

5780 - Exodus 6-9 - Va'era (And I appeared)

In *Va'era*, the story of the exodus begins in earnest, with **an unprecedented series of divine interventions into history**. Time and again plagues hit the Egyptians. Moses repeatedly asks Pharaoh to release the people. Repeatedly, Pharaoh refuses. An immense drama is taking place. All the power of imperial Egypt is powerless against the God of creation and redemption.

In the essays that follow the first examines the four (or is it five?) expressions of redemption, and the missing “fifth cup” of the Seder service. The second looks at God’s “hardening” of Pharaoh’s heart. Does this imply that Pharaoh kept or lost his freedom? The third analyzes the satirical subplot in the third plague, of lice. The fourth is a study of the revolutionary change implicit in the exodus narrative. This was, in a profound sense, the “birth of history,” the first appearance in civilization of the idea of time as an arena of change.

*The Hardened Heart*¹

It is one of the classic philosophical conundrums. In the parasha of *Va'era*, before even the first plague has struck Egypt, God tells Moses:

“But I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and multiply My miraculous signs and wonders in Egypt. He will not listen to you. Then I will lay My hand on Egypt and with mighty acts of judgment I will bring out My troops, My people the Israelites. And the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord when I stretch out My hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it.” (Exodus 7:3–5)

The problem is obvious. **If it was God who hardened Pharaoh’s heart, where then was his freedom?** Either the Egyptian ruler had a genuine choice, or he did not. If he did, it was Pharaoh, not God, who was responsible for the hardness of his heart. If he did not—**if it was God acting upon him, controlling his responses, determining his reactions—then how could Pharaoh be guilty and worthy of punishment?** As Maimonides² puts it: **If there were no free will, what room what would there be for the whole of the Torah?** By what right or justice could God punish the wicked or reward the righteous? “Shall not the judge of all the earth act justly?”⁽¹⁾

Punishing Pharaoh for something he could not help doing is, simply, unjust.

The general outline of an answer—however we construe its details—is already implicit in the precise wording of the biblical narrative. After each of the first five plagues, the Torah tells us that Pharaoh hardened his own heart. So, for example, we read: “Pharaoh’s heart was hard” (7:13, 22; 8:15), “he hardened his heart” (8:11), “Pharaoh hardened his heart this time too” (8:28), and “Pharaoh’s heart was unyielding” (9:7). It is only from the sixth plague onwards that his hard-heartedness is attributed to God:

Plague 6, Boils: “But the Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart and he would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the Lord had said to Moses.” (Exodus 9:12)

Plague 7, Hail: “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Go to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his officials so that I may perform My miraculous signs among them.’” (10:1)

Plague 8, Locusts: “But the Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he would not let the Israelites go.” (10:20)

Plague 9, Darkness: “But the Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he was not willing to let them go.” (10:26)

Plague 10, Death of the Firstborn: “Moses and Aaron performed all these wonders before Pharaoh, but the Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he would not let the Israelites go out of his country.” (11:20)

Rashi³ understands the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart in the last five plagues as a form of punishment for the first five, when it was Pharaoh’s own obstinacy that led him to refuse to let the people go.⁽²⁾

Maimonides interprets God’s hardening of Pharaoh’s heart as meaning that “repentance was withheld from him, and **the liberty to turn from his wickedness was not accorded to him.**”⁽³⁾

Albo⁴ and Sforno⁵ offer the opposite interpretation. **God hardened Pharaoh’s heart precisely to restore his free will.** After the succession of plagues that had devastated the land, Pharaoh was under overwhelming pressure to let the Israelites go. Had he done so, it would not have been out

3 Rashi (1040–1105), Rabbi SHlomo Itzhaki, was a medieval French rabbi and author of a comprehensive commentary on the Talmud and commentary on the *Tanakh*. Acclaimed for his ability to present the basic meaning of the text in a concise and lucid fashion, Rashi appeals to both learned scholars and beginner students, and his works remain a centerpiece of contemporary Jewish study.

4 Joseph Albo (c. 1380–1444) was a Jewish philosopher and rabbi who lived in Spain ... , known chiefly as the author of *Sefer ha-Ikkarim* (“Book of Principles”), the classic work on the fundamentals of Judaism.

5 Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno (c. 1475–1550) was an Italian rabbi, Biblical commentator, philosopher and physician.

1 Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation: Exodus*, (Maggid Books & The Orthodox Union), pp. 47–51.

