

# Pharaoh, The Children of Israel, and Free Will

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### Introduction

During my last d'var Torah I highlighted contrasts between Joseph and Moses. Today I'd like to point out a different set of contrasts and parallels in the Book of Shemot. The last two entries (in italics) draw parallels between Pharaoh and the Children of Israel. Famously, G-d's hardening of Pharaoh's heart has raised implications about free will, so perhaps it's worth considering whether the parallels between the Children of Israel and Pharaoh suggest that they are more alike than different with respect to the issue of free will. Let's start with some examples of thematic contrasts.

<b>Egypt</b>	<b>Exodus (and post Exodus)</b>
Pharaoh heeds Joseph	Pharaoh defies Moses
Store houses - seven years of grain	Manna - day by day
Plagues with thunder, lightning, and hail	Thunder and lightning at Mount Sinai, guiding cloud pillar
Pharaoh's followers are afflicted by boils and plagues	Korach's followers are afflicted by boils and illness
Pharaoh's followers are swallowed by the sea	Korach's followers are swallowed by the earth
G-d summons beasts as a plague	G-d summons birds as food
Killing of first-born Egyptians	Consecration of first-born Jews
<i>Pharaoh - Accustomed to power</i>	<i>Jewish Slaves – Accustomed to powerlessness</i>
<i>Obstinance of Pharaoh</i>	<i>Obstinance of the Children of Israel</i>

Parshat Bo begins:

Bo: 10:1-2 Hashem said to Moses, "Come to Pharaoh, for I have made his heart and the heart of his servants stubborn (proud) so that I can put these signs of Mine in his midst: and so that you may relate in the ears of your son and your son's son that I made a mockery of Egypt and My signs that I placed among them – that you may know that I am Hashem."

This is but one of several iterations where Hashem tells Moses that the exodus from Egypt will not only serve to take Israel out from the midst of Egypt, but will demonstrate to Pharaoh, Egypt, the Jewish People, and to all the inhabitants of the region, G-d's overwhelming and ultimate power.

G-d had made clear this plan as early as the event at the Burning Bush. It is the main theme that runs throughout the entire narrative:

Shemot: 3:19 I know that the king of Egypt will not allow you to go, *except through a strong hand*. I shall stretch out my hand and *I shall strike Egypt with all My wonders* that I shall perform in Egypt..., so that it will happen that when you go, you will not go empty-handed."

Va'Eira: 7:3-5 But I shall harden Pharaoh's heart, and I shall multiply My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt. Pharaoh will not heed you, and I shall put My hand upon Egypt: and I shall take out My legions – My people the Children of Israel – from the land of Egypt, with great judgments. And *Egypt shall know that I am Hashem*, when I stretch out My hand over Egypt; and I shall take the Children of Israel out from among them."

After each plague it appears that Pharaoh has gotten the message but, as we know, he is incapable of relinquishing his status as MPR, most-powerful ruler. At times, though, he does seem to get it:

Va'Eira 9:27 "This time I have sinned; Hashem is the Righteous One, and I and my people are the wicked ones." (almost the exact words that the Kohen Gadol speaks in the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur).

Then, during the plague of locusts:

Bo: 10:16-7: Pharaoh hastened to summon Moses and Aaron and he said, "I have sinned to Hashem, your G-d, and to you. And now, please forgive my sin just this time, and entreat Hashem, your G-d, that He remove from me only this death".

Finally, Hashem reveals that Pharaoh and the Egyptians are pawns to be played:

Beshalach 14: 1-8: Hashem spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the Children of Israel and let them turn back and encamp before Pihahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, before Baal-zephon; you shall encamp opposite it, by the sea. Pharaoh will say of the Children of Israel, 'They are imprisoned in the land, the Wilderness has locked them in.' *I shall strengthen the heart of Pharaoh* and he will pursue them, and I will be glorified through Pharaoh and his entire army, and Egypt will know that I am Hashem. " And so they did.

It was told to the king of Egypt that the people had fled; and *the heart of Pharaoh* and his servants *became transformed* regarding the people, and they said, "What is this that we have done that we have sent away Israel from serving us?". He harnessed his chariot and attracted his people with him. He took six hundred elite chariots and all the chariots of Egypt, with officers on them all. *Hashem strengthened the heart of Pharaoh*, king of Egypt, and he pursued the Children of Israel – and the Children of Israel were going out with an upraised arm.

I quote this passage to point out that G-d strengthens Pharaoh's heart, not through a miraculous magic spell or incantation, but through control of the situation in which Pharaoh finds himself. Although Pharaoh, by now, sees that Hashem wields the ultimate power, he backslides in a similar manner to the "stiff-necked" Jewish People who, despite G-d's signs and wonders, repeatedly behave counter to Moses' expectations. The players in this drama are responding (as they must) to their circumstances. While it is not said that G-d made the hearts of Israel stubborn, there is a strong parallel between the obstinance of Pharaoh and the obstinance of the Jewish People. Maybe the similarities are more than skin deep.

We are told that G-d knew what Pharaoh would decide beforehand. Isn't it also the case that G-d knew what the Children of Israel were going to do beforehand? G-d knew that, as a powerful ruler accustomed to the privileges of power, and surrounded by elite officers, (and with the Jewish People arrayed like sitting ducks), Pharaoh would not relent even after the final plague. Did G-d not also foresee that a collection of slaves, accustomed to the feeling of powerlessness, would need 40 years of challenges and failures to mature as a nation? From this I draw the conclusion that, according to the Torah, The Children of Israel are in the same boat as Pharaoh when it comes to the question of free will. Do humans truly have the power to choose differently than we do at any moment?

