Egypt” (Shemot 6:7).

This is the first of all mitzvot, the root of all precepts of the Torah: The knowledge of G-d in a general way, namely that there is a Supernal Ruler, a Master of the universe and of all life, a Creator of heaven and earth and all their hosts.

When the Children of Israel were about to leave Egypt, they had no knowledge of the Holy One, blessed be He, and Moshe had to teach them the first principle of Divine knowledge. Without this principle, they would not have believed in all the signs and wonders that they were about to experience.

– Zohar Shemot 25a (Raya Mehemna)

Men of Faith

Repay Me on Sunday

As Rabbi Haim Pinto Hakatan was walking through the city streets collecting money for tzedakah, as was his custom, Rabbi Avraham Amar saw him and felt ashamed. In fact he no longer had anything to eat, nor did he even have a cent in his pocket. Shabbat was soon approaching, and his financial situation didn’t allow him to purchase any food for this holy day. He was therefore afraid that Rabbi Haim would approach him asking for a donation. Hence Rabbi Avraham tried to avoid him, running into the courtyard of a house. Seeing this from afar, Rabbi Haim promptly followed him, and when he found him he said: “I know that you’re destitute, but I want to help you.” As he was speaking, Rav Pinto took out a few coins from his shawl and gave them to Rabbi Avraham: “Come see me on Sunday and repay me. When the time comes, you’ll have enough money to repay me.” As Mr. David Amar, Rabbi Avraham’s son, said in recounting this story, Rabbi Avraham refused the loan, afraid that he wouldn’t have enough to repay it. However Rabbi Haim insisted until he eventually accepted. He then went to the market to purchase some fish, meat, and numerous other things for Shabbat. On Sunday, Rabbi Avraham refused to leave his home, for he didn’t have any money left and was afraid of meeting Rav Pinto, whom he couldn’t repay. Eventually, however, Rabbi Avraham placed his faith in G-d and ventured outside. As was walking and thinking things over, an Arab whom he didn’t know approached him and asked that he sell some gold jewelry for him, assuring him of being paid for his efforts. Right then and there, the Arab gave him half the promised amount, even prior to selling any jewelry! He then disappeared.

At that point Rabbi Haim was standing before Rabbi Avraham, his face shining, and he said to him: “You see – things have unfolded as expected. Today is Sunday. Now repay me the money that you borrowed, not a penny more.”

Rabbi Avraham repaid the Rav what he owed, while still retaining a sizeable amount.