2 Moses ben Maimon (c. 1135–1204), commonly known as Maimonides (and also by the acronym Rambam (RABbi Moses Ben Maimon), was a medieval Sephardic Jewish philosopher who became one of the most prolific and influential Torah scholars of the Middle Ages.

of free choice, but rather **under force majeure** (“superior force”). **God therefore toughened, strengthened, Pharaoh’s heart so that even after the first five plagues he was genuinely free to say yes or no.**⁽⁴⁾

Simplest and most profound are the words of the Talmudic sages about the *yetser hara*, the evil impulse:

Rav Assi⁶ said: At first the evil impulse is as thin as a spider’s gossamer, but in the end it is as thick as a cart-ropes.⁽⁵⁾

Rava⁷ said: At first the evil impulse is called a “wayfarer,” then a “guest,” then finally a “master.”⁽⁶⁾

1. James 1:12-15

¹⁴but **each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed.** ¹⁵**Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.**

a. *Not as in*, “the devil made me do it.”

Evil has two faces. The first—turned to the outside world—is what it does to its victim. The second—turned within—is what it does to its perpetrator. Evil traps the evildoer in its mesh. Slowly but surely he or she loses freedom and becomes not evil’s master but its slave.

Pharaoh is in fact (and this is rare in Tanakh) a tragic figure like Lady Macbeth,⁸ or like Captain Ahab⁹ in Melville’s *Moby Dick*, trapped in an obsession which may have had rational beginnings, right or wrong, but which has taken hold of him, bringing not only him but those around him to their ruin. This is signalled, simply but deftly, early in the following parasha, Bo, when Pharaoh’s own advisors say to him: “Let the people go so that they may worship the Lord their God. Do you not yet realize that Egypt is ruined?” (10:7). **But Pharaoh has left rationality behind. He can no longer hear them.**

It is a compelling narrative, and helps us understand not only Pharaoh, but Hitler,¹⁰ Stalin and other tyrants in modern times. It also con-

tains a hint—and this really is fundamental to understanding what makes the Torah unique in religious literature—of why the Torah teaches its moral truths through narrative, rather than through philosophical or quasi-scientific discourse on the one hand, myth or parable on the other.

Compare the Torah’s treatment of free will with that of the great philosophical or scientific theories. For these other systems, freedom is almost invariably an either/or: either we are always free or we never are. Some systems assert the first. Many—those that believe in social, economic or genetic determinism, or historical inevitability—claim the second. Both are too crude to portray the inner life as it really is.⁽⁷⁾

The belief that freedom is an all-or-nothing phenomenon—that we have it either all the time or none of the time—blinds us to the fact that there are degrees of freedom. It can be won and lost, and its loss is gradual. Unless the will is constantly exercised, it atrophies and dies. We then become objects, not subjects, swept along by tides of fashion, or the caprice of desire, or the passion that becomes an obsession. Only narrative can portray the subtlety of Pharaoh’s slow descent into a self-destructive madness. That, I believe, is what makes Torah truer to the human condition than its philosophical or scientific counterparts.

Pharaoh is everyman writ large (i.e., *in a stark or exaggerated form*). The ruler of the ancient world’s greatest empire, **he ruled everyone except himself. It was not the Hebrews but he who was the real slave: to his obstinate insistence that he, not God, ruled history.** Hence the profound insight of Ben Zoma¹¹ (Avot 4:1): **“Who is mighty?” Not one who can conquer his enemies but “One who can conquer himself.”**

2. Avot 4:1

Who is strong? He who subdues his personal inclination ...

- a. The rabbinic duality of *yetser hara*, the so-called “evil inclination,” and *yetser hatov*, the “good inclination,” is more subtle than the names connote. ***Yetser hara is not a demonic force that pushes a person to do evil, but rather a drive toward pleasure or property or security, which if left unlimited, can lead to evil*** (cf. Genesis Rabbah 9:7). When properly controlled by the *yetser hatov*, the *yetser hara* leads to many socially desirable results, including marriage, business, and community.¹² For the rabbis, adults are distinguished from children by the *yetser hatov*, which controls and channels the

Members of the Schutzstaffel (SS) hindered war production by killing key slave workers in critical industries—Stephen E. Atkins, *Holocaust Denial as an International Movement*

11 Simeon ben Zoma, was a tanna of the 1st and 2nd centuries CE. His name is used without the title “Rabbi” because, like Ben Azzai, he died at a young age, remaining in the grade of “pupil” and never receiving semikhah (Rabbinical ordination).

12 <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-birth-of-the-good-inclination/>

6 Rav Assi was a Jewish rabbi of Babylonia, of the first generation of the amoraim.

7 Abba ben Joseph bar Ḥama (c. 280–352 CE), who is exclusively referred to in the Talmud by the name Rava, was a Babylonian rabbi who belonged to the fourth generation of amoraim. He is ...one of the most often-cited rabbis in the Talmud.

