Free Will?--Thoughts for Parashat Bo

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Bo

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Many years ago, a member of our community was arrested for embezzling funds. He was generally a religiously observant man and attended services each Shabbat morning faithfully.

I asked him how he got involved in illegal financial dealings, especially when he was ostensibly a religious man who knew that the Torah prohibits theft. He answered: “I thought I could get away with it. I thought my plan was so brilliant no one would ever catch on.” I responded: “Yes, but you can’t hide things from God.” He nodded his head sadly. “I wasn’t thinking about God.”

In further discussions with him, he indicated how he got deeper and deeper into the crime. First, he just cheated a bit; when he got away with it, he tried again for a larger amount. When he still went undetected, he developed a more elaborate scheme involving substantial amounts of money. Eventually, his system was so routine that he took it for granted that it would go on forever. But finally, he did get caught and his entire plan (and life!) fell apart.

At each step of his embezzlement scheme, he had the free will to stop. But his free will diminished with every new illegal act. Before making his first illegal transaction, he could have caught himself. But he didn’t. After making his first theft, he could have stopped. But he didn’t. Indeed, after each step in the process, he got deeper and deeper into the crime so that it became almost impossible for him to stop. The more entrenched he was in his scheme, the less free will he had to reverse course.

Using biblical terms, we might say that he initially "hardened his heart" to begin cheating. But as he sank deeper and deeper into the process, it was as though the Lord hardened his heart making it exceedingly difficult for him to repent.

Maimonides pointed out that one of the punishments for certain types of sins is the impossibility (or near impossibility) of repentance. The sinner is so mired in sin that he/she can’t seem to stop. The sin has become second nature; it is hardened within and not able to be dislodged. It is as though the Lord has hardened the heart so as to prevent repentance. (Laws of Repentance 6:1-3).

This is how Maimonides, and others, understand the Torah’s statement that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart. Pharaoh, of his own free will, kept the Israelites enslaved. Of his own free will, he oppressed them and maintained a cruel system of dehumanization. With each choice, he made it more and more difficult for himself to change course. He reached the point where his heart was so hardened that he

simply could not bring himself to repent.

This lesson applies to so many aspects of life. We make a problematic choice of our own free will, but this leads to the next negative choice and then to yet another…until it becomes exceedingly difficult to repent. Free will diminishes with each negative choice.

As a mundane example, a person is told that good health requires not eating overly fattening food. One day the person walks by a bakery and sees a tempting chocolate cake in the window. He/she can choose to keep walking but instead decides to stop and look at the cake. Then a process begins: what if I just walk into the bakery to look more closely at the cake; what if I buy it but bring it home for family to eat; what if I bring it home and just take a small taste…Finally, why don't I just eat a big chunk of cake and go on a diet tomorrow? When did the person "lose" free will? It was a process, one step leading to the next, inexorably leading to eating a large slice of chocolate cake.

The Talmud teaches that the reward of a mitzvah is another mitzvah while the consequence of a sin is another sin. We set patterns for ourselves. We initially have free will to choose, and our first choice leads us to our next choice. If we set a positive pattern, we continuously improve ourselves. If we set a negative pattern, we "harden" our own hearts so that it becomes difficult to change for the better.

Every choice has consequences. It is our free will to choose wisely.