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Bo – Make a Choice

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Pharaoh continued his stiff-necked response to the plagues and refused to emancipate the Jewish people. His advisors told him it was a lost cause and Egypt would perish, but Pharaoh refused to heed their warnings. This week's Parsha opens with the following verse:

The Lord said to Moses: "Come to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, in order that I may place these signs of Mine in his midst." (Exodus 10:1)

Rashi explains: "**The Lord said to Moses: Come to Pharaoh: and warn him.**" But what is the point in warning Pharaoh if God had hardened his heart? If Pharaoh had lost his free-will what impact would the warning have? Is this not an exercise in futility?

The Lubavitcher Rebbe (Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, 1902-1994) provides an incredible insight:

"It is brought down in Tanya that even those for whom teshuva (repentance) is impossible, if such a person pushes forward and does in fact repent, his teshuva is accepted. So too here, although God hardened the heart of Pharaoh, he still had the opportunity to strengthen himself to repent and return. This is why Moshe was sent to "warn" Pharaoh. This warning reinforced the idea that Pharaoh still had the ability to change and turn things around. A warning is only significant if the individual has the capacity to change. Had Pharaoh done teshuva, it would have been accepted by God." (Likutei Sichos)

At first glance, the Rebbe's words seem incomprehensible and even contradictory, but upon further reflection we learn that man never completely loses his free-will. There may be times when free-will is compromised and other times when aspects of free-will might even be taken away – but it is never totally gone. Even Pharaoh, whose heart was hardened by God Himself, had the ability to change. There is always a choice. God sends Moshe to warn Pharaoh to teach him that he can change these circumstances if he so chooses.

There are times in life when we feel a lack of choices. We feel like the walls are closing in and we have no options or possibilities. Some experience these feelings in difficult and strained relationships which have been tenuous for so long that we don't see a way to repair them. Some of us experience this in our careers when after doing something for a prolonged period of time, we feel limited in our ability to find additional meaning or to transition to something else. And then some of us experience this in how we view ourselves. "I've been a certain way for so long that I don't think I have the ability or capacity to change." Pharaoh comes along and teaches us that we always have a choice. You may not be able to choose many of your life circumstances but even in those situations which have been foisted upon you, there is always a choice to be made. As Victor Frankl wrote, "*The last of human freedoms - the ability to choose one's attitude in a given set of circumstances.*" We are never without choices. At times I can choose my situation and path in life. Other times the path has been set for me, but I still get to choose what I do with this path.

There are many layers of tragedy in the slavery narrative. There is the tragedy of an oppressed people, there is the tragedy of murder and bloodshed and there is a tragedy of a Pharaoh who could have prevented so much pain had he realized that he still had a choice. There is always a choice to be made, may we find the courage to make it.