

SHABBAT SERMON
JANUARY 5, 2008
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The Choice in 2008

The year 2007 ended with Time Magazine choosing Vladimir Putin, the President of Russia, as the Man of the Year. I'm not sure God would have agreed with that choice! What I do know for sure is that all of us as Americans enter the year 2008 with the Presidential election on the horizon, and who we choose will have a profound affect on the future of our country and the world community.

To help you with your choice I want to study with you a verse from this morning's Torah portion. It is one of the most difficult, one of the most controversial, one of the most debatable, verses in all the Torah. The Jews had been enslaved in Egypt. God says He will now redeem them by bringing plagues on Pharaoh and the Egyptians to make sure they "let my people go." Five plagues are brought, and each time the Torah tells us: "And Pharaoh's heart was hardened. He refused to let the Jewish people go." But then comes the sixth plague and the rest that follow, and it no longer says: "And *Pharaoh* hardened his heart." Instead it says, "Vayichazek Hashem et leiv Paroh – And *God* hardened Pharaoh's heart."

It is impossible to describe the many questions and answers this phrase gave rise to over the centuries. Every Biblical commentator, from Rashi and Rambam to Benno Jacobs and Eric Fromm attempt to explain it. The difficulty is obvious: if God hardened Pharaoh's heart, then how could Pharaoh be punished for what he did? He had no choice. Perhaps he wanted to let the Jews go, but God hardened his heart. The Midrash puts the question succinctly when it says, "Rabbi Yochanan said: Does this not provide heretics with ground for argument that he had no means of repenting, since it says 'for I have hardened his heart?' Good question! And, unfortunately, for the most part, the question is better than the answers that are given. The answers range from the extreme – that God hardened his heart as a counterpoint to the plagues so that if and when he repented, it would be on his own choice. Others go to the extreme of saying that God hardened his heart because he didn't want him to repent.

For me, one of the best answers for this theologic predicament is found in the Midrash where Rab Yochanan asked the question and his colleague, Reish Lakish, replied: "Let the mouths of the heretics be stopped up ... when God warns a man once, twice and even a third time, and he still does not repent, then does God close his heart against repentance for that he should exact vengeance from him for his sins." One rabbi read these words in a rather novel, unique and important way. According to this rabbi's understanding of Reish Lakish, God hardened Pharaoh's heart not so that he would be able to punish him; no, God hardened his heart because that was the punishment! Five times Pharaoh had the opportunity to repent and he didn't do it. And it was not that there were to be another five plagues to punish him; there was to be another five plagues where Pharaoh would have no choice. That was his punishment. In Jewish law, five swings and you're out! God hardened Pharaoh's heart not as a means to an end, but that *was* the end! Pharaoh's decision to enslave the Jewish people was his free choice. His punishment was to have his free choice revoked.

This was a punishment measure for measure. Pharaoh considered himself a god who could do whatever he wanted. Many commentators say that when the Torah tells us that man was

created “in the image of God,” that means God gave man the “god-like” attribute of free will. Pharaoh was punished by having this god-like attribute taken from him.

Jewish tradition is based on the concept of b’chirat chofshi – free choice. No greater punishment can be given a person than to have that free choice taken from them. And yet, with Time Magazine’s choice of Vladimir Putin as Man of the Year, attention must be paid to the fact that while Mr. Putin has certainly returned Russia to the world stage, it has come at a price. Putin has helped put Russia back on its feet by arresting dissidents, by closing newspapers, by rewarding friends, by stifling dissent. And the Russian people go along with this! Time Magazine’s article on Vladimir Putin was entitled, “Choosing Order Before Freedom,” and it went on to say, “He stands above all for stability – stability before freedom, stability before choice, stability in a country that has hardly seen it for 100 years.” The Russian people have forfeited their free will, their freedom of choice. And they’re not the only ones. There are many people in this world who don’t want to be put into a position of having to make any choices. Many of them become religious fundamentalists ... all choices are made for them. Indeed, the word “Islam” means “submission” ... giving up one’s free will to a higher authority. In Islam there is no “wrestling with God,” there is not questioning. There is no choice!

