

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Beshalach)

One of the greatest gifts we have in this world is the ability to make choices in our lives. Though sometimes, we might wish we didn't have to make those choices.

They had trained us for just such a moment. Again and again, this exact question had come up; in fact, an entire day in Officer's course had been dedicated to this very question. What would you do? How would you respond? And all of us, without fail, had reached the same conclusions. Intellectually the choice was very clear and made infinite sense. But that didn't make the choice any easier.

One of the most important topics, drilled into you again and again is what they call "Todah", recognition of enemy weaponry. In fact, every Friday morning in tank Officer's training, (usually done when you are already in dress uniform, literally with the bus engine running, waiting to take you home for a weekend pass,) there was a pop quiz on 'todah'. And if you didn't get a perfect score, you didn't get home for Shabbat. So, you can imagine everyone knew this topic backwards and forwards. One of the regular questions on the test was the RPG anti-tank weapon. A hand-held Russian-made toy, this Rocket Propelled Grenade was a tank killer, and one of the arch nemeses of the armored corps. Easy to fire, with a range of up to 300 yards, it could peel through the armor on our tanks like butter. You could flash a picture of one of these to any tank officer in his sleep, and he'd spew out the name of the weapon, whether it was friend or foe, statistics, and effective responses, without even batting an eye.

So when, on tank patrol in Beirut, you see one of these tubes sticking out of an alley, you know exactly what you have to do, and you know you only have a second to do it. There is an over-ride system a tank commander has, called a 'mashbet', which takes control of the main gun away from the gunner. You don't have time to bring the gun around for the gunner to see in his limited scope, direct him to the target, and wait for him to aim and fire. That takes eight seconds, which is seven seconds too long. So, you grab the mashbet, which sits in the turret wall right at hip level, and bring the tank gun left to site on this tube even as it is emerging from the alley it was hiding in. You have practiced this again and again in maneuvers, till you can aim the main gun at close range and hit the target in your sleep. At a couple hundred yards, even with a target as small as a person, you can't miss.

It all seems like slow motion, seeing the tank gun come left, while the fellow in PLO camouflage uniform, jumps out and crouches down, hefting the long tube on to his shoulder to aim at a huge target that must fill his scope. It's like the Wild West, you have only a second to aim & fire, and whoever hits the trigger first, wins. And that's when you realize why they spent so much time preparing you for just such a moment; why you've had to have made the choice in your mind long ago. Because as your finger tightens around the mashbet trigger, you suddenly realize the man holding the RPG isn't a man at all, he's a seven-year-old boy.

They called them RPG kids; children trained by the PLO to fire RPGs at tanks in combat. They banked on the Israeli soldiers' sense of moral responsibility causing that hesitation that could make all the difference. We lost a lot of men in those moments of hesitation...

Years later, you know you made the right choice. In urban warfare, tanks travel in columns, and often only the tank in front can fire in the narrow alleyways of Beirut. And if your tank gets hit, the whole

column gets stuck in what could easily turn out to be a nasty ambush. So, there are a lot of men depending on your decision. But the image of what a 105mm tank shell does to a seven-year-old boy stays with you forever

Choices; sometimes obvious, often difficult, we don't always relish the weight and challenge that come with them, but they are, in the end, part of what make us who we are. The choices we make carry with them the ability to grow, to express ourselves, and most of all, to be partners with G-d in creating, every day, the new world we live in. It would perhaps be simpler, if we didn't have to make such choices, and G-d did it all for us. But then we would be animals, and life would lose its meaning. Judaism believes that the power to choose is the essence of the image of G-d we carry within us. And because we make these choices, we can be held accountable for all that we do. There is consequence to our actions, and there is purpose to our existence.

All of which makes the opening of this week's portion, *Beshalach*, so challenging.

G-d tells Moshe, that the people should make camp opposite the Sea, because:

"I will strengthen Pharaoh's heart that he will pursue them (Israel), and I will harden Pharaoh and all his armies, that Egypt will know that I am G-d..." (Shemot 14:4)

Essentially, Hashem will harden Pharaoh's heart so that he will pursue the Jewish people, resulting in the miracle of the splitting of the Sea. This has been one of the major themes of the entire story of the exodus from Egypt. All the way back at the Burning Bush, when Moshe is first sent to Egypt to confront Pharaoh, G-d tells him (3: 19-20) that Pharaoh will not let the people go, and G-d will strike at Egypt with all manner of miracles, and only then will Pharaoh let the Jewish people go.

