

“And I shall harden Pharaoh’s heart.” (7:3)

Anyone who peruses the text might think that Pharaoh was some kind of lunatic. He constantly changed his mind. One moment, he was entreating Moshe *Rabbeinu* and Aharon *HaKohen* to rid Egypt of its frogs. The next moment, he had reverted to his usual arrogance. The same scenario played itself out once again concerning *makkas arov*, pestilence. Every time that he was down, he begged forgiveness and appeared to be sincere. As soon as the plague disappeared, he reverted to his old self. This is the likely behavior of an animal – not a rational human being. An animal cannot change its stripes. It is what it is. Born with natural proclivities, it has no control over its life. An animal has no *seichel*, mind. Cognition does not apply to an animal; only instinct does. Pharaoh was a human being – a vile human, but a human nonetheless. Why was he acting like an out-of-control animal?

Horav Aryeh Leib Bakst, zl, quotes the *Rambam* in *Hilchos Teshuvah* who explains that a person can sink to the nadir of sin, such that he ultimately loses his *koach ha’bechirah*, ability to choose between right and wrong, good and evil. At times, the sin has reached such a level of depravity that the option for repentance no longer exists. He has forfeited it, and is relegated to die an unrepentant sinner: maximum sentence; no parole; no commutation. Some transgressions are so heinous that there is no option of forgiveness. Thus, Hashem writes in the Torah, “But I will harden Pharaoh’s heart,” in order to demonstrate that Pharaoh’s sins had gone too far. He would die a sinner.

The *Rosh Yeshivah* expounds on this idea. Man thinks that he is always able to turn matters around, to change his life, and achieve great things. He believes that it is all up to him – whenever he is in the “mood.” He thinks that the reason that he is resistant to change is his own obstinacy, his own reluctance to live a moral, ethical life of spiritual obedience. Whenever he decides to become a practicing Jew, he will do so. The Torah is teaching him otherwise. It is possible that through one’s iniquitous actions, he can sink to such a base level that he is no longer able to return. Just like Pharaoh, he has lost his options.

We attempt to convince ourselves that it is all in our hands. Whenever we decide to repent, we will. We have no guarantees. At a certain point, Hashem may remove the option, and we will be stuck in our spiritual low, relegated to a life of moral and spiritual bankruptcy. We will be forever floating in a maelstrom of evil, with no avenue for escape.

Since *teshuvah* is not coercive, but rather something which we desire, we ask Hashem to facilitate our quest to return to Him. We entreat Him, so that our sins not distance us from Him, preventing our ultimate return. Nothing should be taken for granted.

In conclusion, things are not always what they seem, or what we would like to convince ourselves. It is not that Hashem’s “patience” wears thin; rather, it is our sinful behavior and extreme impudence that warrants the appropriate punishment of a loss of favor and that *teshuvah* is no

longer an option. Sometimes, the door to the house is locked. We have lost our right to return.