



Shevat 5781

Torah Thoughts from the YIGC Community

How is a Person Like a Tree?

Sarah Rudolph

Devarim 20:19 warns against destroying fruit trees during a siege, placing trees alongside humans in a phrase of uncertain punctuation. The phrase might be interpreted as a rhetorical question: “Is the tree of the field a person [and potential enemy threat]?!” Alternatively, it can be read as a statement: “For a person is a tree of the field.” If the latter, trees and humans do have something in common – and indeed, trees serve as metaphors for various aspects of humanity all over Tanach.

For instance, the first *perek* of Tehillim advises, “Fortunate is the man who does not follow the advice of the wicked...” (Note that “wicked” sounds like a strong word but can include a huge spectrum of lesser evils. In fact, long ago I developed an appreciation for this *pasuk* as a mantra in the face of adolescent peer pressure, though rarely in matters of true wickedness.) The person described in this *pasuk* focuses on Hashem’s Torah instead, and as the third *pasuk* in that *perek* states, is compared to a “tree planted upon streams of water...and everything such a one does will succeed.”

The Gemara (Avoda Zara 19a) notes that *shatul* – the word used for “planted” – really means transplanted. The school of Rabbi Yannai explains that in this *pasuk*, *shatul* describes a person who learns Torah from multiple teachers. Rather than planting him/herself firmly in one place (*natua*), a person becomes *shatul*

by going around to varied sources of “water” – i.e. Torah – and **that** is the secret of success.

But isn’t that dangerous? If we seek wisdom from many sources, don’t we risk learning from the wrong crowd and following “the advice of the wicked”?

The answer seems to be that yes, there is a risk; one cannot simply plant oneself anywhere and expect to thrive. We might encounter wickedness, and we may find it challenging to recognize and avoid that influence. However, it’s a challenge we must face in order to succeed, because the alternative – putting down roots in just one source of Torah that might prove too shallow to sustain us – is simply not viable.

To truly grow, we must send our roots into the world to gather nourishment, and we must do so with a sense of nuance and discernment. (See also Ta’anit 7a, which interprets the *pasuk* in Devarim to mean one should learn only from a Torah scholar who is “proper.”)

As we rise to that challenge, we can also build an inner wellspring full of wisdom that accompanies us wherever we go – **as if** we are planted by a never-ending stream of it. Fortunate is the one who finds such rich, complex – and portable – nourishment for the soul.

Decision-Making in Times of Stress

Michael Kurin

It’s 2:00 AM and I’m working on a project with a fast-approaching deadline, but I’m starting to lose focus. I set my alarm for 5:00 and ask my wife to make sure I get up so I can squeeze in some more work before the day starts. 5:00 AM comes, but I don’t respond to the alarm. My wife reminds me I wanted to wake up to get work done, but in my exhaustion, I tell her to ignore what I said last night, and I go back to sleep. Which of these decisions represents the “real” me?

This is a complicated philosophical question that can’t be fully answered on one page, but I believe we can gain some insight from the *parshiyot* we read this time of year. Starting after the 6th plague,¹ the Torah explicitly states that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart, effectively preventing him from letting the people go. Numerous scholars have discussed the implications of this divine interference in light of the concept of free will and the appropriateness of punishment. How can it be, they ask, that God can both interfere with a person’s decision and also punish him/her for the decision he/she made?

Many of the explanations given can be split into two camps. The Rambam’s view² is that Pharaoh’s free will was indeed taken away from him, as part of his punishment. Some people are so evil that they lose their basic right to have free will, at least temporarily, to prevent their repentance and allow them to receive the complete punishment they deserve. The other camp includes R’ Saadya Gaon,³ R’ Yosef Albo,⁴ and the Sforno,⁵ who suggest that Pharaoh’s free will was actually not taken away. They explain that without any outside influence, the physical and emotional pressure from the plagues would have led Pharaoh to set the Israelites free, essentially under duress. God did not want to give him credit for doing the right thing for the wrong reason, so ironically, God hardened Pharaoh’s heart to *restore* his free will and allow him to make a “level-headed” decision about letting the people go.

