

Parshat V'era – The Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart
Melton Gesher at Shearith Israel, January 16, 2012
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A) Background

- 1) Shmot 3:19 – at the burning bush
- 2) Shmot 4:21 – 23 – after the burning bush as Moshe is about to make his way to Egypt. “I will stiffen his heart.”
- 3) Shmot 5:1 – 2, 4 – 5 – the first meeting of Moshe and Aaron with Pharaoh
- 4) Shmot 7:1 – 5 – God encourages and fortifies Moshe. “I will harden Pharaoh's heart.”
- 5) Shmot 7:8 – 13 – the second meeting of Moshe and Aaron with Pharaoh. “Pharaoh's heart stiffened”.
- 6) Shmot 7:14 – 22 – the first plague: blood. Twice it says that “Pharaoh's heart stiffened” (although in the JPS translation this is not explicit).
- 7) Shmot 8:1 – 11 – the second plague: frogs. Pharaoh capitulates but afterward reneges. “He (Hebrew: ‘his heart’) became stubborn”
- 8) Shmot 8:12 – 15 – the third plague: lice. “Pharaoh's heart stiffened”.
- 9) Shmot 8:16 – 17, 24 – 28 – the fourth plague: insects. Pharaoh capitulates but afterward reneges. “Pharaoh (Hebrew: ‘his heart’) became stubborn”.
- 10) Shmot 9:6 – 7 – the fifth plague: pestilence. “(Hebrew: The heart of) Pharaoh remained stubborn”.
- 11) Shmot 9:8 – 12 – the sixth plague: boils. For the first time it is God who stiffens Pharaoh's heart.
- 12) Shmot 9:13 – 18, 27 – 29, 34 – 35 – the seventh plague: hail. Pharaoh capitulates but afterward reneges. “Pharaoh's heart stiffened”.
- 13) Shmot 10:1 – 4, 8, 11, 14, 16 – 20 – the eighth plague: locusts. Pharaoh capitulated before the plague, reneged, and after the plague capitulated again and afterward reneged. This is the second time that God stiffened his heart.
- 14) Shmot 10:21, 24, 27 – the ninth plague: darkness. Pharaoh capitulated and then reneged. This is the third time that God stiffened his heart.
- 15) Shmot 11:4 – 5, 9 – 10 – the tenth plague: death of the firstborn. Pharaoh does not respond to the threat. We are told that “God had stiffened the heart of Pharaoh”.

B) Analysis

- 1) It is not clear if there is a distinction between Pharaoh stiffening his own heart and God doing it for him. We would have liked to have seen a clear demarcation between the first five and the last five of the plagues, but plague seven ruined it.
- 2) It is clear why God stiffens Pharaoh's heart: the purpose of all the plagues is not only to take the Israelites out of Egypt, but also for God to teach a lesson of His providential care and benevolence, and His power. For this Pharaoh must be stood up in order to be continually knocked down.
- 3) The issues with God hardening Pharaoh's heart:
 - a) Seemingly lack of justice: How can Pharaoh be punished and afflicted if his sinning was not of his own doing?
 - b) The give and take between Moshe and Pharaoh is duplicitous and diabolical: God demands that Pharaoh do exactly what God is preventing him from doing!

- c) If God even once has interfered in a human being's free will and caused him to sin, then the whole foundation of human responsibility and culpability has been destroyed: If God may take from us our free will, then in what sense may we be deemed obligated to do good and deserving of reprobation, censure and punishment when we do wrong? In any future case there is always the possibility that God has caused an individual to sin. Every criminal may make such a claim in his defense and it is irrefutable.
- 4) We may be able to skirt the issue of justice: It would appear to be simply to say that God uses Pharaoh for His greater purposes: We need not ask whether Pharaoh deserves this or not; rather the greater good of the world – meaning God's educational message for all generations – trumps the question of justice for the individual. Proactive general providence trumps reactive individual providence. However, the other issues remain on the table.
- C) Insights of the Commentators
- 1) Maimonides / **Rav Moshe ben Maimon - The Rambam**

Mishneh Torah, Laws of Teshuva, Chapters 5 and 6

Every person is given complete autonomy to pursue the course of righteousness to become morally upright, or to follow the way of wickedness to become evil. This is what the text of the Torah intimates concerning this unique capacity of the human being, when it states: 'Behold the human being is like one of Us, to know the difference between good and evil' (Bereishit 3:22).

This is a crucial principle that constitutes the foundation of the Torah and its commandments...(for) God does not coerce human beings nor decree upon them to do good or bad, but rather they have complete choice.

If the Deity were to decree upon the person to be righteous or evil, or were to shape his/her essential nature to of necessity follow a particular path, opinion, or deed (as the foolish astrologers maintain), how could He command us by the word of the Prophets to 'do this' or 'don't do that,' 'improve your ways and desist from performing evil?' If it had already been determined at the moment of conception, that one's nature would inevitably be drawn towards a particular course of action that could not be averted, then where is the possibility of the Torah's fulfillment? By what law could God then punish the evildoer or reward the righteous? Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?"

