

Parashat Va-era Davar Torah - Jan. 1, 2022

By Arnie Zar-Kessler

We gave our grandson one of those graphic novels of what is considered to be a very important nonfiction book 'Sapiens' by Yuval Noah Harari. Early on, I was disturbed by an introduction by Mephistopheles to a play about a play, Dr. Faustus, dealing with the problems created by agriculture in which he tells us – on the third page of the book, no less – 'More, more they all wanted more. Let me tell you – you should know. Human fate was sealed long ago.' I quaked at the line, realizing that this was a message I was indirectly sending my grandson. But also about my resistance to the idea that things are determined outside of our control. That there is a determinism that operates beyond and perhaps above us... And yet, and yet.....

In last week's portion and then again in this week's portion, Va-era, we hear of God attempting to reassure Moshe that he will succeed in his struggle with Pharaoh because God will intercede and 'harden' Pharaoh's heart. "I will harden Pharaoh's heart said God to Moses, and multiply my signs in wonder in the land of Egypt." (7:3). And so, indeed we find in the sixth plague, boils; the eighth, locusts; and the tenth, the firstborn. In each case, the hardening is attributed to God and - apparently – with Pharaoh's actions and the results determined outside of his freely drawn choice.

If God hardened Pharaoh's heart, then it was God who made Pharaoh refuse to let the Israelites go, not Pharaoh himself., how can this be just? The question is ancient and I am indebted to R. Jonathan Sacks z"l for his insights and guidance in these brief remarks that follow.

How could it be right to punish Pharaoh and his people for a decision – a series of decisions – that were not made freely? Because punishment presupposes guilt. Guilt presupposes responsibility. Responsibility presupposes freedom. We do not blame weights for falling, or the sun for shining. Natural forces are not choices made by reflecting on alternatives. Homo sapiens alone is free. Take away that freedom and you take away our humanity. How then can it say, as it does in our parsha (Ex. 7:3) that God hardened Pharaoh's heart? If that is the case with one person, then doesn't it apply to all? Indeed, one of the pillars what it means to be a Jew, taking on the kingdom of the yoke of heaven, by choice, is now turned on its head.

Hence the problem that troubled the sages and later commentators: if God was the cause, and Pharaoh merely God's passive vehicle, what was Pharaoh's sin? Pharaoh had no choice, therefore no responsibility, therefore no culpability.

Indeed, the commentators exercised by this question give a broad range of answers. Maimonides and others note a striking feature of the narrative: For the first five plagues

we read that Pharaoh himself hardened his heart. Only later, during the last five plagues, do we read about God doing so. The conclusion they draw therefore is that the last five plagues were therefore a punishment for the first five refusals, freely made by an obstinate Pharaoh himself.

.A second approach, the approach of Albo and Sforno, argues that the relevant verb here, Kha- za-k does not mean to harden, but to strengthen. God was not taking away Pharaoh's free will but to the contrary, preserving it in the face of the overwhelming disasters that were hitting Egypt.

Luzzato offers a third approach: God is a partner in all human action, but we only usually attributed an act to God if it seems inexplicable, in ordinary human terms. Pharaoh acted freely throughout, but it was only during the last five plagues that his behavior was so strange, that was attributed to God.

Note how reluctant commentators were to take the text at face value. - rightly so because free will is one of the fundamental beliefs of Judaism. Maimonides in his Mishneh Torah Hilkhoh Teshuvah explains why: if we had no free will, there would be, he says, no point to the commands and the prohibitions, since we would behave as we were predestined to regardless of what the law is. Nor would there be any justice in reward or punishment, since neither the righteous or the wrongdoer is free to be other than what they are.

These are all interesting and plausible interpretations. It seems to Sacks, however, that the Torah is telling a deeper story, one that never loses its relevance - about free will and freedom itself.

In our ponderings on freedom and free will, we can fail to see what the ancient sages knew: If we genuinely lack free will, our entire sense of what it means to be human will crumble into dust. Possibly we fail to recognize this because there is a glaring contradiction at the heart of our culture. On the one hand, we moderns believe that nothing should constrain our freedom to choose to do whatever we want to do, or be whatever we want to be, so long as we do not harm others. Our supreme value is autonomous choice.

On the other hand, while the problem is an ancient one, it has become much more salient in modern times because of the sheer accumulation of challenges to the idea of freedom itself. Marx says we operate within systems that are formed by the play of economic forces. Freud argued that we are what we are due to unconscious drives. Neo-Darwinists contend that however we rationalize our behavior, we do what we do because people who behaved this way in the past survived to hand on their genes to

future generations. Why then should we invoke freedom to choose as a value if - according to these pillars of modern orthodoxy - it is an illusion?

If hard determinism is true, there is no reason to honor liberty or create a free society. To the contrary, we should embrace Aldous Huxley's Brave New World where children are conceived and hatched in laboratories, and adults programmed to stay happy by a regime of drugs and pleasure. We should implement this scenario of Anthony Burgess's, the Clockwork Orange, which criminals are reformed by brain surgery or conditioning. If freedom does not exist, why be bothered by the addictive nature of computer games and social media? Why prefer genuine reality to virtual reality or the Metaverse? It was Nietzsche who observed that the greater our scientific achievements, the lower our view of the human person. No longer the image of God, we've become mere incarnated algorithms.

