

בחירת פרעה במכות

הרב צבי איינשטטר

The Rambam, in פרק ה' הלכות תשובה, discusses the *inyan* of *bechira*. He states that a person has the free will to choose to do good and to live as a *tzaddik* or to pursue bad and live as a *rasha*. He explains the whole system of שכר ועונש is based upon this *yesod*. In פרק ו הלכה ג, he states that a person can do many *aveiros*, or one massive one, to the point where the Ribono Shel Olam decides that the person forfeits the ability to do *teshuva*. This is in order to cause him to die and be destroyed on account of his sin. He brings many examples of this from all over Tanach, one of them being in our *parsha*.

Hashem tells Moshe Rabbeinu, "וַיֹּאמֶר אֲחִיזֶק אֶת לֵב פַּרְעֹה" - *I will harden Pharaoh's heart*. The Rambam explains that this means Hashem removed Pharaoh's ability to do *teshuva*, and did so because Pharaoh had sinned by his own volition in the beginning, when Mitzrayim enslaved Bnei Yisroel and afflicted them greatly. (The Torah tells us such at the beginning of *Parshas Shemos*, "וַיִּחַזֶּק אֶת לֵב פַּרְעֹה... וַיִּשְׁמָוּ לוֹ... וַיַּחֲכֵמָה לוֹ... וַיִּשְׁמָוּ עָלָיו שְׂרֵי מִסִּים לְמַעַן עֲנֹתוֹ בְּסַבְלָתָם...".)

This Rambam bothered me because of a Rashi in this week's *parsha*. In *posuk* ג', he says that even though Hashem had said he would harden Pharaoh's heart, in the first five *Makkos* He actually did not, which is why the *pesukim* say the *lashon* of, "וַיִּחַזֶּק אֶת לֵב פַּרְעֹה", because Pharaoh did it himself. I understood this Rashi to mean that Pharaoh still had the ability to do *teshuva* all the way through *מכת דבר*. After five chances, where he lied because each time he said he would let them out yet did not, he forfeited his shot at *teshuva*. According to this, the final straw of him losing his *teshuva* chance was because Hashem showed him clearly that He was orchestrating miraculous events (the *Makkos*) and that Pharaoh was in charge of making the decision to let Bnei Yisroel go or not, and Pharaoh would not budge to let them out. The Rambam, however, attributes Pharaoh's loss of *teshuva* to the affliction perpetrated against Bnei Yisroel during the slavery before the *Makkos*. (That may very well be part of it, but it seems clear from Rashi that part of it was also the *aveiros* committed later on.)

There is an interesting *mehalech* to answer this *ha'ara* on the Rambam, based upon another Rambam later on (פרק ו הלכה ה), where he asks the following famous question: The Torah says, in the *Bris bein Habesarim*, Hashem tells Avraham that his descendants will live as strangers in a foreign land and they will be enslaved and afflicted. Seemingly, Hashem decreed on the Mitzriyim that they carry out this bad deed. Why, then, are they punished for doing that which Hashem forced them to do? Many Rishonim deal with this question. The Rambam's answer is that the promise to Avraham of what will happen did not mention that each one of the Mitzriyim specifically would be the ones to carry it out. Indeed, each and every individual Egyptian citizen had the personal choice whether to go along and "partake" in afflicting Bnei Yisroel or not. (I find it interesting that the Rambam does not say that it could have happened in a whole different country, rather he points out how each Egyptian has their own *bechira* to be part of it or abstain from it.)

After this, the Rambam reiterates that we are too limited to comprehend the idea that Hashem knows the future. He is referring to another one of his famous questions. The Rambam asks, isn't there a *סתירה* between the concept of every individual having *bechira* to make personal choices and one of the *עיקרים*, that Hashem knows the future, i.e. He knows every single action a person will take? If a person's route is already charted out because Hashem knows exactly what he will do, how do we have free will? The Rambam answers by saying that if we understood what it means "Hashem knows the future," then we wouldn't even have this question.