8 Lady Macbeth is a leading character in William Shakespeare’s tragedy *Macbeth* (c.1603–1607). The wife of the play’s tragic hero, Macbeth (a Scottish nobleman), Lady Macbeth goads her husband into committing regicide, after which she becomes queen of Scotland. Sack’s reference is to her “single-minded pursuit of power.”

9 *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* is an 1851 novel by American writer Herman Melville. The book is sailor Ishmael’s narrative of the obsessive quest of Ahab, captain of the whaling ship *Pequod*, for revenge on Moby Dick, the giant white sperm whale that on the ship’s previous voyage bit off Ahab’s leg at the knee.

10 The effort to wipe out the Jews hindered the German war effort by diverting critical resources at crucial times. Critical troop and military supply trains were delayed to allow the transportation of Jews to the death camps in Poland.

drives that exist unchecked in the child. Thus children may seek pleasure and acquisition, but they are not able to create a sanctified relationship or exercise the responsibility to engage in business.

b. Romans 12:21

²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

c. Colossians 3:8

⁸you must ... rid yourselves of ... anger, rage, malice, slander ...

d. James 1:19

¹⁹Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry ...

Many things influence us—our genes, our parents, our early childhood, our race, creed, culture, class, and the persuasions and pressures of our environment. **But influence is not control.** Causes do not compel. It was a survivor of Auschwitz, the late Viktor Frankl, who discovered in that nightmare kingdom the truth to which he subsequently devoted his life. He said: The Nazis tried to rob us of every vestige of our humanity, but there was one freedom they could not take away from us, the freedom to decide how to respond:

We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.⁽⁸⁾

At the heart of Judaism is faith in freedom: Our faith in God's freedom, and God's faith in ours.

Judaism is, among other things, a sustained tutorial in freedom: in the ability to say no; to conquer instinct by conscience; to resist the madness of crowds and their idols. That needs discipline, and the ability to stand a little apart from society, even while contributing to it. **To be a Jew is to know that though we are here, we are also elsewhere.** We live in time, but we are addressed by the voice of One who is beyond time.

Pharaoh was born free but became his own slave. Moses was born into a nation of slaves but led them to freedom. Easily lost, hard to sustain, freedom is our most precious gift. But it must be exercised if it is to be retained. Its greatest discipline is to let God's will challenge ours. That is the path to freedom and the cure for hardness of heart.

(1) Genesis 18:25; *Mishneh Torah* ("Repetition of the Torah"), *Hilkhot Teshuva* 5:6.

(2) Rashi, commentary to Exodus 7:3.

(3) *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Teshuva* 6:3.

(4) Albo, *Ikkarim* ("Principles") 4:25; Sforno, commentary to Exodus 7:3.

(5) Sukka 52a.

(6) Sukka 52b.

(7) For further reading, see Daniel O'Connor, *Free Will* (New York: Anchor Books, 1971); Gerald Dworkin, ed., *Determinism, Free Will and Moral Responsibility* (Prentice-Hall, 1970); Jennifer Trusted, *Free Will and Responsibility* (Oxford University Press, 1984); Robert Kane, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will* (Oxford, 2002); Daniel Dennett, *Freedom Evolves* (Allen Lane, 2003). For Jewish views, see Charles Manekin and Menachem Kellner, eds., *Freedom and Moral Responsibility: General and Jewish Perspectives* (University Press of Maryland, 1997); Yitzhak Berger and David Shatz, eds., *Judaism, Science and Moral Responsibility* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2006).

(8) Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 75.

3. The Christian view of "the Fall" includes the idea of **the complete depravity of man**, i.e., he is completely immoral, corrupt, evil, wicked, etc.

a. The importance of determining whether the will is bound or free is ... forced on us by the history of Christian dogma. Significant theological debates in the history of the church have centered on the issue. In the early years of the Church the majority of theologians seemed to endorse free will; **they were concerned to overcome the entrenched determinism of the Greek and Roman world.**¹³

1) **In philosophy**, the doctrine that all events, including human decisions, are completely determined by previously existing causes. The traditional **free will problem** arises from the question, **Is moral responsibility consistent with the truth of determinism?** Among those who believe it is not consistent, some, maintaining the truth of determinism, have concluded that **no one is morally responsible for what he does** (and therefore that punishment for criminal actions is unjustified); others, maintaining the reality of maintaining the reality of moral responsibility, have concluded that determinism is false.¹⁴

b. Augustine argued that there is **an inherited depravity** as the result of which it is simply not possible for the individual to stop sinning. His key phrase was *non posse non peccare*. **It means that a person is not able to choose God.** Augustine said that **man, having used his free will badly in the Fall, lost both himself and his will.** He said that the will has been so enslaved that it can have no power for righteousness. He said that the will is indeed free—of righteousness—but enslaved to sin. He said that **the will is free to turn from God, but not to come to Him** ... Augustine was concerned to stress that grace is an absolute necessity; apart from it no one can be saved ...¹⁵

13 James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith: A Comprehensive and Readable Theology*, (InterVarsity Press, 1986), p.209.

