

When God first calls Jeremiah to prophesy in the first chapter of the book, the young Jeremiah is understandably frightened. He says, “Ah, Lord GOD! I don’t know how to speak, For I am still a boy!” “Do not say, ‘I am still a boy,’” God responds, “But go wherever I send you / And speak whatever I command you. / Have no fear of them, / For I am with you” (Jer. 1:6–8). The young lad does not yet know that he will endure prison, barely escape death, and end his career in exile, but he knows that prophecy is hard, and he knows enough to be afraid. But he clearly was not expecting God’s description of the prophetic mission:

See, I appoint you this day over nations and kingdoms: to uproot and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant. (Jer. 1:10)

The mission given to Jeremiah is no doubt an incredible burden, but there is also a positive aspiration here—God’s plans go beyond the austere demands of justice. Pharaoh’s punishment taught the Egyptians of the power of God and ensured the Israelites freedom from Egyptian domination beyond the Exodus. Similarly, Jeremiah was reassured that destruction is necessary for the eventual “building” and “planting” of a new future. Though demolition is a sometimes-necessary part of our world, may we be blessed to also taste the fruits that grow from the ruins.

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To Destroy and to Overthrow, to Build and to Plant

**Rabbi Marcus Mordecai Schwartz, Director,
Matthew Eisenfeld and Sara Duker Beit Midrash;
Assistant Professor of Talmud and Rabbinics, JTS**

The LORD replied to Moses, “See, I place you in the role of God to Pharaoh, with your brother Aaron as your prophet. You shall repeat all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall speak to Pharaoh to let the Israelites depart from his land. But I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, that I may multiply My signs and marvels in the land of Egypt. When Pharaoh does not heed you, I will lay My hand upon Egypt and deliver My ranks, My people the Israelites, from the land of Egypt with extraordinary chastisements. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch out My hand over Egypt and bring out the Israelites from their midst.” (Exod. 7:1–5)

For me, this is one of the most troubling passages in the Torah. First, God assigns Moses and Aaron the task of speaking to Pharaoh, explicitly calling Aaron a prophet. Presumably, a prophet tells people what could come to pass, so that they have the opportunity to repent their sins and turn toward God. One famous illustration of this paradigm is Jonah’s mission to Nineveh. Troubled as Jonah may be that his predictions did not come true for the Ninevites, nonetheless, his mission was a successful one. He managed to convince the Ninevites to end their evil ways, and walk instead on the path of justice and righteousness (Jonah 3).

But here, in our passage in Exodus 7, God seems to take away the possibility of a successful prophetic mission from Moses and Aaron. Instead of allowing Pharaoh to repent his wicked ways, God declares that He will harden Pharaoh’s heart, with the aim of increasing the signs and wonders that He will do in Egypt. This strikes me as an odd Divine pursuit: taking away a human being’s free will

so that more spectacular miracles can be done. But as God goes on to describe what He will do to the Egyptians, it begins to feel out and out unjust: He will enact upon them *גְּדֹלִים שְׁפָטִים*—great chastisements—as he brings the children of Israel forth from Egypt. Indeed, the violence and horror of the plagues that we see in this and next week’s parashah bear out this Divine promise.

It seems that none of the plagues would have been necessary had Moses and Aaron’s prophetic mission to Pharaoh been successful. None of the pain and suffering endured by the Egyptians should have been necessary, had Pharaoh simply been convinced by Moses and Aaron. Put simply, why does God not allow Pharaoh to truly hear Moses and Aaron’s words and repent?

This truly difficult conundrum is actually magnified when we look at the descriptions of the classical prophets’ call to mission. Isaiah 6 is perhaps one of the most important chapters in the prophets. Here the most prolific of the prophets is called by God to his mission as prophet. He receives his call in the midst of a vision of the celestial Temple. God is seated on His throne, the seraphim flying about, declaring God’s glory with the words, “Holy, holy, holy, the Lord of hosts, the whole world is filled with his glory.” In the midst of these overwhelming circumstances Isaiah overhears God ask, “Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?” And he volunteers, saying “Here am I; send me.” But what Isaiah hears next is undoubtedly difficult and demoralizing. God says,

Go, say to that people:
 ‘Hear, indeed, but do not understand;
 See, indeed, but do not grasp.’
 Dull that people’s mind,
 Stop its ears,
 And seal its eyes—
 Lest, seeing with its eyes
 And hearing with its ears,
 It also grasp with its mind,
 And repent and save itself. (Isa. 6:9–10)

Isaiah is not meant to induce the people to *repent* with Divine words. Instead, they are to hear his words but fail to grasp them, to see his prophetic acts but fail to understand them. Apparently, God does not want the people to save themselves through repentance. We can almost hear the tears in Isaiah’s

voice in his response, “How long, my Lord?” And God’s reply only makes matters worse, “Till towns lie waste without inhabitants / And houses without people, / And the ground lies waste and desolate” (Isa. 6:11–13). It seems that God wants the people to suffer the desolation that results from their sins. It is as if what they have done is so awful that God cannot in good conscience allow them to repent.

And indeed, near the beginning of the *Mishneh Torah*, in his Laws of Repentance (6:3), Maimonides posits this very reason:

And, it is possible that a man should commit either one grievous iniquity or a multitude of sins so that the Judge of Truth will decree against him that, whereas this sinner committed those sins of his own free will and consciously, repentance should be withheld from him altogether, and grant him no leave to repent, so that he might die and perish in the iniquity he committed. This is what the Holy One said through Isaiah . . .

Some sins are so unforgivably bad, some deeds so without redemption, Maimonides claims, that justice and fairness demand that the corrupt criminal must be forced to pay the piper. Repentance under such circumstances would allow those truly deserving of punishment to escape free of the pain and suffering that they have caused others. God hardened Pharaoh’s heart, according to Maimonides, because, “at the beginning he sinned of his own free will, and meted out evil to Israel who sojourned in his land” (Ibid.). The avarice and the deceit, the callousness and the cruelty that Pharaoh displayed against Israel demand that Pharaoh be punished. This may sound harsh, but I think Maimonides would agree with the notion that without justice, there can be no peace. He explains rightly, I think, that the wicked must account for their deeds, especially when they sit on the throne, clothed in great power.

The job of a prophet is not an easy one. Sometimes the prophet’s mission is to induce the people to repent. Sometimes it is to pray on their behalf, so that the Divine anger is quieted and the people can escape God’s wrath. But sometimes the prophet’s job is to overturn and destroy. Dietrich Bonhoeffer is credited with saying that the job of religion is to comfort the troubled and trouble the comfortable. Neither of those tasks is easy, but at least the first is more palatable. We don’t like to see religion, especially prophetic religion, as a wrecking ball. But sometimes it can be, and legitimately so.