

Moshe's Mission to Pharaoh in Light of Rambam's Hilchos Teshuvah

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The Torah's wording of the last few of the Ten Plagues contains many points that have drawn the attention of the commentators. Let us examine several of them.

- 1) When Moshe warned Pharaoh about the plague of Hail, he said in the name of Hashem, "For this time I am sending all of My plagues to your heart, and against your slaves and against your people" (*Shemos* 9:14). The phrase "to your heart" does not appear with reference to any of the other plagues. In what sense was the plague of Hail in particular "to Pharaoh's heart"?
- 2) After Hashem sent the plague of Hail, the Torah says, "Pharaoh sent someone to summon Moshe and Aharon, and said to them, 'I have sinned this time. Hashem is the Righteous One, and I and my people are the wicked ones'" (9:27). Why was it only at this point that Pharaoh said, "I have sinned this time"? Why did he not do so after any of the earlier plagues?
- 3) After Hashem ended the plague of Hail, the Torah says, "And Pharaoh saw that the rain, the hail, and the thunder had stopped, and he continued to sin" (9:34). The plague of Hail was the seventh plague. Pharaoh's failure to relent after the earlier plagues—each of them a miracle that inflicted severe suffering on his nation—was surely remarkable, to say the least. Why is it only at this point that the Torah says, "And he continued to sin"?
- 4) In the introduction to the plague of Locusts, the Torah says, "Hashem said to Moshe, 'Come to Pharaoh for I have made heavy his heart...'" (10:1). There are other plagues before which

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Hashem told Moshe “come to Pharaoh” or “stand before Pharaoh” (see 7:15, 8:16, 9:1, and 9:13), but in those instances the phrase is always followed by “and say to him.” Why is it that here “come to Pharaoh” stands by itself without “and say to him”?

- 5) The above verse and the one that follows continue, “Come to Pharaoh for I have made heavy his heart and the heart of his slaves so that I may place these signs of Mine in his midst, and so that you shall tell to the ears of your son and your son’s son how I amused Myself with Egypt, and of My signs that I inflicted on them, and you will know that I am Hashem.” It is clear from the words “so that you shall tell to the ears of your son and your son’s son” that the lesson to be learned from the upcoming plague of Locusts was one directed at the future generations of Israel. This stands in contrast to the introduction to the preceding plague, the plague of Hail. There Moshe tells Pharaoh in the name of Hashem, “However, it is because of this that I have kept you standing, in order to *show you* My strength, and so that My Name will be spoken of *throughout the entire world*” (9:16). Why is the lesson of the plague of Locusts for Israel alone, while the lesson of the plague of Hail is directed toward the entire world?
- 6) “Come to Pharaoh for I have made heavy his heart and the heart of his slaves” sounds like a non sequitur. The reason to come to Pharaoh is to warn him of the impending plague. How is the heaviness of his heart a reason to come to him? Furthermore, why is it that only at this point does Hashem tell Moshe, “For I have made heavy his heart”? Had He not already made Pharaoh’s heart heavy in the preceding plagues?
- 7) Before the plague of Locusts, Moshe told Pharaoh in the name of Hashem, “How long will you refuse to be humbled before Me?” (10:3). Why is it this particular plague that elicits this expression of exasperation?
- 8) As a result of the plague of Locusts, Pharaoh told Moshe and Aharon, “I have sinned to Hashem your God and to you. Now, please forgive my sin just this time” (10:16-17). Pharaoh had earlier acknowledged that he had sinned, after the plague of Hail (9:27; see question 2 above). Why is it only after the plague of Locusts that he asks for forgiveness?

- 9) In all of the plagues before the ninth plague, the plague of Darkness, Moshe and Aharon appeared before Pharaoh. Although the third and sixth plagues were not preceded by warnings to Pharaoh, Moshe and Aharon came to him before the plague nevertheless. Why is it that with the ninth plague, Moshe and Aharon stopped coming to Pharaoh in advance of the plague?
- 10) When Pharaoh summoned Moshe at the end of the ninth plague, the plague of Darkness, he ended up telling Moshe angrily, "Do not ever see my face again" (10:28). Moshe responded, "You have spoken correctly. Never again will I see your face" (10:29). How could Moshe make such a statement? Was it not possible that God would again send him to warn Pharaoh?¹

To answer the above questions, let us refer to the words of Rambam in *Hilchos Teshuvah* 6:3. After elaborating on the fundamental principle that man has free will, the Rambam writes:

It is possible for a person to commit such a grave sin, or so many sins, that justice demands before the Judge of Truth that retribution from this sinner for these sins that he committed willingly and consciously is that they withhold *teshuvah* from him, and do not grant him the ability to repent of his evil, so that he should die and perish through the sin he committed. This is what the Holy One, Blessed Is He, said through Yeshayah, "The heart of this people has become fat..." (*Yeshayah* 6:10). Similarly, it says, "They insulted the messengers of God, and ridiculed His words, and mocked His prophets, until the wrath of Hashem rose against His people to the point that there was no cure" (*II Divrei HaYamim* 36:16). That is, they sinned of their own volition and transgressed greatly to the point that their guilt demanded that *teshuvah*, which is the cure, be withheld from them.