(Just to give a *mashal* to this *yesod*, let us say in 2020, Hashem can already see that in 2025 that the person had the free will do commit his action. Hashem saw it after the fact because he saw it in 2025, right now. How could that be? It isn't 2025 right now? This demonstrates that we cannot understand how it works and therefore are stuck

trying to make sense of *bechira* and Hashem knowing the future. I am not saying that this is what Hashem does, because I have no idea. We are merely presenting a *mashal* to help one hear that there is free will while Hashem still knows the choice. It is because He sees the action after the choice was already made. Some people use the expression that Hashem is not bound by time, but *I'maaseh* all these things fall under the label, "we can't understand.")

Why does the Rambam reiterate this point at the end of explaining Pharaoh's loss of *teshuva* ability? The Lechem Mishna explains that the Rambam is giving a second answer to his question of why Mitzrayim was punished for something they were seemingly forced to do. This answer says that even though Hashem knew what they would do in the future, they still maintained their *bechira* to choose to do so. Hashem's knowledge of the future does not impede free will of the present. This Lechem Mishnah's explanation is a צריך עיון גדול because the Rambam already mentioned this *yesod* in the *perek* preceding the one in which he asks his question on Mitzrayim. Why would he need to even ask the question if he explained the answer to it? As well, why would the Rambam feel it necessary to give his first answer (that the original statement to Avraham Avinu was not specific as to whom would carry it out)?

The Or Sameach vehemently disagrees with this Lechem Mishna. He explains that previously, the Rambam only said that when Hashem keeps His knowledge *to Himself* it does not infringe on *bechira*. Here, however, he revealed Mitzrayim's choice to Avraham Avinu, a human being. Once a physical person knows what will happen *bechira* is lost. Therefore, the Rambam has a good question on why Mitzrayim was punished if Avraham Avinu already knew, because Avraham Avinu knowing so meant that they really did lose their *bechira*.

This *yesod* of the Or Sameach has an interesting implication. It turns out that when Hashem spoke to Moshe Rabbeinu at the סנה and told him clearly that Pharaoh be unable to let Bnei Yisroel go on account of Hashem hardening his heart, that is the moment Pharaoh is locked into the saga of the *Makkos* and divested of his *bechira*. Even before the first *Makka* began, Pharaoh could not possibly decide to let Bnei Yisroel until after *Makkas Bechoros* because Hashem had already told Moshe Rabbeinu exactly what would transpire. One might ask that the *pesukim* suggest otherwise, because only from the sixth *Makka* onwards does the Torah use the phrase of, "ויחזק" "...את לב פרעה", so he must have had *bechira* for the first five *Makkos*? The answer to this is simply that Hashem knew how big a *rasha* Pharaoh was and that on his own he would still refuse to let Bnei Yisroel go. Only when it started to get too tight and too hard would Hashem need to strengthen and harden his heart for him. Still, Pharaoh did not really have *bechira* to choose to let Bnei Yisroel go before the *Makkos* were completed. It then comes out that Pharaoh was not punished for anything after the סנה because it was then that Hashem told Moshe Rabbeinu what Pharaoh would do.

The Seder Olam states that the *Makkos* took twelve months to be completed (the Mishna in מס' עדיות says this as well). Rashi states that each one had three weeks of warning and then lasted for a week. This only comes out to about nine months because *Makkas Bechoros* took only one day. How, then, did they last a year? The Gra explains that the *Makkos* really began at the סנה when Hakadosh Boruch Hu told Moshe Rabbeinu what would transpire. From that point, it took three months until the Nile turned to blood, etc. The question is where do we see any trace of the *Makkos* at the סנה to indicate their commencement? According to this Rambam, with the Or Sameach, it is very understandable. As we said, the greatest punishment is when Hashem removes a person's *bechira* and he is locked in to doing whatever Hashem decided for him. That punishment actually happened at the סנה when Hashem told Moshe what Pharaoh would do. It was at that point that his *bechira* was stripped away and nothing else could happen. This is how the *Makkos* started at the סנה.

We should all be *zoche* to use our *bechira* for good and to accomplish *teshuva shlaymuh*, and be *zoche* to the *Geula Shlaymuh*.