

# Parsha Va'era — Hardened Hearts, Free-Will, and Determinism<sup>1</sup>

Typographic convention: paragraphs in this font represent my comments. A bold face header in this font represents my summary of the quote to follow. The source quotes themselves are presented in this font.

## 1. Hashem's Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart

**I will harden** Pharaoh's heart, in order to increase My signs and wonders in the land of Egypt.

וְאֲנִי אֶקְשֶׁה אֶת-לֵב פַּרְעֹה וְהִרְבִּיתִי אֶת-אֲתֹתַי וְאֶת-מוֹפְתֵי בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:

Shmot, 7:3, when Hashem gives Moshe his initial assignment

When Pharaoh saw that there was respite, **he hardened** his heart and did not listen to them [Moshe and Aharon], just as Hashem had spoken.

וַיִּרְא פַּרְעֹה כִּי הִיטָה הַרְוָחָה [וְהִקְבִּיד] אֶת-לְבוֹ וְלֹא שָׁמַע אֲלֵהֶם כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר הָשֵׁם:

Shmot, 8:11, after the frogs were eliminated

But Pharaoh **hardened** his heart again, this time, and he did not send out the people.

וַיִּקְבֶּד פַּרְעֹה אֶת-לְבוֹ גַּם בַּפֶּעַם הַזֹּאת וְלֹא שְׁלַח אֶת-הָעָם:

Shmot, 8:28, after the wild animals were eliminated

Hashem **caused** Pharaoh's heart **to remain hard** and he did not listen to them, just as Hashem had spoken to Moshe.

וַיַּחֲזִק הָשֵׁם אֶת-לֵב פַּרְעֹה וְלֹא שָׁמַע אֲלֵהֶם כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר הָשֵׁם אֶל-מֹשֶׁה:

Shmot, 9:12, after the boils were inflicted

He and his servants **hardened** their hearts. Pharaoh's heart was **strengthened**, and he did not send the B'nei Yisrael out, just as Hashem had spoken through Moshe.

וַיִּקְבֶּד לְבוֹ הוּא וְעַבְדָּיו: [וַיַּחֲזִק] לֵב פַּרְעֹה וְלֹא שְׁלַח אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר הָשֵׁם בְּיַד מֹשֶׁה:

Shmot, 9:34-35, after the rain, hail, and thunder ceased

---

<sup>1</sup> Notes on the source texts copyright © Sidney C. Bailin, 2004. Permission to duplicate is hereby granted as long as all attributions and this copyright notice are included.

Parsha Va'era, and these quotes in particular, raise the question of free-will vs. determinism: do people choose their actions, feelings, and thoughts, or are they determined by other forces, in particular by Hashem? The Rabbis have wrestled with this question, as have philosophers.

## 2. Determinism: All Things Happen of Necessity

**Hashem hardens or opens our hearts according to His will:**

R. Joshua b. Boethus observed in the name of R. Judah b. R. Simon, It is written, *O Lord, why do You make us err from Your ways, and harden our heart from Your fear?* (Isaiah, 63: 17) When You desire, You inspired them with love; and when You desire, You inspired them with hate.

Bereishit Rabbah, 84:18 (on the selling of Joseph)

**Hashem causes people to sin:**

R. Yochanan said: He [Judah] wished to go on [upon seeing Tamar], but the Holy One, blessed be He, made the angel who is in charge of desire appear before him ... Thereupon, *And he turned to her* [Bereishit, 38:16]—in spite of himself and against his wish.

Bereishit Rabbah, 85:8

**Hashem sees all, including the future:**

When Cain slew Abel, G-d demanded of him, *“Where is Abel your brother?”* (Bereishit, 4:9) “Sovereign of the Universe,” he replied, “Abel and I brought You a gift. Abel’s You accepted, while You turned me away with aching heart. Do You seek him from me? Surely he is to be sought from none but You, for You keep watch over all creatures.” “I will let you know where he is,” G-d answered. Forthwith He cursed him, as it says, *And now you are cursed from the ground* (Bereishit, 4:11). He [Cain] thereupon arose and prostrated himself to beseech mercy of G-d, as it says, *My punishment Is greater than I can bear* (Bereishit, 4:13). “Sovereign of the Universe,” he pleaded. “Surely my sin is not greater than that of the sixty myriads who will provoke You in the wilderness, yet as soon as he [Moshe] exclaimed, *Forgiving iniquity* (Numbers, 14:18), You forgave them,” as it says, *And the Lord said: I have pardoned according to your word* (Numbers, 14:20). In that moment the Holy One, blessed be He, said: “If I do not forgive Cain, I will shut the door in the face of all penitents. Consequently G-d forgave him half; yet because his repentance was incomplete, He did not forgive him all his sins.