Therefore it is written in the Torah, "And I shall harden the heart of Pharaoh" (*Shemos* 4:21). Because he sinned on his own initially, and mistreated Israel who lived in his land, as it says, "Come, let us deal wisely with him" (1:10), justice demanded that *teshuvah* be withheld from him until he suffered retribu-

¹ See *Or HaChaim* to *Shemos* 7:4.

tion. That is why the Holy One, Blessed Is He, hardened his heart.

But why did He send a message to him through Moshe, and say, “Send [them free] and do *teshuvah*,” when the Holy One, Blessed Is He, had already told him, “You will not send [them free],” as it says, “But you and your slaves, I know [that you do not yet have fear of Hashem]” (9:30)?

[The answer lies in the verse,] “However, it is because of this that I have kept you standing, in order to show you My strength, and so that My Name will be spoken of throughout the entire world” (9:16). [Hashem sent Moshe to Pharaoh] in order to make known to those who come into the world that at the time that the Holy One, Blessed Is He, withholds *teshuvah* from a sinner, he is unable to repent. Rather, he will die through the wickedness that he did at first through his own volition...

It is clear from these words of Rambam that the objective of sending Moshe to Pharaoh was not to bring him to repentance, but rather to show that it was impossible for him to repent. It seems that this is not true, however, with respect to all of Moshe’s appearances before Pharaoh before the plagues.

Both Rashi (7:3) and Rabbeinu Avraham ben HaRambam (9:12) note that it is only with the sixth plague, the plague of Boils, that the Torah begins to say that Hashem hardened the heart of Pharaoh. Up to that point Pharaoh hardened his own heart. He had the option of repentance but chose not to exercise it.

The point at which man by nature is unable to sustain obstinate resistance to suffering is a subtle one. The Torah informs us that Pharaoh crossed this threshold between the fifth plague, Pestilence, and the sixth, Boils. By the time of the plague of Boils, it would have been humanly impossible to persist. Divine hardening of the heart was required for Pharaoh to do so.

If it was clear to God that Pharaoh had crossed this line after the fifth plague, it could hardly have been so for human beings. Pharaoh had already shown extraordinary obstinacy up to that point. How could anybody tell the exact moment at which his obstinacy went from the extraordinary to the miraculous?

By the time of the seventh plague, however, the plague of Hail, it was evident to everybody that Pharaoh was not in control of himself. His loss of the ability to make the right decisions had gone well beyond the point of subtlety. It was plain to all that he was a mere marionette whose strings were being pulled by a Higher Being.

We can now begin to answer the questions raised above. It was before the plague of Hail that Hashem told Pharaoh, “For this time I am sending all of My plagues to your heart,” for it was with this plague that it became evident that the plagues affected Pharaoh’s heart, his ability to make decisions. And it was only after this plague that Pharaoh first said, “I have sinned this time,” because Hashem wished to demonstrate that Pharaoh had lost all ability to repent. Even though he declared, “I have sinned this time,” he could not bring himself to follow through with the next logical step—to free Israel. For the same reason, it is only after the plague of Hail that the Torah says of Pharaoh, “And he continued to sin,” for it is after his declaration of guilt following this plague that it is most remarkable that he would still continue to sin.² This also explains why the next time Moshe spoke to Pharaoh, he said, “How long will you refuse to be humbled before Me?” With this statement, he told Pharaoh, “How is it possible that even after your recognition of guilt, you still refuse to humble yourself? It must be that the ability to do so has been taken from you.”

As the Rambam said, the point of Moshe’s mission to Pharaoh was to demonstrate that he did not have the ability to choose to repent. After Pharaoh’s declaration of guilt following the plague of Hail, and his continued refusal to release the Jewish people, this phenomenon had been clearly illustrated. Everyone understood that Pharaoh had suffered a loss of free will. Moshe thought that there was no further need for him to appear before Pharaoh. His mission had been completed successfully.

This is why, before the next plague, the plague of Locusts, Hashem told him, “Come to Pharaoh.” Here, “Come to Pharaoh” does not serve as an introductory remark to “and say to him.” Here,

² Rabbeinu Avraham ben HaRambam makes this point in his commentary to *Sefer Shemos*.

“Come to Pharaoh” stands as a commandment on its own, for Moshe thought he would no longer need to come to him.

But Moshe’s mission was not yet completed. There was still something to be demonstrated by going to Pharaoh once again.

Midrash Tanchuma, Haazinu 4, says that possibility of doing *teshuvah* was given to Israel alone, not to other nations. This midrash is obviously contradicted by the story of Yonah in which the people of Nineveh repented of their sins. Indeed, they are held up as a model for us every Yom Kippur. The commentators³ answer that non-Jews do have the possibility of repentance. The Midrash means that their repentance differs from the *teshuvah* given to Israel. When a Jew does *teshuvah*, he has the power to undo the past. He can obliterate his sin totally, as if it never existed. A non-Jew cannot do this. By correcting his sinful behavior, he can arouse God’s mercy and save himself from punishment. But he can never undo that which he has done. His sin exists permanently.

