

# Who was Pharaoh?

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The challenging question that these early chapters of Exodus raise is whether Pharaoh had any freedom to act or was it all determined when God says, "I will harden his heart"? Perhaps he had no choice at all.

On the other hand, you might say that everything about Pharaoh's background and education made his response predictable. After all he was the absolute monarch of the world's greatest and most advanced power at the time with its magnificent engineering and cultural achievements. Why should he listen to some outsider speaking on behalf of an unimportant semi-nomadic group of tribes? Besides so called miracles can often be explained as physical phenomena.

Imagine a Harvard Graduate having a theological debate with a primitive tribesman from the amazon jungle. This does not mean of course that the Harvard Graduate would be automatically right. Our background and training so convince us we are right its often almost impossible to see another point of view. The NRA will never ever accept any kind of limitation on gun ownership no matter what the arguments. But that doesn't mean they don't have a choice.

When God says, "I will harden Pharaoh's heart" it is a way of speaking, a metaphor, to indicate that one can predict he won't change his mind. And even when he says he will re-consider or make concessions he is, like so many people who pretend to negotiate in good faith today, only playing for time, leading them on with no intention of fulfilling his pledges. Sound familiar?