Bereishit Rabbah, 97

I do not believe that anything is hidden to Him, may He be exalted, nor do I attribute to Him a lack of power.

Rambam, *Guide to the Perplexed*, 3:17

**Hashem does not learn new information:**

A matter concerning which there is a general consensus is that it is *not* true that new knowledge should come to Him, may He be exalted, so that He would know now what He did not know before.

Rambam, *Guide to the Perplexed*, 3:20

The 17<sup>th</sup> century (c.e.) philosopher Spinoza was the determinist *par excellence*.

**G-d is omnipotent and therefore the cause of all:**

By G-d we mean a Being supremely perfect and absolutely infinite.

Spinoza, Letter to Henry Oldenburg, Aug/Sep 1661

G-d is the efficient cause not only of the existence of things, but also of their essence.

Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part I (Concerning G-d), Proposition XXV.

Nothing in the universe is contingent, but all things are conditioned to exist and operate in a particular manner by the necessity of the divine nature.

Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part I (Concerning G-d), Proposition XXIX.

Determinism has been bolstered over the past century by advances in science, especially in our understanding of how mind and brain work.

**Our supposedly free decisions are in fact determined by unconscious forces:**

By abandoning a part of our psychic capacity as unexplainable through purposive ideas we ignore the realms of determinism in our mental life. Here, as in still other spheres, determinism reaches farther than we suppose. ... For some time I have been aware that it is impossible to think of a number, or even of a name, of one's own free will. If one investigates this seeming voluntary formation, let us say, of a number of many digits uttered in unrestrained mirth, it always proves to be so strictly determined that the determination seems impossible.

... As is known, many persons argue against the assumption of an absolute psychic determinism by referring to an intense feeling of conviction that there is a free will. This feeling of conviction exists, but is not incompatible with the belief in determinism. Like all normal feelings, it must be justified by something.

... it is in trivial and indifferent decisions that one feels sure that he could just as easily have acted differently, that he acted of his own free will, and without any motives. From our analyses we therefore need not contest the right of the feeling of conviction that there is a free will. If we distinguish conscious from unconscious motivation we are then informed by the feeling of conviction that the conscious motivation does not extend over all our motor resolutions. ... What is thus left free from the one side receives its motive from the other side, from the unconscious, and the determinism in the psychic realm is thus carried out uninterruptedly

Sigmund Freud, *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Chapter 12.

Most people today would not accept Freud's specific description of the mind's operation as scientific. But the notion that the brain—an organ that can be scientifically studied—is the source of the mind's workings, and hence of human behavior, is current in both psychology and neuroscience. This may seem a far cry from the Divine determinism seen in the Midrashim quoted above, unless one connects the workings of nature with the Divine will.

### 3. Free Will: Man has Choice

The main problems with determinism are: 1) it seems to make ethics irrelevant, and 2) it makes Hashem responsible for human evil (the problem of *theodicy*). In contrast, the free-will position places the burden squarely on humans.

#### **Hashem's Foreknowledge does not Imply Determinism:**

[One is] unable to prove that the Creator's foreknowledge of things is the cause of their coming into being.

Saadia Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, Treatise IV, Chapter 4.

#### **Hashem endows mankind with free-will:**

Let me say next that the Creator, magnified be His majesty, does not in any way interfere with the actions of men and that He does not exercise any force upon them either to obey or disobey Him. ... A human being feels conscious of his own ability either to speak or remain silent, or to take hold of things or desist from them ... Whoever, therefore, believes that the Creator, magnified and exalted be He, exercises force upon His servant in regard to anything, hereby attributes one and the same act to both of them. Furthermore, if G-d were to exercise force upon His servant, there would be no sense to His command or His interdict.

Saadia Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, Treatise IV, Chapter 4.

[Our intellect and choice] have the power to move us contrary to that which is determined by the heavenly bodies.

Gersonides, *Wars of the Lord*, II.2, p. 34

[G-d has provided humans with] the intellectual capacity (sekhel ba'al takhlit) that enables us both to act contrary to what has been ordered by the heavenly bodies and to correct, as far as possible, the [astrally ordained] misfortunes that befall us.

Gersonides, *Wars of the Lord*, II.2, p. 35

The Talmud, in Makkot 10, produces proof from all parts of the Bible that the path in life a person wishes to take, he is allowed to travel, i.e., freedom of choice is *absolute*. An example is the prophet Bileam who was first told by G-d not to accompany the messengers of Balak, but who, once it had become clear that he had made up his mind to go with them, was permitted to proceed (B'Midbar 22:12-20).