Let's shift gears a bit and examine several translations of one sentence from the Torah related to this question. Consider the first sentence of next week's parsha, Beshalach:

כִּי | אָמַר אֱלֹהִים פֶּן יִנַּחֵם הָעַם בְּרֹאֲתָם מִלְחָמָה וְשָׁבוּ מִצְרָיִם׃

Important implications flow from the way one translates and interprets the meaning of the words, "Pen Yi-nah-chem." The Hebrew word, "Pen," (translated in yellow) derives from the concept of "face," and it has many meanings relating to the *aspect*, *countenance*, and the *presentation* of a person. It also carries the connotation of *inclination*, *design*, or *motivation* as in the related Hebrew word, "Pen-eeya". When preceding a future tense verb, "pen" is commonly translated as *lest*, or *for fear that*.

The second word in the phrase, "Yi-nah-chem" (in English, "they will be comforted," derives from the concept of *comfort* or *consolation* ("nachum"). I translate Yi-nah-chem as "they will be comforted" Let's look at four translations and their implications. I've greyed out the first sentence of the passage because it is the second sentence that I will discuss.

Stone Chumash:

It happened when Pharaoh sent out the people that G-d did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, because it was near, For G-d said, "Perhaps the people will reconsider when they see a war, and they will return to Egypt. So G-d turned the people toward the way of the Wilderness to the Sea of Reeds."

The translation of "pen" as "perhaps" suggests that Hashem doesn't know, with certainty, what the people would do if they took the land route. Doesn't that seem a bit odd? I get the impression from this translation that the People could choose either to leave Egypt or to stay, and that G-d isn't certain of the outcome in advance. Since G-d doesn't know what they would do, this translation fits with (and promotes) an assumption of free will.

## The Living Torah:

When Pharaoh let the people leave, G-d did not lead them along the Philistine Highway, although it was the shorter route. **G-d's consideration was that** if the people encountered armed resistance, **they would lose heart** and return to Egypt.

This translation makes a hypothetical “if/then” statement. *If* they were to face resistance, G-d knows that they *would* return to Egypt, and why (because they “would lose heart”). But the word “if” in this context implies uncertainty around future events. Wouldn't G-d know unequivocally whether the People would or would not encounter resistance? I am also struggling to understand how G-d could know that they “would lose heart,” but not know “if” they would encounter armed resistance. Finally, translating the phrase אָמַר אֱלֹהִים | כִּי as “G-d's consideration was that...” offers us a glimpse into G-d's decision-making process that I've never seen anywhere else. I'm not sure that this translation holds up to scrutiny, but it is fascinating.

## Hertz Chumash:

And it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that G-d led them not by the way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for G-d said, “**Lest peradventure**” the people **repent** when they see war, and they return to Egypt.”

This translation of the word “pen” is consistent with how the Torah commonly uses the word: It is used this way when G-d speaks hypothetically (as in, “Beware, *lest* your heart be swayed...”). G-d has already clearly decided that Moses will lead the Children of Israel out of Egypt via the seashore and is explaining why. However, the word “peradventure” seems to be an added bit of spice – it doesn't directly correspond to any Hebrew word in the sentence. Still, the message is clear: G-d chose the path that gave the Children of Israel fewer choices and less agency of their own. That's not a great endorsement for the notion that G-d is all about choice and our free will.

## This is my literal translation:

And it came to pass that when Pharaoh sent out the people, G-d did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines because it was close by, for G-d said, **Lest** the people **seek comfort** when war is in sight and return towards Egypt. And G-d turned the people towards the path of the wilderness...”

## Even more literal:

..for G-d said, “Face it, the people will seek comfort when war is in sight...”

I feel that my translations do not undermine the Torah's assumption that G-d is omniscient. Rather, they convey that G-d knew how the people would respond had they been led out of Egypt via Philistia. Comparison of these translations shows the wide variation of interpretation and the assumptions that creep in during translation from Hebrew to English. In this case, I suspect that each translator's conception of free will in the Torah influences the translation of this passage. I'll now share some thoughts on my conception of free will in the Torah.

It's my opinion that the Torah makes a strong case that the world runs according to G-d's will rather than by our free will. The narrative of the book of Shemot indicates that G-d, all powerful and omniscient, knew the plan for the Exodus beforehand, knew the inclination of Pharaoh, knew the mindset of the People, and knew how they would all act. G-d's omniscience is pervasive throughout the Torah. Our patriarchs were promised outcomes far into the future. The many setbacks and conflicts our ancestors experienced both before and after Egypt are generally seen as part of a grand plan. In my view, the actions of every person in the Torah were driven by their nature, history, and circumstance, in service of the Torah's divine plan. As such, they could not have acted differently than they did; and by extension, neither can we.

The debate over free will is perhaps the most central and pervasive philosophical subject taken up by humans throughout the ages and we certainly aren't going to settle it here. It is a huge task just to define the parameters necessary to know what is meant by the term. That said, I believe that the Torah provides far more evidence to deny that we are in control of our will than to support it. I take the position that the absence of free will does no damage to any of the central tenets of Judaism including Tzedakah, Tefilla and Teshuva. On the contrary, a deterministic viewpoint imbues our actions with utmost importance because our present behavior influences our future behavior as well as our collective future.

## **Discussion**

Please provide evidence from the Torah that you feel provides convincing support that we have or lack free will.