I don't know about you all, but this secular New Year's, which I spent with my in-laws in Minnesota, I was a complete fuddy duddy. I had dinner with the family and went to bed at 10:30 pm. I also didn't make any New Year's resolutions, because, to be honest, I feel like I went through that in September with Rosh Hashanah, and the low energy time of mid-winter has never felt to me like an auspicious time to take on a new resolution.

But in light of the fact that this week's parashah, Va'era, fell the week of the secular New Year, I couldn't help but think about resolutions as I read the parashah. A new year's resolution is an expression of free will, a statement of faith that no matter how I have behaved in the past, I am capable of change.

And as every bat or bar mitzvah student who encounters this parashah notices, Va'era raises a troubling question about the capacity for change. Before the plagues begin, God tells Moses, in Chapter 7, verse 3, *Ani aksheh et lev Paroh*. "I will harden Pharaoh's heart, that I may multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt." Many commentators ask, fairly, how Pharaoh could be held accountable for his refusal to release the Israelites, if God's hand were controlling his impulses.

Some of the possible answers are apologetic. Many commentators note that Pharaoh had already enslaved the Jewish people, incited the Egyptian people against them, killed the baby boys, and in short done plenty to merit retribution. The hardening of the heart just prevents Pharaoh from repenting and seeking forgiveness for his numerous earlier sins. Several medieval commentators point to Maimonides Laws of Teshuvah, of Repentance, Chapter 6, which state: "it is possible for a person to commit a sin so egregious, or to commit so many sins, that the judgment rendered before the True Judge is that the retribution for these

sins, which s/he committed freely and of his/her own accord, is that s/he is prevented from repenting and is no longer able to abandon the evil ways. . ." Lest there be any doubt, Maimonides uses Pharaoh as a case study, saying, "Since s/he initially sinned of his own free will and wronged the Israelites who lived in his land… justice required that s/he be prevented from repenting, so that s/he be punished. This is why the Blessed Holy One hardened his heart."

Medieval commentator Rabbeinu Bahya ibn Pekuda notes that this punishment – being closed off from teshuvah – is reserved for those who have already proven themselves to be entrenched in their wickedness. Pharaoh hardens his own heart 5 times before the text says the God hardens Pharaoh's heart. In contrast, Bahya points out that even the people of Nineveh, about whom we read every Yom Kippur in the book of Jonah, were given the opportunity to repent and completely escaped punishment.

But it's still a bit troubling to imagine God deciding that someone is unworthy of repentance. While some sins, like murder, might be impossible to repent fully, surely there must be some potential for remorse that should never be taken away.

There are two contemporary rabbis who offer a reframe of this problem in terms that we may find useful. Rabbi Shai Held, one of my favorite teachers, writes, "What does Maimonides mean when he says that sin can lead to loss of freedom? Maimonides insists in the Guide of the Perplexed that God never interferes with human freedom (3:32), and that divine providence never takes the form of direct divine intervention to punish the wicked (3:18).6 So what does Maimonides mean? There comes a point when a person has become so totally entrenched in bad behavior that s/he simply loses the ability to choose any other path. Crucially,

the person remains responsible for his actions even after s/he has lost his freedom because his consistently bad choices are what led him to his current state. Human nature is such that freedom at a particular time may be constricted by decisions made earlier. God can be said to have hardened Pharaoh's heart only in the sense that God created human nature this way."

After considering this and other interpretations, Rabbi Held concludes: "Whether or not it fully captures the Torah's intentions, Maimonides' interpretation does powerfully evoke a fundamental truth of the human condition. In psychologist Erich Fromm's words, "Every evil act tends to harden a person's heart, that is, to deaden it. Every good deed tends to soften it, that is, to make it more alive. The more person's heart hardens, the less freedom does s/he have to change, the more is determined already by previous action. But there comes a point of no return when person's heart has become so hardened and so deadened that s/he has lost the possibility of freedom." Consistently repeated, sinful behavior can take deep and unrelenting hold of us. Piling bad decision upon bad decision deeply compromises our ability to choose a different course. . .

"Repeated often enough, bad behavior can eventually take over our inner world. As anyone who has ever taken the project of repentance seriously can attest, to stop committing sins that have become deeply ingrained habits—speaking ill of other. . . eating unhealthful foods, etc.—can be excruciatingly difficult."

Or as Rabbi Arthur Waskow teaches, Pharaoh's free will can be compared to that of an addict, who at first might be making a choice about what s/he puts into his or her body. "But at some point," Waskow writes, "Reality (call It "God" if you like) takes over. The body has so deeply responded to these acts of free will that it loses its freedom.

And this is what happens to Pharaoh. He chooses hard-heartedness so often that he loses his ability to choose. He -- the most powerful man in the world --- has lost his freedom in order to deny freedom to those he has enslaved. The heart that he himself has chosen to harden, he becomes unable to soften. -- For God, Reality, begins to harden his heart. Addiction takes over. The most powerful army, the most brutal police cannot save him: indeed, they are exactly what destroy him."

Both Rabbi Held and Rabbi Waskow conclude that Pharaoh's problem was not one of too little freedom, but of unchecked freedom – the freedom that comes of power without accountability, the freedom to do whatever he wanted without answering to anyone, freedom to make so many bad choices that he ultimately stopped being capable of making other choices. As for the true freedom that we need in order to be able to redirect our paths and make better choices, Rabbi Held concludes, "Mindfulness and constant, exquisite attention are necessary for freedom to flourish. Freedom needs to be nurtured and attended to, not taken for granted."

So for any of us who are in the habit of making resolutions, whether at the secular New Year, the Jewish new year, or any other times of year, Va'Era offers both a caution and some guidance. Change is possible, but we must not take our capacity to change for granted. We are most likely to succeed if we make ourselves accountable to others who will help us on our journey, and if we are honest and mindful about the difficulty of change. I wish us all luck as we all continue to strive to be better people.