... The true meaning seems to be that it was G-d's original plan to create man equipped with freedom of choice. The reason for this was that only in this manner would man attain the ultimate moral stature that He wished him to attain. What G-d is saying, therefore, is that ultimately His plan will prevail, since it had not been His primary

objective to foil the plans of the wicked, but to help man to achieve righteousness. ... The idea then that G-d Himself would impede man in attaining his moral perfection by interfering with his opportunity to do the right thing would be intolerable.

Yitzchak Arama, *Akeydat Yitzchak*, Chapter 36.

**Free-will is the essence of mankind as an ethical being:**

... animals are “programmed.” ... Human beings, however, are unique in the world of living creatures. The “image of G-d” in us permits us to say No to instinct on moral grounds. We can choose not to eat even though we are hungry. We can refrain from sex even when our instincts are aroused, not because we are afraid of being punished, but because we understand the terms “good” and “bad” in a way that no other animal can. The whole story of being human is the story of rising above our animal nature, and learning to control our instincts.

But if Man is truly free to choose, if he can show himself as being virtuous by freely choosing the good when the bad is equally possible, then he has to be free to choose the bad also. If he were only free to do good, he would not really be choosing. If we are *bound* to do good, then we are not free to *choose* it.

Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Chapter 5

**G-d voluntarily limits himself in order for humans to have free-will:**

None of us can read G-d's mind, to know why, at a certain point in the evolutionary process, He had a new kind of creature emerge, a morally free animal who could choose to be good or bad. But He did, and the world has seen a lot of nobility and a lot of cruelty ever since.

...But G-d has set Himself the limit that He will not intervene to take away our freedom, including our freedom to hurt ourselves and others around us. He has already let Man evolve morally free, and there is no turning back the evolutionary clock.

Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Chapter 5.

The idea of G-d voluntarily limiting Himself is closely related (perhaps identical) with the notion of *tsimtsum*, contraction, whereby G-d's infiniteness is suddenly bounded, thereby leaving space in which mankind, and creation as a whole, do their thing.

The main weakness of the free-will position is that G-d is no longer all-powerful. If, however, He is still all-knowing, then He knows what the consequences of *tsimtsum* will be: so is He not still responsible? Furthermore, to call all human choices “free” choices is just not realistic, as several of the passages quoted under Determinism point out. Where, then, is the boundary between *influenced* choice and *free* choice?

## 4. Some Things are Determined, Others Not

The simplest way to “resolve” the free-will vs. determinism debate is to grant limited truth to both. In some ways this is no different from the free-will position itself, since most people would agree that at least *some* things are determined by forces other than our free

choice. Where these analyses become interesting is in the interplay between determinism and free-will.

#### **4.1. Freedom is an Existential Challenge**

**Freedom occurs when one overcomes external and internal fetters.**

Man lives in bondage to his natural environment, to society, and to his own “character”; he is enslaved to needs, interests, and selfish desires. Yet to be free means to transcend nature, society, “character,” needs, interests, desires. How then is freedom conceivable?

... To believe in freedom is to believe in events, namely to maintain that man is able to escape the bonds of the processes in which he is involved and to act in a way not necessitated by antecedent factors. Freedom is the state of going out of the self, an act of *spiritual ecstasy*, in the original sense of the term.

... We are free at rare moments. Most of the time we are driven by a process; we submit to the power of inherited character qualities or to the force of external circumstances. Freedom is not a continual state of man, “a permanent attitude of the conscious subject.” [William James, *The Will to Believe*] It is not, it *happens*. Freedom is an act, an event. We all are endowed with the potentiality of freedom. In actuality, however, we only act freely in rare creative moments.

... Freedom is not, as is often maintained, a principle of uncertainty, the ability to act without motive. Such a view confounds freedom with chaos, free will with a freak of unmotivated volition, with subrational action.

Nor is freedom the same as the ability to choose between motives. Freedom includes an act of choice, but its root is in the realization that the self is no sovereign, in the discontent with the tyranny of the ego. Freedom comes about in the moment of transcending the self, thus rising above the habit of regarding the self as its own end. *Freedom is an act of self-engagement of the spirit, a spiritual event.*

Abraham Joshua Heschel, *G-d in Search of Man*, Chapter 41

There is a strong similarity between Heschel's notion of freedom and Spinoza's, in which freedom comes from alignment with G-d (see §6). Also with Freud's notion of psychoanalysis freeing one from the fetters of the unconscious (see §2).