Given that the effects of the *teshuvah* of a Jew and the repentance of a non-Jew are different, it could well be that their content is different, as well. The Rambam writes in *Hilchos Teshuvah* 2:2 that *teshuvah* consists of three essential parts: refraining from the sin, commitment never to do it again, and regret for having done it. Refraining from the sin relates to the present. Commitment not to repeat it relates to the future. Regret relates to the past.

If the repentance of a non-Jew does not affect his past, it stands to reason that it does not require the element of *teshuvah* that relates to the past—regret. If someone who is diabetic wishes to maintain good health, he must refrain from sweets. It is pointless for him to regret the sweets he ate in the past. It will not contribute the least bit to his well-being. By the same token, the repentance of a non-Jew is protection from future punishment. If a non-Jew realizes that his sin is the source of his troubles and wishes to rid himself of them, all he needs to do is change his conduct for the better. Regret

³ Rav Zadok HaKohen in *Takanas HaShavin*, p. 5; *Sfas Emes* to *Parashas Naso* 5650; Rav Elchonon Wasserman in *Kovetz He’aros* to *Yevamos*, 232, to name but a few.

undoubtedly enhances the non-Jewish penitent's relationship with the Creator but is not a part of his repentance per se.⁴

This helps us to arrive at the answers to the rest of the questions raised above. Pharaoh's declaration after the plague of Hail, "I have sinned this time," was an admission of guilt, but not an expression of regret. Had Moshe's mission ended at this point, there still would have been room for error. People may have thought that the possibility of *teshuvah* might be denied to someone who attained the level of repentance expected from a non-Jew, as Pharaoh did. Pharaoh recognized that he was wrong and that his suffering was the result of his sin. It was evident that if he had the ability, he would have repented by setting the Jews free. The fact that he did not was proof that God had taken away his ability to make that choice. But this still left room for people to think that if someone reached a deeper emotional level than Pharaoh did, God would never deny him the possibility of *teshuvah*. Perhaps if someone actually regretted his sin, Hashem would allow him to repent no matter what.

It was because of this that Hashem commanded Moshe, "Come to Pharaoh." That is to say, your mission is not yet over. There is still need to make an object lesson of Pharaoh. "For I have made heavy his heart and the heart of his slaves." Now there would be a new lesson in heaviness of the heart. This time Pharaoh would not say merely, "I have sinned." After the plague of Locusts, Pharaoh went so far as to say, "Now, please forgive my sin." This expresses regret. Nobody can ask forgiveness without regret. It is the height of impertinence to say, "I don't regret what I did to you, but forgive me anyway."

⁴ In referring to the repentance of the people of Nineveh, the Gemara in *Rosh Hashanah* 16b uses the term *shinui maaseh*, "change of conduct," rather than the far more common *teshuvah*. This supports our assertion that the repentance of non-Jews operates only on the practical plane, unlike the *teshuvah* of a Jew which demands emotional involvement. (The Gemara there teaches us that even if a Jew is capable only of *shinui maaseh*, he still should do it and it will save him from punishment.) The Gemara brings a source for the concept of *shinui maaseh* from the verse which refers to the people of Nineveh, "And God saw their actions" (*Yonah* 3:10). This verse, too, refers only to the practical aspect.

Here lies the difference between the wording at the introduction of the plague of Hail and the wording at the introduction of the plague of Locusts. The lesson of the plague of Hail was “so that My Name will be spoken of throughout the entire world.” It was a lesson for all of mankind. It related to the level of repentance that God expects from everyone, Jew or non-Jew. But the plague of Locusts was “so that you shall tell to the ears of your son and your son’s son how I amused Myself with Egypt.” Its lesson related to a level of repentance expected of Israel alone.

After the plague of Locusts, God showed Israel that a person’s sins might block the path of *teshuvah* to him even if he feels regret. The full extent of God’s limitation of man’s free will was illustrated. There was no longer any need to send Moshe to Pharaoh before the plague of Darkness. Moshe’s mission to Pharaoh had come to an end, and he could later state confidently that he would never go to see his face again.⁵ ❧

⁵ “The fig tree brought forth its unripe fruit, and the vines with young grapes gave off a fragrance” (*Shir HaShirim* 2:13). *Pesikta DeRav Kahana, HaChodesh Hazev* 9 (brought in Rashi’s commentary to the verse) expounds: “‘The fig tree brought forth its unripe fruit’—These are the three days of darkness during which the wicked of Israel were wiped out. ‘And the vines with young grapes gave off a fragrance’—These are the rest [of Israel] who repented and were accepted.” The Midrash here refers to repentance done by Israel at the time of the plague of Darkness, but the nature of this repentance is obscure. What was it for? We may suggest on the basis of what we have written here that the concept of repentance was not fully revealed to Israel until after the plague of Locusts, before the plague of Darkness. Thus, any repentance they may have done for any sin before that time was not complete because they did not have full comprehension of what they were doing. It was only at the time of the plague of Darkness that they applied the lessons in repentance that they learned through the plague of Locusts.