14 <https://universalium.enacademic.com/103153/determinism>

15 *Ibid.*, p. 210.

- 1) How is it then that the “prodigal son” was able to “come to his senses” and return to his father? (Luke 15:11-32)
 - 2) Or, that Yeshua told his listeners, “Whoever has ears, let them hear” (Mat 11:15; 13:9,43; Mar 4:9; Luk 8:8; 14:35; Rev 2:7,11,17,29; 3:6,13,22; 13:9).
 - 3) Or, that he “denounce(d) the towns in which most of his miracles had been performed, **because they did not repent.**
- c. Luther (also) denied the freedom of the will ... ‘**We are wholly given over to sin,**’ said Luther. Therefore, our only proper role is humbly to acknowledge that sin, confess our blindness and acknowledge that **we can no more choose God by our enslaved wills than we can please him by our sullied moral acts.** Our sole role is to admit our sin and call upon the eternal God for mercy, knowing even as we seek to do so that we cannot do it unless God is first of all active in us to convict us of sin and lead our wills to embrace the Lord (Yeshua the Messiah) for salvation.¹⁶
- d. The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England say, ‘The condition of man after the fall of Adam is such, that **he cannot turn and prepare himself by his own natural strength and good works to faith, and calling upon God;** wherefore we have no power to do good works, pleasant and acceptable to God, without the grace of God by (Messiah) preventing us (that is, being with us beforehand to motivate use, that we may have a good will, and working with us when we have that will’ (Article 10).¹⁷
- e. The Westminster Catechism declares, ‘The sinfulness of that state whereinto man fell, **consisteth in the guilt of Adam’s first sin,** the wont of that righteousness wherein he was created, **and the corruption of his nature, whereby his is utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all that is spiritually good, and wholly inclined to all evil, and that continually**’ (Answer to Question 25).¹⁸
- f. Deuteronomy 30:19
Now **choose** life, so that you and your children may live ...
- 1) Acts 6:5
They chose Stephen ...
 - 2) Romans 11:22
²²but kindness to you, **provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off.**

g. Ezekiel 18:10-24

¹⁹**Yet you ask, ‘Why does the son not share the guilt of his father?’ Since the son has done what is just and right and has been careful to keep all my decrees, he will surely live. ²⁰The soul who sins is the one who will die. The son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous man will be credited to him, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against him.**

h. The Apocalypse of Baruch 19 (2Baruch) 54:14-16

¹⁴And justly do they perish who have not loved Your law, and the torment of judgment shall await those who have not submitted themselves to Your power.

¹⁵**For though Adam first sinned and brought untimely death upon all, yet of those who were born from him, each one of them has prepared for his own soul torment to come, and again each one of them has chosen for himself glories to come.**

¹⁶[For assuredly he who believeth will receive reward ...

i. Romans 5:12-14

¹²Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, **because all sinned** ...

1) ¹²“... death came to all men, because all men sinned”—not “death came to all men because all men are sinners” or “death came to all men because they are culpable for Adam’s sin.”

j. As a result of the Christian view of the depravity of man:

- 1) **Believers tend to think that they are “worthless” and have no intrinsic value.**
- 2) **All non-Christians are considered to be corrupt, wicked, disabled, opposite to all that is spiritually good, and wholly inclined to evil—continually.**
- 3) **No non-Christian can love God, have a legitimate spiritual insight, do good things, have good thoughts or contribute in any way to the good of mankind.**
- 4) Since it is the responsibility of all Christians to persuade all non-Christians to convert to Christianity—all interaction between Christians and non-Christians is an “intervention,” i.e., an attempt on the part of the Christian to “rescue” the non-Christian.

19 The Apocalypse of Baruch is part of the Pseudepigrapha (purportedly written by Baruch, the scribe of Jeremiah), “a post-biblical work apparently written prior to the rise of Christianity. “Although, others in the 1st-early 2nd century BCE.

16 Ibid., p. 211.

17 Ibid., p. 212.

18 Ibid.