

Tze U'Imad—Go and Learn

Weekly Talmud Learning with Rabbi Mordecai Schwartz, director of admissions, The Rabbinical School, JTS.

Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 73a

העושה מלאכות הרבה מעין מלאכה אחת אינו חייב אלא אחת

"He who does many forbidden *melakhot* which are like one *melakhah* is liable only for one [sacrifice]."

Note: This passage was first taught to me by Rabbi Joel Roth, whose explanation I use below.

One who performs any of the forbidden labors on Shabbat is held criminally liable. If one, however, does so inadvertently (either because one forgot that it was Shabbat, or because one did not know that the act was forbidden), the Torah requires a sacrifice for each violation.

Now, let us suppose that Reuven, having completely forgotten that it was Shabbat, went out to work in his yard. In the course of the three uninterrupted hours he spent there, he reseeded a bald spot on the lawn, pruned back the hedges, and planted an evergreen sapling. After finishing all of this work, he suddenly remembered that it was Shabbat.

Reuven has performed *four* forbidden labors, all in one uninterrupted period of "forgetfulness" that it was Shabbat. Obviously, his violation of Shabbat was completely inadvertent. Were the Temple standing in Jerusalem, he would be liable to bring a sacrifice. But, how many would he have to bring? One for each of the forbidden activities that he did? If so, in this case he would have to bring four.

The Talmud teaches us that if one performs even *many* forbidden activities, he is liable for only *one* expiatory sacrifice, if *all* of the activities were of similar purpose, as in our case above. Thus, Reuven would be liable for only *one* sacrifice. If, during those same three hours, Reuven had also rehung the door that had fallen off of his tool shed, he would have been liable for two sacrifices. Fixing a broken door, though absolutely forbidden on Shabbat, is not an activity with the same purpose as the other things he had done. Note that when we use the word *purpose*, we are really referring to the conceptual categories as defined by the *Avot Melakhah* (the forbidden labors listed in Mishnah Shabbat 7:2). Therefore, if during those same three hours, he had also gone on to paint the door, he would be responsible for yet a third expiatory sacrifice, for though we might argue that painting the door has a similar "purpose" to hanging it, painting is a different conceptual category from building.

Questions

1. How do we define the purpose of our work in the world?
2. How does Shabbat help us to see the impact of our labors?

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Torah from JTS

Parashat Bo

Exodus 10:1-13:16

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This week's commentary was written by Chancellor Arnold Eisen, JTS

Pharaoh does not get a lot of sympathy from the Torah, nor does he deserve any. The all-powerful king of Egypt has hardened his heart to the sufferings of Israelite slaves (and, we suspect, not only them) one time too many. There are thoughts he refuses to think, emotions he cannot feel, and possibilities he will not consider. Now God "has hardened [Pharaoh's] heart and the hearts of his courtiers" in order to teach them and the entire world a painful and difficult lesson about where true power resides. In order to understand that lesson, I think, we must try to understand Pharaoh. The key to learning the lesson that God and Torah want to teach lies buried inside his "hard," "strong," and "heavy" heart.

Who is this man? The first clue we receive is that he is not like the first Pharaoh in the Exodus story: not at all the kind of leader (his father?) who founded the system of repression to which this Pharaoh is the heir. By the time of his rule, the regime of evil is well-established. His task is to maintain it. He is a routine tyrant, as it were; a manager, not at all a creative or purposeful leader. His lack of political imagination will prove fatal.

Enter Moses, a person familiar at court, who bears the word of a God whom the Pharaoh does not and cannot recognize. Egyptian state religion will not allow it; nor will the rules of power politics. If the Pharaoh were to permit his slaves to go on vacation for purported worship in the wilderness—worship of a foreign god no less—who knows what damage to the economy and the state would ensue? The king will not accede to or negotiate Moses's demands. He will beat the aspiration out of Israel by force.

God, therefore, needs to *demonstrate* God's power to Pharaoh, rather than merely assert it. "Every state is founded on force," said Trotsky. Pharaoh represents and incarnates the very logic of force. God contests that power—and educates it—through a series of plagues that ascend gradually from nuisance and inconvenience to bodily injury and death. Each plague follows a specific warning so that the series as a whole cannot be ascribed to chance or fate or nature. It eventually becomes clear, even to Pharaoh, that the plagues are the work of the God of Nature, now active inside human history in a way not previously known. The lesson is clear: *the rules of politics must change, because the rules of religion have changed*. Pharaoh refuses to countenance either change. He works to prevent both of them through a combination of manipulation, bargaining, and brute force.

Pharaoh negotiates episodically, unpredictably, haltingly. He "strengthens his heart" and stands fast, then makes concessions and retracts them, until God takes over Pharaoh's heart and makes sure it cannot bend. Finally, Pharaoh responds to the plague of hail by saying, "I have sinned this time. YHWH is righteous. I and my

people are the wicked ones.”

The text makes it clear that the king's heart has not really moved; once the plague stops, Pharaoh reverts immediately to type. He acts with “a stiffened heart.” We are not told whether he or God is the agent of hardening this time. That is the point: the man who does not let Israel go and rules Egypt with an iron hand can no longer be sure that he actually controls his own heart or sets the policies it decides for Egypt or authors the story line. We know that Pharaoh is doomed, and he probably knows it too.

This is a leader incapable of leading; a ruler who will not adapt to new realities, rethink the givens of his system, face facts, or hear cries and so cannot rule successfully much longer. That, I think, is why Parashat Bo begins with God instructing Moses to *come* to Pharaoh (not, as JPS translates, to go to him). The previous scene faded out, as it were, with our eyes fixed firmly on the somewhat tragic figure engulfed in deepening shadow. The narrative has us linger with him on his empty stage. God is there too—the power now clearly in charge. Moses joins a scene to which we are already riveted.

