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TRAPPED? NOT TRAPPED!

ONE OF THE MOST FRIGHTENING FEELINGS IS THAT OF BEING TRAPPED. There is no way out. Blocked on all sides. It is a situation which might occur, G-d forbid, in literal, physical terms, in a context of violence or war. It is also one which might arise in terms of the turns and twists of a career, or of difficult human relationships. Being trapped is also something which might happen to a person inside his or her own mind and heart. Trapped, unable to move freely. Stuck. Like Pharaoh King of Egypt, in the Sedra¹ this week.

In which way was he trapped? Surely, Pharaoh was the oppressor of the Jews, they were trapped and not he?

The Sedra begins by telling us that G-d has hardened Pharaoh's heart. Because of this, Pharaoh is *unable* to respond to the warnings given by Moses, and to the series of plagues, one after the other. G-d had trapped Pharaoh into a position of defiance, and seemingly there was nothing the Egyptian king could do. He had to follow his own course inexorably leading to destruction.



In Loving Memory of David Dattner ז"ל
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117 GEORGE STREET, LONDON W1H 7HF
 cru@lubavitchuk.com - www.chabadresearch.org

Our Sages comment on this. How is this possible? Surely G-d grants free will? Is it fair to punish Pharaoh if his refusal to recognise G-d is forced upon him - by G-d Himself?

An explanation of this puzzle is given by the Rambam. The hardening of Pharaoh's heart was itself a punishment for his cruel treatment of the Jewish people². When a person does bad, he gets trapped into a position from which he cannot escape. This itself is part of the punishment for his crime.

Thus we find a story in the Talmud about a rabbi, named Elisha the son of Abuya but called 'Acher', meaning the 'other one', who left the path of Jewish teaching. Many reasons are given for this, including the influence of Greek culture, perplexity at the suffering of the innocent and drawing the wrong conclusions from a mystical experience. Consequently he stopped keeping Jewish law. Then, at a certain point in his wayward life he heard a heavenly voice say: "Repent, wayward children - *except for Acher*"³. He later gave this as an excuse for the fact that he never repented.

The exclusion of Acher from the general invitation to repent was itself part of his punishment, as in the case of Pharaoh.

However, Jewish teaching in all its different dimensions is not so simple. An important commentary on the Talmud, discussing the case of Acher, states: "However, he should not have taken any notice of this.... Because *Nothing stands before Repentance*"⁴.

Chassidic teachings tell us that however deeply a person has sunk, and even if it seems that G-d has trapped him in his own evil - repentance is always possible. It might be more difficult than usual, even much more difficult - but it is always possible. Trapped? No, not trapped. Anyone, even the ancient Pharaoh., can always break out of the trap and return to G-d. We are always free⁵.

1. Exodus 10¹-13:16. 2. Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance, 6:3. See Midrash Shemot Rabbah 13:4. 3. Hagigah 15a. 4. Maharsha on Hagigah 15a. 5. See Tanya 31b, 100b, and the Lubavitcher Rebbe's *Likkutei Sichot* vol.6 p.57ff.

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SEDRA BO

REDEEMING THE FIRSTBORN

We all looked rather sombre as we drove that morning down the quiet roads on the way to Middlesex Hospital, We were going to visit Aunty Rachel, my Dad's sister, who'd had a baby boy exactly a month ago. Of course, mazal tov's and smiles were all round as everybody celebrated the first-born for Rachel and Martin, who only got married a year ago. Until, a few days later, we heard the news.

The baby was not very well, the doctors said, something was wrong and he would have to stay in the hospital for a while. We went to see him and he didn't look so bad, but still the doctors said they needed to do tests and other things. They told us to pray, so that's what we did. For the whole month, every night before eating we all said a chapter of psalms together. Father said, 'If we pray then G-d listens'. I hope he is right. The Brit had to be postponed.

Now, Dad, Mom, Dina (my sister), and Martin were on the way to the hospital to visit Rachel and the baby. 'Did you bring the get-well card for the baby?' my dad asked me as we turned the corner into the hospital. 'Yes,' I said, taking it out of my pocket and handing it to him.

'David!' my Dad said in surprise. 'Yes?' I said. 'You haven't got the card here, you've brought along some notes from class instead! Now what are we going to do with these?' Dad said looking down at the papers. Suddenly I noticed

something caught his eye. I peered over to see what Dad was looking at. It wasn't the card at all - I must have left it at home.

Dad read aloud, 'The tenth plague was Makat Bechorot. All of the Egyptian first-born sons died at midnight. However, G-d saved all the Jewish firstborn. To remember this G-d commanded the Jews to redeem every firstborn son. This means that 30 days after the firstborn boy is born, the father of the child goes to a Cohen, a priest, whom he chooses and he gives him an amount of money, which then redeems the child so that it belongs to the father again. This is called Pidyan Haben, Redemption of the Firstborn Son.'

'That means that we need to redeem my son today!' said Martin who had been listening closely. 'With all the worry about his health I forgot to mention it to you! But I spoke with the Rabbi and in fact it is all organised. When we get to the hospital my friend Joel Cohen will be there, and we will be doing the Pidyan Haben today.'

An hour later we were again in the car, only now we had been to the hospital. The Rabbi's wife had brought food for the Pidyan Haben meal, the Rabbi brought five silver coins, which Martin gave to the Cohen in a kind of ceremony. Then we all said mazaltov and began driving home.

Suddenly Martin's mobile rang, it was Rachel. '..What? Are you sure?' he shouted excitedly. 'You won't believe this,' he said after he switched off the phone, his face shining with happiness, 'the doctors have just told Rachel that they have just got the results of some tests and the baby is perfectly healthy. In fact, so much so that both are coming home tonight... !'

I laughed happily, 'I guess we won't be needing that get-well card after all', I said to my father. 'No,' he said merrily, 'the notes about redeeming the firstborn were just fine...'

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