"And God Hardened Pharaoh's Heart"

Based on a sicha by Harav Yehuda Amital

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"In order that you will tell your children and your children's children of that which I PERFORMED in Egypt, and of the signs that I showed them, that you may know that I am God." (Shemot 10:2)

Rashi and the Ramban explain the phrase, "I performed in Egypt" (hit'alalti be-Mitzrayim), as meaning, "I played with Egypt," i.e. I toyed with them. Thus, the verse defines two things which a person must tell his children: a. how God "played" with the Egyptians, and b. the signs and wonders that God performed in Egypt, demonstrating His power.

A study of the Pesach Haggada reveals that, in fact, we discuss only the second point – we give thanks to God Who saved us from Egypt with signs and wonders, and we praise His strong arm. There is no mention in the Haggada of how God "played" with the Egyptians. This leads us to ask what exactly this "playing" refers to, and what its purpose was.

Reading the account at the beginning of Sefer Shemot, another question arises, concerning Moshe's running back and forth to Pharaoh. Moshe engages in negotiations with Pharaoh in which, inter alia, he proposes a limited three-day journey, and the question concerns who will go and who will remain. Why does Moshe need to engage in these negotiations? Does the Holy One really need Pharaoh's agreement in order to take Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt? "And it happened when Pharaoh sent out the nation..." – why the emphasis that Pharaoh sent them out? Why could Bnei Yisrael not have left Egypt quietly and peacefully during the plague of darkness, during which the Egyptians were unable to move?

To answer this, we must understand that Pharaoh had put himself in an unprecedented position: he saw himself as a god, doing as he wished, without being answerable to anyone. Regarding the Nile, he said, "The river is mine, and I have made it for myself" (Yechezkel 29:3). During the first five plagues, he hardened his heart and refused to let Bnei Yisrael go, although he saw that he was unable to stand up to the power of God.

This phenomenon in itself is most interesting, and Rav Yaakov Moshe Charlap once asked Rav Kook how it is possible for a person to reach a situation of "knowing his Master and nevertheless intending to rebel against Him." To deny God is one thing, but how can a person recognize God and have experienced His power, yet nevertheless rebel against Him and refuse His discipline? Rav Kook's answer was that a person's free choice can bring him even to this: if a person reaches a situation where his morality is perverted, then his logic likewise is affected and he will act in an illogical manner.

Even if Pharaoh had capitulated and decided to let Bnei Yisrael go, this would not have contradicted his ideology: he would have claimed that no one had forced him to send them out, but that he was his own master and that he had made his own decision at his own discretion. In order to prove that Pharaoh had been wrong and that no one can rebel against the Holy One and be his own master, it was necessary to harden Pharaoh's heart during the last five plagues, withholding his free choice so that he would act in accordance with God's will and not in accordance with his own. This is the meaning of the "playing" with Pharaoh, and this explains the negotiations with him and the running back and forth to him over and over: God wanted to show Pharaoh that he was nothing more than a pawn in the Divine plan, and that God was able to remove the free choice from someone who had undertaken to rebel against Him.

The Rambam, in the last chapter of his "Shemonah Perakim," writes as follows:

"You may ask why he (Moshe) asked of him (Pharaoh) to send out Israel time after time, but he (Pharaoh) was prevented from doing so and the plagues befell him but he was steadfast in his refusal... surely there was no point in asking him (Pharaoh) something that he was unable to do!

But this too was done out of God's wisdom, to show him that if God chose to cancel his free choice, then He would do so. He said to him, 'I will demand of you to send them out, and if you were to send them out, you would be saved. But you will not send them until you are destroyed.' … This was also a great sign for all of humanity, as we read, 'In order that My Name be told throughout the land' (Shemot 9:16) – that it is possible for God to punish a person by preventing him from being able to do something, and for the person thereby to know and to be unable to bring himself back to that choice."

This was an important lesson that was also learned from the exodus. It is not mentioned at the Seder since it is not connected to the salvation of Am Yisrael, but it is important in its own right. We learn from this that a person who degenerates morally can deteriorate from the level of a human to the level of an automaton. He may perform illogical actions and lose control of his own conduct; in fact, his free choice has been removed from him. This is both a consequence of his immoral behavior and attitudes, as well as a punishment for them. Only conscious moral improvement can prevent this eventuality.