Pharaoh's horizon has contracted to that royal chamber. He cannot see out of it; cannot picture any possibility beyond the few basic rules of power politics on which he was raised, even after he realizes that those rules will not save him. The sky is about to darken with locusts, and light soon to vanish altogether. And still Pharaoh negotiates: you can go, he tells Moses, and your children can go with you, but not your livestock.

The last words seem incomprehensible. The whole point of the Exodus was purportedly sacrifice to God. Once again the text wants us to get inside Pharaoh's heart, the better to understand God's intention. It is as if the king says to Moses: “Just leave. That is what you want, isn't it? The sacrifice thing was a pretext. What you are after is freedom. Just admit it and be gone.” He is partly right—and totally wrong. The point of the new politics introduced here by God is precisely that it cannot be separated from faith and covenant. God is not only worshipped at Sinai, but joined in establishing an order of justice on earth. *Slaves* of Pharaoh are to become *servants* of God—and the fact that the three-letter Hebrew root is the same in both cases, and is the word used for *worship* as well, carries a meaning that transforms politics, changes religion, and mandates a new relation between the two.

Religion in God's new order does not exist to serve state power. Kings are not divine. No status quo is sacred. This God cares about justice and compassion, and works in the world along with human partners to create societies founded on justice and compassion. The Israelites are leaving Egypt in order to worship God at Sinai, as Moses had said all along, but that worship is crucial to the founding of a new order that is far more comprehensive. Israelites will offer sacrifice to their God, rather than the one served by and serving Pharaoh.

The classic question, inescapable in our parashah, is how God can justly punish Pharaoh for decisions that God controls by hardening the king's heart. It seems to me that Pharaoh, like so many other human beings, becomes the prisoner of his own accumulated choices. He can think differently up to a point—until he can no longer do so. He deafens his ears to suffering for so long that, one day, he can no longer hear it. Some choice remains to him even at the end—though he cannot see it. His hardened heart is in the way.

Might Pharaoh have repented, as the city of Nineveh and its ruler did in Jonah's time? Could Pharaoh too have recognized Divine power at work even without knowing YHWH?

Might he have determined that state policy needed to change course; that his own rule depended upon breaking with, rather than enforcing, the regime imposed by his predecessors? Many kings have altered course. The change has safeguarded their ability to govern.

Might Pharaoh have left his heart free to cry at the suffering all around him, and his mind

free to reconsider and react—changing the economy, the power structure, and the state religion—in order to take account of what his heart had learned?

We do not know what Pharaoh could have done; the text does not tell us. I think it is important to consider these roads not taken by Pharaoh: not only because they restore choice and agency to the man, thereby denying him the pity of a tragic hostage to fate, but also because they remind every ruler of every state, every decision-maker in every situation,—i.e., all of us—that the heart should not remain unthinking or unfeeling, deaf to suffering or closed to experience. Only so does Exodus lead to Sinai and Sinai to redemption of the world.

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A Taste of Torah

A Comment on Ramban by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz

Exodus 12:1-2 The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: this month will mark for you the beginning of the months; it will be the first of the months of the year for you.

Ramban, “this month will mark for you the beginning of the months,” This order of the counting of the months is not in regard to the years, for the beginning of our years is from Tishrei, the seventh month . . . If so, when we call the month of Nisan the first of the months and Tishrei the seventh, the meaning is “the first month of the redemption” and “the seventh month from the redemption.” This is the meaning of the expression “it will be the first of the months of the year for you,” meaning that it is not the first in regard to the year but it is the first “for you”; in other words, it is called “the first” for the purpose of remembering our redemption.

The first of Tishrei, commonly known as Rosh Hashanah, is celebrated in the Jewish community as the “official” New Year. Parashat Bo, however, undermines this traditional understanding. At the beginning of Exodus 12, God speaks to Moses and Aaron and declares that the month of Nisan, in which Passover occurs, “will mark for you the beginning of the months.” And if that weren't enough to confuse us, the Mishnah teaches, not only are there two new years, but there are actually four. Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:1 explains that the first of Nisan is the New Year for kings and festivals; the first of Elul is the New Year for tithing of animals; the first of Tishrei is the New Year for years; and the fifteenth of Shevat (coming up) is the New Year for trees. How do we reconcile the Torah's teaching of Nisan as the beginning of the biblical year with the common understanding of Rosh Hashanah, Tishrei, as the start of the annual cycle?

Ramban contends that in order to understand the biblical commandment, which is the first given to the Israelite nation, emphasis must be placed on *lakhem* (for you). Ramban, sensitively, explains that Nisan represents the first month in celebration of the Israelite redemption from Egypt. It is a month that marks the beginning of the year for the Jewish people as it marks the pivotal event of *yetziat Mitzrayim*. And so, it is the beginning of the counting of the years *for you*. In other words, Torah recognizes Nisan as the particular new year of the Jewish people throughout the generations. Nisan is bound intimately with the Israelite transition from slavery to redemption. If Nisan is so central to Jewish identity, why then do we need Rosh Hashanah?

Nisan and Tishrei represent the poles of the particular and the universal. As Ramban explains, Nisan is “for you”: it is for the Jewish people in recognition of their freedom. Tishrei, or Rosh Hashanah, celebrates the birth of the world and God's Kingship—clearly more universal in scope. It is between these two poles that the modern Jew maneuvers—taking to heart the experience of redemption while seeing oneself as part and parcel of humanity.

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