



# NHS Sedra Sheet

Parshas Vaera – David Levy (reprinted)

כ"ה טבת תשע"ח – 13th January 2018 – שבת פ' וארא

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On the face of it Parashas Va'era poses a theological problem. For the 6th, 8th and 9th plagues the Torah says Vayechazeik Hashem Es Lev Paroh ("and G-d strengthened Paroh's heart") whereas in connection with the first five plagues it said Vayechezak Lev Paroh ("and Paroh's heart was strong") the implication being that he made it strong himself. (This also applies to the 7th plague).

Even before the first plague Hashem said to Moshe (Shemos 7:3) Va'ani Aksheh Es Lev Paroh ("I will strengthen Paroh's heart") and Rashi explains that Hashem did this in order to increase His signs so that Israel would take note and be fearful of Hashem, although Rashi acknowledges that during the first five plagues Paroh strengthened his heart himself.

All this seems unfair on Paroh even though he was a Rosho. Why should his ability to choose the good path and repent be removed from him? Rashi and Rambam in Hilchos Teshuvoh 6:3 follow the approach of the Medrash (Shemos Rabbo 11:6 and 13:3) that Hashem sometimes removes the possibility of exercising Bechira (free will) as an extreme form of punishment for people who have been exceedingly wicked.

Because Bechira, the choice between good and evil, is such a fundamental concept in Judaism not all the Meforshim are happy with this approach. Abarbanel quotes the possuk in Yechezkel 18:32 that "Hashem does not desire the death of a wicked person but rather that he repent from his ways and live" There are similar statements in Yirmayahu (3:22) and Tehilim (25:8). Rambam himself wrote in Hilchos Teshuva (4:5) about those who have a share in the world to come: "If they repented of their sins and died they are among those who will be in the world to come because there is nothing more powerful than Teshuva". In Pirkei Avos (2:15) there is the famous statement "Repent even one day before your death". So why would the benefit of this basic principle be denied Paroh? Exactly how wicked does a person have to be for this right of Bechira to be removed from him?

Rabbi Yosef Albo (Sefer Ha-ikkarim 4:25) and Rabbi Ovadia Sforno on Shemos 7:3 solve the problem by saying that Hashem hardened Paroh's heart in order to restore his free will. If he had let the Bnei Yisroel leave Mitzrayim under the duress of the plagues it could be argued that he was not acting with free will. Support for this is the fact that when Paroh's own magicians could no longer replicate the plagues by their own magic, they implored him to send the Bnei Yisroel out in order to save Mitzrayim from further suffering or even destruction.

Abarbanel explains that Hashem did not actually harden Paroh's heart directly at all. Each plague came 30 days after the last one and each one lasted for 7 days. Therefore there was an interval of 23 days until the next one began. During that period Paroh could reason that the plague was only a natural disaster which Moshe had somehow predicted. It did not come from Hashem at all. In other words Hashem tempted him. Devorim Rabbo (7:9) says that the plagues are called Hamofsim (the signs) because Mefatos Osom ("they tempted them") According to Abarbanel therefore Hashem indirectly strengthened Paroh's heart or, to put it another way, gave him the opportunity to do it himself. As we know from Bamidbor Rabbo (20:12) "On the way that a person wants to go that way he is led" (this is quoted in relation to Bilom who was eventually allowed by Hashem to go with Bolok's men in order (so he believed) to curse Bnei Yisroel). However the concept of Bechira means that man can always turn aside from that path.

In truth none of these explanations seem entirely satisfactory. There are also others; Ramban (Paroh never intended to repent, only to save himself); Abarbanel (alternative theories - in order to repent the Mitzrim had to be punished with their lives just as they had killed the Bnei Yisroel or repentance is only possible for the Jewish people (but what about Nineveh and Yonah?); Maharal (Paroh was by nature too stubborn to change); Shelo Hakodosh (the purpose was to show the nations of the world how cruel was Paroh) This plethora of different interpretations by our revered commentators illustrates how the Torah as the word of Hashem is beyond our complete understanding and we can only try to interpret it to the best of our ability according to human reasoning. Perhaps that is one reason why Torah study is so addictive.

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