



PARSHAS VAEIRA – MARK GARFIELD – “CHOICES!”

The Torah states, 'I shall harden the heart of Paroh and I shall multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt'. (Sh'mos 7:3)

The concept of reward and punishment based on our freewill has remained a challenge since Bria Ho'olom (creation). Although Odom Horishon had everything he was the first to suffer the consequences of poor choice. Avrohom Ovinu, on the other hand, chose wisely. The result of this has withstood the test of time. The Jewish nation flourishes to this very day, demonstrating the importance of making the right decision.

Rashi states that as a result of Paroh's continued resistance towards Him, Hashem decides that it is preferable that his heart be hardened. Rashi's basis for this is that the nations do not wish to acknowledge G-d as the Supreme Ruler and Paroh appears to be the catalyst for this behaviour. G-d's method is to perform wonders so that the Jewish people recognise His greatness.

The Ramban brings a Midrash, 'G-d revealed to Moshe that He was destined to harden Paroh's heart in order to bring judgement upon him for he caused B'nei Yisroel to work'. Rabbi Yochanon says that this gives an opportunity to heretics to argue that Paroh was given no opportunity to repent. However, G-d gave him FIVE opportunities to let Bnei Yisroel go; words which went totally unheeded. The question here is: If G-d hardened Paroh's heart, what was his sin? Ramban answers that had Paroh not acted so abhorrently towards Bnei Yisroel he would have deserved an opportunity to be forgiven. This wickedness had been committed with his very own freewill.

Rav Hirsch in his unique linguistic style focuses on the language of 'hardening'. He points out three different roots are used when referring to Paroh: 'kasheh', 'cabed' and 'chazak'. The first term refers to being completely hard, not allowing any impression to be made whatsoever. The second term implies that an impression can be made, but a long gap will often take place between one impression and another. However, ultimately there will be success. The final term consciously opposes any submission whatsoever. Even the impression is completely lost as far as any consequences of it go. Paroh wouldn't bend one iota, believing that he was the ultimate deity an all-powerful being (chas vesholom).

We daven every day to Hashem for wisdom to make the correct choices. Do we learn a Mishna each morning for five minutes or do we spend that time speaking loshon hora? Do we give a few minutes extra to our shemona esrei or do we rush the words to give ourselves a little more time scrolling the iphone? A powerful narrative related in the *Gemara (Avodah Zarah 17a)* concerning Elazer ben Durdaya, who strayed from the path of Jewish life, and became addicted to the allurements of lust and passion, I think, gives us the answer. One day when he was mocked by one who apparently shared his view of life, he was overwhelmed by his lowly moral situation, and realized that his life was being wasted. He felt an intense need to return to Hashem.

In his earnest desire to repent and with deep anguish, Elazer ben Durdaya sought external help, and he called out, "Mountains and hills, ask mercy for me".

"Ask mercy for you? We must ask mercy for ourselves."

"Heaven and earth, ask mercy for me."

"Ask mercy for you? We must ask for ourselves."

"Sun and moon, ask mercy for me."

"Ask mercy for you? We must ask mercy for ourselves."

"Stars and planets, ask mercy for me."

"Ask mercy for you? We must ask mercy for ourselves."

Elazar sat upon the ground, and after a long and serious period of probing introspection, he placed his head between his knees and expired while crying, "*Ein hadavar talu ela bi*" — "It all depends on me — the responsibility is totally mine!" A voice emerged from above and declared, "Elazar ben Durdaya is worthy of Eternal Life."

The choice is ours!

L'iluyi nishmas my Zeide, Reb Moshe ben Eliezer – a guide par excellence!