

Moses and Pharaoh: Who was the Hero?

by Moshe Dann (February 2015)

The confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh is one of the greatest dramatic moments in recorded history. The most powerful figure in the world confronts an apparent shepherd and his brother, who demand freedom for an entire slave population. It was something unheard of until modern times. It is a drama, moreover, that has elements of a classic Greek tragedy: a contest between a powerful ruler and a seemingly weak opponent, in which the god-king becomes entangled in personal flaws, dooming himself and his nation.

This conflict, however, is much more profound. It is fundamentally between paganism and ethical monotheism. The cry "Let my people go," an inspiration for oppressed people ever since, adds the purpose: "so that they can serve Me (God)." Freedom is only the beginning of a journey.

Moreover, several elements of the story seem strange. Pharaoh could have killed Moses and Aaron immediately when they presented their audacious demands; he could have refused to meet them. Surprisingly, however, from the very outset Pharaoh accepts their legitimacy as political and spiritual leaders. If he thought that they were magicians, like those of his own court, he quickly realized that they were not ordinary "miracle workers" or emissaries. The bold "shepherd" knew the Egyptian court structure and spoke its language; an "outsider," he appeared to be an "insider."

Secondly, Pharaoh's position is unique in the world of his time. He represented not only the political/military/religious power of the state, but was revered as a demi-god. The entire socio-cultural and economic basis of the Egyptian empire depended on him alone. Everything he did must be seen against this background, like an inverted pyramid, with Pharaoh at the bottom. He cannot allow any deviations lest the entire structure collapse – even though he may sense his mistake or that inevitability.

Pharaoh's first response to Moses was to deny that he had ever heard of an "Eternal God" of the Hebrews and was not obligated to obey any other authority. Moses' demand that the Jews be allowed to pray to their God, therefore, is a direct challenge to everything that Pharaoh and Egypt represent. Moreover, Pharaoh isn't only concerned about the Jews, but the possibility that their rebellion might spark revolts among others in the empire.

Pharaoh's refusal to listen, therefore, is predictable; he has no choice if he wants Egypt to survive. Allowing the Jews to leave would be an admission that his authority was not absolute, putting the entire Egyptian theo-political structure at risk. As a paradigm, Jewish resistance to oppression and assimilation marks a well-worn path.

By consistently demanding religious freedom and refusing to assimilate, Jews have caused the breakdown of totalitarian regimes and have been the backbone of pluralistic democratic movements. Their refusal to be broken by the former USSR, for example, encouraged other social, ethnic and religious groups to demand recognition and independence.

Is there a hero in the classical sense in this story? We know from the beginning who will win, and perhaps Pharaoh knows as well; certainly this becomes clearer to everyone. Yet, "stubborn, hard-hearted" Pharaoh refuses to concede. Doomed to fail because of *hubris* (pride) and self-delusion, Pharaoh can't let go. Despite his growing awareness that he isn't in control and is increasingly vulnerable, he continues to oppose Moses. Although he acknowledges God, Pharaoh resists until the end.

Biblical commentators have explained this process as a growing awareness by Pharaoh and his court, the Egyptian people, and the Jewish people of a revolution in the history of mankind: freedom and the importance of human dignity. Pharaoh's refusal to allow the Jews to leave, however, is complicated by God's intervention: He "hardened Pharaoh's heart." (Exodus 7:3) It would seem, therefore, that Pharaoh did not have complete free will.

Rashi notes that the process of increasing punishments was necessary to demonstrate God's power – not only to the Egyptians, but the Jews as well. During the first five plagues Pharaoh himself was responsible for his hardening heart; during the last five plagues, Pharaoh is no longer able to resist his obsession. In addition, Pharaoh's heart was "strengthened." (7:13) and then became "heavy." (7:14) Why does Torah use three different words to describe what amounts to a repetitive description of his stubborn obstinacy? We will answer this shortly.

Rambam, Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, (Mishne Torah, Hilchot Teshuva) insists that everyone has free will; one can choose to do good, or evil. The ability to choose freely defines us as human beings; our choices define us as individuals. Freedom to choose is an essential and inherent right, but it is not absolute; actions have consequences.

This explains why three different words are used to describe Pharaoh's heart. He changes his mind, perhaps from lack of awareness and fear of losing a valuable commodity; given his position, it's understandable. That is what is meant by "hardening," and "heavy." He refuses to change even though he recognizes God's existence. But then he becomes a fanatic,

recalcitrant and arrogant – which is described as “his heart was strengthened.”

The key to understanding this psychological debilitation – and what Torah teaches – is Pharaoh’s lack of self-criticism. The ability to exercise free will gives one the confidence to act, even if it is wrong, for example, in cases of addiction or abuse. Honest self-examination and self-awareness allow for change; but without such introspection, change is impossible, and then free will becomes destructive to oneself and others. In Pharaoh’s case, he led his army and his nation to disaster.

Only by emphasizing Pharaoh’s stubbornness could the limits of human endeavor and God’s sovereignty be proven and the egocentric lie that encompassed Pharaoh’s life be exposed. His fanaticism was, paradoxically, a necessary evil.

In the end, Egypt’s economy was shattered, yet Pharaoh holds on. In a last desperate act, he pursues the fleeing Jews into the sea and his entire army drowns. Egypt never recovers and the Philistines, an invader force from Greek islands, became the dominant power in the region.

Pharaoh, the anti-hero, represents the denial of what is transcendent; blinded by self-glorification, he could not see the importance of human dignity. Moses and Aaron risk their lives to save the Jewish people, but they (and we) know that – commanded by God – they will win.

Freedom in the Exodus story means more than ending slavery; it means finding meaning and purpose. Moses understood that physical freedom does not prevent mental slavery; “he could take the Jews out of Egypt, but it would be more difficult to take Egyptian culture and influence out of the Jews.” That is what assimilation means: the breakdown of inner spiritual identity while the outer material condition thrives. Pharaoh tried to convince the Jews that they had “the best of all possible worlds;” and many were seduced – until the plagues and Pharaoh’s demise.

Having watched Pharaoh’s army be destroyed, the Jews asked where this was leading and to what purpose. The answer would inspire a new people, Am Yisrael, and a mission: to receive Torah, occupy and settle Eretz Yisrael, build the Temple and bring on the Messianic age.

And the Jews sang, not only because they had endured hundreds of years of slavery and had maintained their identity, but to declare their commitment to carry a message of ethical monotheism, spiritual, mental and physical freedom to the world.

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