Yet, yet.... the more we understand about the human brain, the better able we are to describe what free action really is. At present, scientists distinguish between 1) the most primitive part of the brain, conditioned to sensitize us to potential danger; 2) the 'social brain', which is responsible for much of our emotional life, and 3) the part of the brain which is analytical and capable of dispassionately weighing consequences or alternative choices. The tensions between these three form the arena within which personal freedom is won or lost.

Patterns of behavior are shaped by neural pathways connecting different parts of the brain, but not all of them good for us. So for instance, we might turn to drugs or binge eating or thrill seeking to distract us from some of the unhappy chemicals associated with fears and anxiety, for instance, that are also part of the architecture of the brain. The more often we do so, the stronger the pathways and the more rapid and instinctive the behavior. So the more often we behave in certain ways, the harder it is to break the habit and create a new and different pathways. To do so requires the acquisition of new habits, acted on consistently for an extended period of time. Current scientific thinking suggests that a minimum of 66 days is needed to form a new habit, or perhaps to keep a New Year's resolution.

So we now have a scientific way of explaining the hardening taking place in Pharaoh's heart. Having established a pattern of response to the first five plagues, he would find it progressively more difficult at every level - neuro-scientifically, psychologically and politically - to change. The same is true of every bad habit and political decision. Almost all of our structures - mental and social - tend to reinforce previous patterns of behavior. Thus, our freedom diminishes every time we fail to exercise it.

If so, then this parashah and contemporary science tell the same story. Freedom is not a given, nor is it an absolute. We have to work for it. We acquire it slowly in stages and we can lose it just as Pharaoh lost his and as addicts, workaholics and those addicted to computer games lose theirs.

In one of the most famous opening lines in all of literature Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote at the beginning of *The Social Contract*, that, “man is born free and everywhere he is in chains” Sacks contends that the opposite is true. Our early character is determined partly by DNA, the genetic heritage of our parents, partly by our home and upbringing, partly by our friends, partly by surrounding culture, and partly by a shared history perhaps built on oppression by class, gender and race going back 400 years and more.. We're not born free. We have to work hard to achieve freedom. These factors – culture, community, history and early childhood – that circumscribe our freedom.

But Jews through the ages have been in but not of society. To be a Jew means keeping a calibrated distance from the age and its idols. Freedom needs time to make reflective decisions and distance so as not to be lulled into conformity.

Sacks argues that it takes rituals whose repeated performance shape neural pathways and rapid response behaviors. It requires that certain calibrated distance from the surrounding culture if we're not to be swept away by social fads and fashions that seemed to be liberating now, but destructive in retrospect. It needs a mental mindset that pauses before any significant action and asks, “Should I do this? May I do this? What rules of conduct should I bring to bear?” It involves an internalized narrative of identity, so that we can ask of any course of action “is this who I am and what I stand for?”

It is no accident the elements listed in above are all prominent features of Judaism, which turns out to be an ongoing seminar on willpower and impulse control. Now that we are beginning to understand the plasticity of the brain, we know that at least a little of the neuroscience that lies behind the ability to overcome bad habits and addictions. Keeping Shabbat, for example, holds the power to liberate us and our children from addiction to screens and all that goes with it. The religion whose first festival, Pesach, celebrates collective freedom gives us in its rituals the skills we need for personal freedom.

Freedom is less a gift than an achievement even a Pharaoh, the most powerful man in the ancient world, could lose it. Even a nation of slaves could, with the help of God, acquire it. Never take freedom for granted. It needs 100 small acts of self control daily, which is what Halachah - Jewish law - is all about.

Freedom is an achievement it is a muscle that needs to be exercised daily

In closing, leave it to my teacher, Nechama Leibowitz z”l to tease out a line from *Macbeth* to illuminate this point, In Act 3, scene 2, Macbeth turns to Lady Macbeth as their trail of violence and destruction is gathering momentum and tells her “Things bad

begun make strong themselves by ill' In other words, that habituation to evil leads to only more evil. And leave it Shakespeare to remind us that 'Mitzvah gorreret mitzvah, Averiah Gorreret Aveirah' One mitzvah leads to another; one sin leads to further sins. We have the capacity to exercise choice and break our habituations.

We can lose our freedom gradually, often without noticing it . That is what the Torah means when it says that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. Enslaving others, Pharaoh himself became enslaved. He became a prisoner of the values he himself had espoused.

Freedom in the deepest sense, the freedom to do the right and the good, is not a given. We acquire it, or lose it, gradually. In the end tyrants bring about their own destruction, whereas those with willpower, courage, and the willingness to go against the consensus, acquire a monumental freedom. That is what Judaism is: an invitation to freedom by resisting the idols and siren calls of the age.

May we all be up to that task, choosing to bring sanctity and integrity into our world through the honor, and the opportunities provided us.