And again, before ever arriving in Egypt, G-d tells Moshe (4:21) that:

"I will harden his heart and he will not send the people out..."

Indeed, throughout the entire Exodus story, even at the last plague of the first born, (11:20) G-d consistently hardens Pharaoh's heart, so that he will not let the people go.

Why is this concept so crucial to the entire story of the Exodus from Egypt? Why is it so important that it is repeated so often? What would have been so terrible if, after a couple of plagues, Pharaoh had seen the writing on the wall, and let the Jewish people go home? We could have received the Torah an entire year earlier!

Think about it; the world was without the Torah for nearly a year, simply because G-d hardened Pharaoh's heart. Why?

And even more challenging is the theological issue this raises. If Pharaoh did not actually *choose* to keep the Jews in bondage, why was he (along with all of Egypt) responsible for the consequences? If after, say, the first plague, Pharaoh would have let the Jewish people go, but didn't because G-d hardened his heart, how could Hashem then 'punish' him for his refusal by visiting the next plague upon him? He did not choose to refuse, so why is he responsible for the implication of that choice-less choice?

And of course, this question has enormous ramifications for us, in all that we do. If G-d is really pulling the strings, and we find ourselves in situations where we really have no choice, perhaps we are not responsible either?

If a person grows up in a really tough neighborhood, in a home full of all sorts of abuse, then hasn't G-d 'hardened his heart'? Is he really responsible for the choices he will ultimately be led to? This position, often taken by the environmentalist approach to the study of human behavior, seems to be completely at odds with Jewish tradition. Every Yom Kippur, we own up to the mistakes we have made, taking responsibility for our actions, and Maimonides, in his laws of repentance, makes abundantly clear that every human being is capable of rising above his environment, however challenging that might prove to be.

Yet G-d states quite clearly here that *He* hardens Pharaoh's heart. So how is Pharaoh then held accountable for his actions?

The key to this question may lie in a fascinating insight the **Ramban** (Moshe Ben Nachman, a 13th century commentator in Spain, and later in Jerusalem,) makes.

It is interesting to note, that in the first five plagues, despite Hashem's promise to harden Pharaoh's heart, it never says that he does so. In fact, consistently in the first five plagues, the Torah actually describes how Pharaoh hardens his own heart. (See 7:23, 8:11, 8:15, 8:28, and 9:7) It is only with the advent of the sixth plague, that we begin to see (9:12) that G-d actually hardens Pharaoh's heart.

The Ramban suggests that although Pharaoh can only be responsible for the choices he himself makes, a person can make choices, which ultimately remove his ability to choose.

A person can actually sink to such a level of evil, as a result of the choices he has made, that he actually no longer has the ability to choose. This is how far down into the abyss of human behavior Pharaoh had sunken. He was so invested in evil, so absorbed in the path he had chosen, he was no longer on that path out of choice, he was simply on a roller-coaster ride he could no longer control.

This may explain why the decisions Pharaoh was making, from our perspective, made absolutely no sense. How could he have been so blind? Clearly, every time Pharaoh refuses to let the Jews go, things only get worse. And clearly, Hashem has the ability to deliver on His promises, and Egypt is no match for the hand of G-d. Eventually, the Jews will be going home, so why not just let go?

When you stop to think about it, Adolph Hitler found himself in exactly the same place 3,000 years later. In fact, the parallels to ancient Egypt are fascinating. The choices Hitler made at the end of the war make absolutely no sense. In 1944, when most of the problems the German armies were facing were the holes in their supply lines, Hitler was dedicating most of his rail lines to transport the 400,000 Jews of Hungary to Auschwitz.

Imagine a drug addict. It is hard for many of us to understand what motivates a person to pick up heroin for the first time. The implications of such a decision are so clear and can only end in disaster. Nonetheless, this decision is a choice that someone makes. And this choice may lead to another choice, to use heroin again, and again, and again. But eventually, when a person reaches a certain stage in their

addiction, they are no longer able to choose. One might suggest that the definition of addiction is that you can no longer freely choose. The only way for an addict to really break his addiction is for others, perhaps in a rehab center, to step in and gradually return to him his ability to choose. This does not, however, mean that he is not responsible for his actions. His own actions were what led him to the state of addiction he now finds himself in.