"It is possible that a person can commit a sin so grievous or transgressions so numerous, such that the True Judge determines that the transgressor, who committed those acts freely, henceforth forfeit the opportunity of Teshuva. Such a person loses the privilege of repentance from their evil, in order that they should die, and perish on account of their act...Therefore the Torah states: 'I will harden Pharaoh's heart,' for he had initially transgressed of his own free will and dealt harshly with Israel who were sojourners in his land...thus, Teshuva was withheld from him, and he was punished..."

"Why then did God send Moshe telling him to 'let the people go and repent' if God had already informed him that he would not let them go? This was in order to indicate to all that when God withholds the option of Teshuva from the transgressor, he will not be able to return, and will of necessity perish as a result of the wickedness that he had committed initially of his own free volition...Therefore, God did not decree that Pharaoh should oppress the Israelites...but rather, he himself decided to do so, and lost the opportunity of Teshuva as a result"

2) Rav Yosef Albo, Sefer Halkarim

The wicked man becomes pious and returns to the Lord when the blow falls – out of fear of retribution, as in the case of Pharaoh...Because such a situation smells of compulsion and not of free will, the Lord hardened his heart, so that he imagined that the plague was accidental rather than providential. This was to eradicate the cowering effects of the plague itself, leaving his freewill uninfluenced by any compulsion.

3) Shadal, Rabbi Shmuel David Luzatto, Commentary on the Torah

Know that all acts are ascribed to God, since He is their ultimate cause, some by absolute decree, and others through the operation of human choice granted by Him...(in this way) He hardened Pharaoh's heart...The acts ascribed to God in Scriptures are those which are unusual, the cause of which are beyond our understanding. Pharaoh's stubbornness was an example of this.

4) Rav Ya'acov Meidan, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Etzion, VBM, Parshat Vaera "I Shall Harden Pharaoh's Heart"

"Pharaoh called Moshe and Aharon, saying: Pray to God that He should remove the frogs from me and from my nation, and I shall let the people go, that they may sacrifice to God." (8:4)

But it is right here that great disappointment strikes: it turns out that Moshe and Aharon, despite the power of their wonders, are very bad businessmen and politicians. They ask for no guarantees; they believe Pharaoh's promise and remove the frogs:

"Moshe said to Pharaoh: 'Challenge me as to when I should pray for you and for your servants and for your nation, to cut off the frogs from you and from your house; they will remain only in the river.' [Pharaoh] said, 'Tomorrow.' And Moshe said, 'According to your word, in order that you may know that there is none like the Lord our God.'" (8:5-6)

Pharaoh - obviously - violates his promise, but Moshe and Aharon are nevertheless tempted to believe him once again during the plague of wild beasts; they remove the plague in return for a verbal promise by the lying king. The same innocent, embarrassing pattern repeats itself in the plagues of hail and locusts. It becomes clear to everyone that A STRONG HAND, IN THE ABSENCE OF A TOUGH, WISE POLICY BASED ON A HEALTHY SUSPICION, WILL NOT LEAD THE NATION TO FREEDOM, and that Moshe and Aharon are hopelessly amateur politicians.

Pharaoh, too, "understands" this, AND THIS IS THE HARDENING OF HIS HEART. God lets him off the hook time after time, giving him opportunities for teshuva. Had there been any conscience in the heart of the wicked king, he would have respected the fact that God relies on his promise. But as a person devoid of honor and altogether lacking moral conscience, Pharaoh concludes that one can make promises to God without having to fulfill them. God exploits this in order to pay Pharaoh back and show him His power time after time, but God's own justice and goodness are not affected at all; nor is the opportunity that He extends to the evil king to renounce his evil.

D) Conclusion - Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Avodah Zara, page 17a

It was said of Elazar ben Dordai that there was not a harlot in the world of whose services he did not avail himself. Once, on hearing that there was a certain harlot in one of the far away cities who demanded a full purse of denarii for her hire, he took a purse of denarii and crossed seven rivers for her sake. As he was with her, she blew forth breath and said: As this blown breath will not return to its place, so will Elazar ben Dordai never be received in repentance. He thereupon went, sat between two hills and mountains and exclaimed: O, ye hills and mountains, plead for mercy for me! They replied: How shall we pray for thee? We stand in need of mercy ourselves ... So he exclaimed: Heaven and earth, plead ye for mercy for me! They, too, replied: How shall we pray for thee? We stand in need of mercy ourselves ... He then exclaimed: Sun and moon, plead ye for mercy for me! But they also replied: How shall we pray for thee? We stand in need of mercy ourselves ... He exclaimed: Ye stars and constellations, plead ye for mercy for me! Said they: How shall we pray for thee? We stand in need of mercy ourselves ... Said he: The matter

then depends upon me alone! Having placed his head between his knees, he wept aloud until his soul departed. Then an echo of a heavenly voice was heard proclaiming: 'Rabbi Elazar ben Dordai is destined for the life of the world to come!'

Sources –

Nechama Leibowitz, Studies in Shmot, Parshat V'era

VBM Shiur of Michael Hattin

VBM Shiur of Rav Ya'acov Meidan

Ohr haChaim on 9:31-32 and 10:1