Why would the Rambam, a champion of the fundamental importance of free will to Judaism, take the approach that robs Pharaoh of his free will instead of this alternative? There are

many ways to answer this question. As several Rishonim suggest,⁶ the value of everyone having free will all the time had to be weighed against God's desire to punish Pharaoh in spectacular fashion. God has the right to take away free will for the greater purpose of glorifying His own name through the miracles with which He extracted the Jews from Egypt. Alternatively, Rabbi Shalom Carmy⁷ understands the Rambam to mean that Pharaoh's inveterate sinning psychologically made him lose the ability to choose naturally. In effect, his heart was hardened, but this was a consequence of his own choices, not an external force removing his free will. It is as if he became addicted to refusing Moshe's requests to set the Jews free.

I want to share one additional explanation. I believe one can look at the entire debate from a different angle, in a way that sheds light on the question we started with. If, according to R' Saadya Gaon and his camp, Pharaoh needed his heart hardened to restore his free will, that implies that a decision to free the Israelites under the stress of the plagues would not have been an expression of his free will. It must be that a "true" autonomous decision is only one that is not under duress. They would say that my level-headed plan to wake up early in the morning was something I decided autonomously, but perhaps my renegeing of that plan was not.

By disagreeing with that viewpoint, the Rambam implies that had Pharaoh freed the people due to the plagues, it would have been considered an expression of his free will and could have absolved him from further punishment. Apparently, for the Rambam, even decisions made under tremendous stress can still be considered a representation of our free will. The Rambam would say that the level-headed plan to wake up in the morning was me, but so was my exhausted, ignoring-the-alarm self.

So why did the Rambam take the approach he did? By insisting that God took Pharaoh's free will away in this situation, the Rambam indicates that if He hadn't done so, the choices that Pharaoh made under enormous pressure would indeed have been made with free will. Rambam is therefore able to maintain that decisions made under duress are still expressions of free will. Ironically, and contrary to what it seems on first blush, the Rambam's view actually might be the more appropriate one for a champion of free will. Taking away Pharaoh's free will means that we get to keep ours under all circumstances.

The idea that even our most pressured decisions are still wholly our own is an empowering and expansive understanding of free will. And what is true regarding negative decisions, such as sleeping through an alarm, is certainly true about positive decisions as well. Many of us may sometimes feel that we decide to do good only because our community, or someone specific, pushed us to do it. We might get discouraged, but that would be selling ourselves short. The Rambam would still give us full credit for those decisions. As R' Mordechai Eliyahu wrote in a different context, sometimes you need a little push to get to a place where you can make an inspired decision. When that happens, there's no need to think that that inspired decision isn't wholly your own.⁸

Notes:

¹ Shemot 9:12.

² *Hilchot Teshuva* 6:2-3.

³ *Ha'emunot V'hadeot* 4:6.

⁴ *Sefer Ha'ikarim, ma'amar* 5.

⁵ Shemot 7:3.

⁶ See Ramban on Shemot 7:3 (second explanation), for example.

⁷ Told to me in personal correspondence.

⁸ <https://www.yeshiva.org.il/midrash/4645>.

*This month's issue of Clilei HaChodesh is sponsored
in memory of*

Dr. Baruch and Mrs. Ita Kaufman

ברוך שעי' בן חיים הלוי
איטא רייזל בת שמעון

Moish & Hindy Goldfinger & family

Rabbi Moshe Berger

Scholar in Residence

(216) 533-5233

moshe@mberger.com

Sarah Rudolph

Editor

(216) 291-8918

scdrudolph@gmail.com

Ronnie Shulman

Sponsorships

(614) 507-3855

rshulman1@gmail.com

YOUNG ISRAEL OF GREATER CLEVELAND

Rabbi Naphtali Burnstein, *Rabbi*

Rabbi Aharon Lebovics, *Associate Rabbi (Hebrew Academy)*

Yank Gecovich, *President*

Beachwood Branch
2463 S. Green Road
Beachwood, Ohio 44122



Hebrew Academy Branch
1860 S. Taylor Road
Cleveland Heights, Ohio 44118