This is not, incidentally, always a bad thing. We can actually use this process to remove choices we don't want to have to struggle with.

Rav Dessler, in his *Michtav Me'Eliahu*, points out that every person has a range of choice with which they struggle. But each person can change the parameters of that range. The Lubavitcher Rebbe, for example, did not struggle with the temptation to eat a cheeseburger when he walked by McDonald's. The idea of eating a cheeseburger must have been so beyond where he was, that the thought most probably never occurred to him. Quite simply, the path of his life removed that choice from his range of possibilities!

This also means that I not only have the ability to remove choices from my own range of possibilities, but I can actually influence someone else's range of choice as well. Most notably, this is true in the way we raise our children. By making certain choices for the way our children will lead their lives, we actually have removed certain issues from the range of their possibilities.

Growing up in the home I grew up in, it is not really much to my credit that I chose not to date and marry a non-Jewish partner. In fact, I remember the point that this became abundantly clear to me.

I once asked my mother (really, it was one of those questions you ask your mom just to see if you can get to her...) what she would say if I brought home a non-Jewish girlfriend. I was about 16 at the time, and to this day, I still remember the answer. She said 'if you could bring a non-Jewish girlfriend home to this house, we probably wouldn't have much left to talk about'.

And in that moment, I knew I could never, would never, date, much less marry someone who was not Jewish. And I don't really think that was my choice.

This is true, to some degree, of all the choices we make. They affect everyone else in our lives, and their choices, as well. For example, if you are the type of person who is successful in always keeping a smile on your face, and rarely getting angry, then you remove other people's choice to create conflict with you. If I am determined to be happy and positive, it is much more difficult for anyone to choose to argue with me. It always takes two people to have a really good fight. And if I refuse to choose to fight, then don't I actually limit someone else's ability to make that mistaken choice as well?

And this leads me to one last point: It is important to differentiate between the choices that are ours to make, and the choices we cannot make for anyone but our selves.

The **Baal Shem Tov**, the founder of Chassidut, makes an incredible statement. Says the Baal Shem Tov, when you see someone else making what you perceive to be a bad choice, don't assume it is so that you can tell them what you think they are doing wrong. It is really so you can realize how much you need to

work on that very same issue. For example, if I see someone desecrating Shabbat, it is not so I can yell “Shabbos!” at him or her; it is because my Shabbat needs a little work.

I remember, after my army stint was over, doing guard duty one night in yeshiva. There was a two-man patrol around the grounds of the yeshiva, and all the students gave a certain number of hours to guard duty every month. For practical reasons, they always paired up the new guys with no military experience with veterans who were more experienced. I had been in Yeshiva a few years already, and was about to start rabbinical studies, and this boy I was with was in his first year of yeshiva studies out of High school.

In the middle of the patrol, while we were talking, he started telling me a joke. After a moment I realized he was telling me a dirty joke! I couldn’t believe it, here we were, spending our days studying Torah, I was getting ready to begin the process of studying to become a rabbi, and this albeit younger, yeshiva student was telling me a dirty joke! I resisted my impulse to let him have it, because I didn’t want to embarrass him, which gave me a moment to think. And it occurred to me, that this guy must think that I am the type of guy who wants to hear a dirty joke... If Rav Lichtenstein, the head of the yeshiva, was walking with us, I imagine this boy would not have started telling such a joke.

So, after I thought about it, I realized the joke was on me. The real challenge of that experience was to become the type of person no one would ever consider telling a dirty joke to in the first place.

Often, the choices we have to make are a function of the choices others make before us. The implications of those choices are the gift that we ultimately give to the world.

Maybe this is why this issue is so much a part of our Exodus from Egypt. We all have our own little Egypt we are always trying to get out of. And part of making that exodus, is the awareness of the choices we make, and the understanding of the implications they have.

May Hashem bless us all to rise to the challenge of the choices we are faced with, and to revel in the way that those choices make us partners with G-d in re-creating the world each and every day.

And may we even be blessed, on occasion; to see just how beautiful the gift of our choices is, to the world around us.

Shabbat Shalom,

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