#### **4.2. The Boundaries are not so Rigid**

Free choice can turn into compulsion, and vice versa. The following two arguments reveal remarkable insight into the human condition. The Punishment Explanation can be read as describing the way in which certain choices that we make can take on a life of their own, and eventually are no longer choices at all: we are simply stuck in them. The Repentance Explanation can be read as describing the way in which we sometimes require truly catastrophic experiences in order to change our ways and become really free.

In the Punishment Explanation, free choice turns into compulsion. In the Repentance Explanation, compulsion—leading to catastrophe piled upon catastrophe—eventually leads to repentance, and thereby to freedom.

### 4.2.1. The Punishment Explanation of Hardening

#### Hashem hardens Pharaoh's already hard heart:

*And the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh* (Shmot, 9:12). When G-d perceived that he did not relent after the first five plagues, He decided that even if Pharaoh now wished to repent, He would harden his heart in order to exact the whole punishment from him.

Shmot Rabbah, 11:6

#### Hashem hardened Pharaoh's heart as punishment for his hardening his own heart:

Pharaoh in his wickedness had unjustifiably perpetrated such great evils against Israel that justice required that the ways of repentance be withheld from him, as is so indicated in many places in the Torah and in the Writings. He was judged according to his wickedness which he had originally committed of his own will.

Ramban, Commentary to Shmot, 7:3

Ramban also presents the Punishment Explanation, ending the discussion with a curious summary that reaffirms free-will while also qualifying it:

We preserve the principle that obedience and disobedience are in man's hands and that he is a free agent in his actions. What he wants to do, he does; what he does not want to do, he does not do. However, G-d punishes him for his sin by nullifying his volition, as we have explained.

Ramban, *Commentary on the Mishnah, Eight Chapters*, Chapter Eight

### 4.2.2. The Repentance Explanation of Hardening

#### Hardening is a function of Pharaoh's relapses into sin:

*And when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunders had ceased, he sinned yet more* (Shmot, 9:34). So it is always with the wicked: as long as they are in trouble, they humiliate themselves, but as soon as the trouble passes, they return to their perversity.

Shmot Rabbah, 12:7

#### Hashem hardened Pharaoh's heart so that he would not give in for the wrong reason:

Being that G-d desires the repentance of the wicked and not their death, as it says, *As I live, says my Lord, I do not desire the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live* (Ezekiel, 33:11). Therefore, the signs and wonders will be increased for the purpose of bringing the Egyptians to repentance, by demonstrating to them His greatness and kindness, through the signs and wonders, as it says, *For this cause I have made you stand to show you My power* (Shmot, 9:16) ...

Without a doubt, were it not for the hardening of Pharaoh's heart he would have sent forth Israel, not because of repentance or submission to G-d, the Blessed One, not because he regretted his rebellion, recognizing G-d's greatness and goodness—but because he could no longer abide the anguish of the plagues ... If Pharaoh would have wished to submit to G-d, the Blessed One, and return to Him in full repentance, there

would have been no Divine deterrent at all. Now, G-d states, *and I will harden Pharaoh's heart*, granting him the strength to withstand the plagues, hence he will not send forth Israel because he fears the plagues, *but that I might show My signs in their midst* (Shmot, 10:1) through which they will perceive My greatness and goodness and repent to a degree, in sincerity.

Sforno, Commentary to Shmot, 7:3

Ramban also cites the Repentance explanation. But Arama rebuts it:

The problem with this approach is that if G-d knows that the sinner does not plan to repent, why interfere with his decisions? His actions would automatically expose him to further punitive action by G-d.

Surely it would be viewed as a greater success for G-d if His creatures are forced by circumstances to comply with His wishes! If this is indeed what happened after the tenth plague, what reason do we have to assume that Pharaoh's last pronouncement was any more sincere than his earlier ones? In fact, G-d would have delayed the deliverance of the Israelites by having interfered with Pharaoh's free will! For this and reasons, the author prefers an approach supported by many Midrashim which state clearly that there had been no interference with Pharaoh's free will.

...All the references made in the Torah to G-d hardening the heart of Pharaoh etc. have to be understood as the recovery Pharaoh was allowed to make between the plagues, so he could be made to feel the full impact of the next installment.

Yitzchak Arama, *Akeydat Yitzchak*, Chapter 36.

## 5. Accepting the Paradox

Unfortunately, the "some things are determined, some not" argument fails to address the problems in either strict determinism (in particular, the theodicy problem) or free-will! An alternative approach is to state that both positions are true—not the one in some cases, the other in other cases, but rather that both are always true. Certain thinkers simply accept this as a paradox in the nature of things.

