

## 929 Exodus Chapter 7

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929, the number of chapters in Tanakh, is a project dedicated to creating a global Jewish conversation. 929 invites Jews everywhere to read Tanakh, one chapter a day, together with a website of pluralistic interpretations from a wide range of contributors, including JTS rabbinical students. Here is a past contribution from this week's parashah. Visit [929.org.il](http://929.org.il) to learn more.

This chapter opens with a most unusual verse: “Then God said to Moses, ‘Behold, I have placed you as [a] God (*Elohim*) to Pharaoh, and Aaron your brother as your prophet.’” Even for God, this is a bold claim. How can a person be “as a god” to another person, or even be a god to another person? Can we learn from this verse what it means to be God?

Elsewhere in the Torah, what most distinguishes God from humanity is God's control over life and death. The God of the Torah has some human attributes, but cannot be born and can never die. God's power in the Torah comes from God's ability to control fertility, birth, and death for the people of the Torah. Yet in this brief interaction, God is sharing God's most distinguishing characteristic with Moses, and granting Moses the power to control Pharaoh's, and the Egyptians', life through his speech. Moses is burdened with an awesome and tremendous responsibility—should he fail to convince Pharaoh to release the Israelites (and he will surely fail, for God will continually harden Pharaoh's heart), Moses will personally be responsible for the death of thousands of Egyptians. Hardly a balm to Moses's nerves, God's statement that Moses will be “as God to Pharaoh” teaches us what a tremendous breach of the human-Divine partnership it is to take another human life.

Ordinarily, only God is allowed to decide when a person will be born and when they will die—a common sentiment to anyone familiar with the High Holiday liturgy. Perhaps by granting Moses a limited access to this power, God is reminding us of this most Godly attribute. Even God's prophets can only communicate God's will. Ultimately, only Godself can make the decision to bring a person into the world or take them out of it, and it is our role as humans to respect God's decisions and relish in the time we are given.

Va'era 5780

וארא תש"ף



## Finding Freedom

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A moment of great tragedy occurs in this week's Torah reading, although it is not a moment that many people focus on when they read these chapters. There is so much drama in this story, so many scenes that we can visualize either because we've seen them acted out on stage or in a movie (or perhaps in our dining room during a Passover Seder), or because they are powerful moments that speak to our connection with one of the pivotal Jewish moments, that many people pass over (pun intended!) the quieter elements of the story.

And yet, near the beginning of the Torah reading, immediately following God telling Moses about the eventual redemption from Egypt, we read the following, “But when Moses told this to the Israelites, they would not listen to Moses, their spirits crushed by cruel bondage (Exod. 6:9)”. The tragedy is not *that* the Israelites did not listen to Moses, the tragedy is *why* they would not listen to Moses. Slavery had beat them down to such an extent that they could not imagine what freedom looked like. Slavery had damaged them so greatly that when freedom was dangled in front of them, they could not for the life of them understand what it truly meant.

**At this moment in their collective lives, the Israelites were struggling with an issue that many of us can recognize—they could not see what was right in front of them.** Have you ever had that experience? Have you ever finally left a job or ended a painful relationship and then realized that everyone around you saw the truth of the situation long before you could see it? More amorphous than any physical object and yet infinitely more important, freedom is difficult for many of us to grasp, especially those of us who have never lived without it.

In our Torah reading, the ability to not see what is right in front of you is illustrated by the dilemma of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. The Torah tells us that God hardened Pharaoh's heart during the saga of the ten plagues. If this is so, then how can Pharaoh be held responsible for not letting the Israelites go and forcing his country to undergo undue suffering at the hands of the Israelite God? Why couldn't Pharaoh see early in the story (after the first or second plague) that the situation was futile and that he should just give up and let the Israelites go?

The Torah provides us with one answer to this question. If you pay close attention to the wording of the plagues, you will see that for the first five plagues, Pharaoh hardens his own heart. God only hardens his heart with plagues six through 10. How does this fact provide us with an answer? In this transition from Pharaoh hardening his own heart to God hardening his heart, maybe we are seeing the ancient equivalent of cognitive dissonance, of Pharaoh going so far down a path of thought and behavior (as evidenced in his choosing to act a certain way following plagues one through five) that he caused himself to lose his free will!

As Rambam wrote in his introduction to *Pirkei Avot*, "In other words, they sinned of their own free will, till they forfeited the opportunity of repentance." (*Shemonah Perakim*, Ch. 8) Have you ever felt that you had gone so far down a road of behavior, making certain choices, that you honestly could not see a way out, that you could not see an alternative? Maybe that is what happened to Pharaoh.

A second answer is supplied by Rashi, who understands plagues six through 10 (in which God hardened Pharaoh's heart) as being punishment for Pharaoh and the Egyptians. God needed to show Pharaoh that God was in charge. God needed Pharaoh to see that, contrary to Egyptian culture and religion, Pharaoh was not a god, and that the Israelite God, our God, had all of the power.

It is difficult to imagine a world that is different from the world we are currently living in. It must have been extremely painful for Pharaoh to realize that the worldview on which he was raised, the worldview that allowed Israelite slavery and that understood Egyptian power, and especially the prestige of the Pharaoh, to be absolute, was crumbling to the ground. And yet, we still wonder how he could not see the truth. In next week's Torah reading, Pharaoh's courtiers say this to him in words that ring

out thousands of years later, "Are you not yet aware that Egypt is lost? (10:7)"

He did not realize that all was lost; because Pharaoh could not see what was in front of him, he could not see the truth of the situation that was staring him in the face because it was too difficult to do so, too painful, too harsh a reality for him to face.

When Moses told the Israelites that God would free them, they did not believe him because they had been slaves for so long they could not imagine a reality any different from the one they were living. And yet, courageous people throughout history remind us that freedom is a state of mind that we can grasp on to even when our bodies cannot experience it.

Perhaps we think of the great Jewish hero, Natan Sharansky, who told the story many times of how he felt free many years before he was released from solitary confinement because he had decided that he would be free in his mind, even though his body was held captive by the KGB. Or perhaps we find inspiration in the story of the late Senator John McCain, who was held captive by North Vietnam for several years during the Vietnam War. Senator McCain held on to his sanity, at least in part, by repeating to himself these words from his favorite poem, "Invictus," by William Ernest Henley, "It matters not how strait the gate, how charged with punishments the scroll, I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul."

We must never allow ourselves to fall victim like Pharaoh, victim either to our own evil or to losing sight of what is around us. With effort and with the constant search for clarity and understanding, we will hold on to the great human gift of freedom, and decide for ourselves, hoping to have the strength of Sharansky and McCain, to use our freedom for good, and to inspire truth and liberty for ourselves and for those around us.

The publication and distribution of the *JTS Parashah Commentary* are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee (z"l) and Harold Hassenfeld (z"l).