We should thank God that we live in a country where there can be freedom and stability and growth and prosperity without giving up our freedom. But it’s not easy. Sometimes difficult choices have to be made, and I believe that the Presidential election of 2008 is one such time. So much time is wasted on discussing the small issues and foibles and flaws of each of the candidates. But the reality is there are major issues that is dividing our country; major issues that, in large part, separate the Democratic candidates from the Republican candidates ... major issues where we – the American people – have to make a choice. We were reminded of one with the recent assassination of Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan. Her brutal slaying reminded us – if we needed any reminding – that we are living in an age of terrorism, that the destiny of a country, the destiny of the world, can be affected by one person who seeks to be a martyr. The world has never confronted an enemy like this. Benazir Bhutto was in a well guarded, military garrison. It was as if she would have been assassinated at West Point. It seems as if there is no way to prevent it. And it’s even more difficult to retaliate ... retaliate against whom? In WWII there was a Tokyo and a Berlin. In the Cold War there was Moscow. Where do you retaliate now? And retaliate against what – a religious ideology? And how? As the military historian, Victor Davis Hanson, has put it: “We are fighting an enemy with unsophisticated weapons which “permit illiterate teenagers to kill an American Army officer with a quarter million dollar education from West Point, riding in a hundred thousand dollar Humvee.” Yes, it is a different kind of enemy in a different kind of war, requiring different kinds of tactics, which leads to one of the great issues of our day. The issue? In this era of terrorism, the issue is the conflict between security on one hand, and human rights on the other. When they are in conflict which takes precedence? In confronting an unconventional enemy, how unconventional can we be in response?

These questions were debated On Dec. 17th of this year at the Hebrew University, pitting a great Israeli legal scholar against a great American legal scholar. The Israeli was the retired Supreme Court President, Justice Aharon Barak. The American was Judge Richard Posner from the U.S. Court of Appeals in Chicago. Both are considered amongst the great legal scholars of our day. Barak argued that human rights come first; he believes that courts must uphold human rights as much during wartime as during peace because once we curb civil liberties it is hard to restore them, as happened in Nazi Germany. Justice Posner argued that the most basic human right is the right to security, and therefore security must be given the highest priority. He went on to point out that during the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln suspended Habeas Corpus, which

protects individual liberties. But it was restored as soon as the emergency the War had created ended.

What do you think ... human rights or security? Which one takes precedence? Well, you better start thinking about it because after all is said and done, resolving that issue may very well be the most important question facing our country. Abu Ghraib, Guantonomo, airport security, passenger profiling, military courts, waterboarding and torture, Presidential power ... these are all part of the debate regarding human rights vs. security. And there are differences of opinion; differences between Republicans and Democrats with one group agreeing with Justice Barak – human rights come first, and the other siding with Justice Posner – security considerations come first.

What do I think? That doesn't matter. What matters is what do you think? If you lived in Russia, you don't have to make this choice. Mr. Putin will make it for you! Thank God we live in America ... the land of the free and home of the brave. It sometimes requires being brave in order to be free. It requires making difficult choices. But that's the way it is in life. At the end of life frequently these days a choice has to be made between "death with dignity" and the "sanctity of human life." All through life we all have choices to make and sometimes the choice comes down to being honest or being wealthy ... being loyal or playing games ... being likeable or being successful ... sometimes we can have both, but not often. Usually in life we can't have it all, so we have choices to make. And the ability to make those choices is what makes us in the image of God.

Pharaoh lost his right to choose. And the Russian people have given up that right. But we – the American people – have it! Let us learn to choose wisely, and then the prayer we recited this morning ushering in a new month will be fulfilled; we'll be blessed with a chaim sh'yimalu mishalos libeinu l'tovah – a life in which all the desires of our heart will be fulfilled for good." Amen.

Sermons/010508

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