**Both determinism and free will are true, however paradoxical this sounds:**

All is foreseen, yet free choice is given.

Akiba, Avot, 3:15

**Hashem's foreknowledge does not preclude human choice:**

One of the things that have become clear to me by the texts of the Torah is that His knowledge, may He be exalted, that a certain possible thing will come into existence, does not in any way make that possible thing quit the nature of the possible.

Rambam, *Guide to the Perplexed*, 3:20

Recall Saadia's statement that foreknowledge does not cause an event (see §3).

**Hashem's foreknowledge is only paradoxical because we think of it in the same way as human knowledge:**

The same incapacity that prevents our intellects from apprehending His essence also prevents them from apprehending His knowledge of things as they are. For this knowledge is not of the same species as ours so that we can draw an analogy with regard to it, but a totally different thing. ... Between our knowledge and His knowledge there is nothing in common, as there is nothing in common between our essence and His essence. ... It is from this that incongruities follow necessarily, as we imagine that things that obligatorily pertain to our knowledge pertain also to His knowledge.

Rambam, *Guide to the Perplexed*, 3:20

Rambam's argument may seem like a sleight of hand, or a cop-out. In fact, however, it foreshadows developments in modern logic, such as Russell's paradox. (Don't worry if you're not familiar with this! It's just an aside.) The problem that Rambam identifies is, in modern terms, the impossibility of *reifying universals*—that is, talking about an absolute transcendent, G-d, as a "thing."

## **6. Resolving the Paradox: Integrating Determinism and Free Will**

The key to integrating determinism with free-will is to stop regarding the "willing self" as something distinct and discrete, separate from its environment. Instead, we can regard the self as part of a network of pushes and pulls that, in totality, make up G-d's creation. Volition, or will, exists, since we experience it; but as part of creation, it too is determined by G-d. Of course, this requires that we reinterpret "free" will; but we have already read Heschel suggesting that (see §4.1).

**The sense that we do something independent of G-d's decree comes from unawareness of the role of G-d's decree in our choices.**

Will is only a particular mode of thinking, like intellect; therefore no volition can exist, nor be conditioned to act, unless it be conditioned by some cause other than itself, which cause is conditioned by a third cause, and so on to infinity.

Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part I (Concerning G-d), Proof to Proposition XXXII.

Men think themselves free inasmuch as they are conscious of their volitions and desires, and never even dream, in their ignorance, of the causes which have disposed them so to wish and desire.

Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part I (Concerning G-d), Appendix

As this necessity is nothing else but the decree of G-d ... we may hence, after a fashion, understand how we act freely and are the cause of our action, though all the time we are acting necessarily and according to the decree of G-d. ... When we allow our will to pass beyond the limits of our understanding, we no longer perceive the necessity nor the decree of G-d, we can only see our freedom, which is always involved in our will ... If we then try to reconcile our freedom with G-d's decree and continuous creation, we

confuse that which we clearly and distinctly understand [our will] with that which we do not perceive [G-d's decree], and, therefore, our attempt is vain. It is, therefore, sufficient for us to know that we are free, and that we can be so notwithstanding G-d's decree ...

Spinoza, Letter to William de Blyenbergh, 28 Jan., 1665

Finally, we can think of determinism as an attitude towards the past, helping us to accept what has happened, and free-will as an attitude towards the future, empowering us to act ethically.

**Determinism is an attitude, especially towards the past, rather than a statement of fact:**

The use of the word "fate." Our attitude to the future and the past. To what extent do we hold ourselves responsible for the future? How much do we speculate about the future? How do we think about the past and the future? If something unwelcome happens: – do we ask "Whose fault is it?", do we say "It must be somebody's fault," – or do we say "It was G-d's will," "It was fate"?

In the sense in which asking a question and insisting on an answer is expressive of a different attitude, a different mode of life, from not asking it, the *same* can be said of utterances like "It is G-d's will" or "We are not masters of our fate." The work done by this sentence, or at any rate something like it, could also be done by a command! Including one that you give yourself. And conversely the utterance of a command, such as "Don't be resentful," may be like the affirmation of a truth.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, p. 61

Life is like a path along a mountain ridge; to left and right are slippery slopes down which you slide without being able to stop yourself, in one direction or the other. I keep seeing people slip like this and I say, "How could a man help himself in such a situation!" And *that* is what "denying free will" comes to. That is the attitude expressed in this "belief." But it is not a *scientific* belief and has nothing to do with scientific convictions.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, p. 63