

Parshat HaShavua
Yeshivat Har Etzion

PARASHAT VAERA

"I Shall Harden Pharaoh's Heart"

By Rav Yaakov Medan

HARDENING THE HEART

"I shall harden Pharaoh's heart, that I may multiply My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt. Pharaoh will not listen to you, and I shall lay My hand on Egypt, and I shall bring out My hosts, My nation - the children of Israel - from the land of Egypt, with great judgments." (7:3-4)

The commentators address this Divine promise in terms of both its justice and an understanding of its reality. In terms of justice - how can God present accusations against Pharaoh and punish him if He Himself hardened his heart? And in terms of understanding the reality - is all of the negotiating that Moshe conducts with Pharaoh and all the rebuke and warning that he gives him all just for show? After all, God is determining in advance what Pharaoh's answers are going to be; what, then, is the purpose of all the negotiating? Moreover, God is certainly able to perform whatever He chooses, but His involvement in a person's private realm - his will and his free choice - arouses the suspicion that perhaps a person is not truly free to choose. Who can guarantee, when we wish to punish a regular criminal, that he acted out of free will and that God did not interfere in his choice?

The Rambam, in his Introduction to Massekhet Avot and in his Laws of Teshuva, as well as the Ramban in his commentary on our parasha, maintain that the negation of choice is one of the punishments that God may choose to inflict on a person. The Rambam teaches:

"It is possible that a person may commit a grave transgression, or several transgressions, such that the True Judge rules that the punishment for this sinner, for the transgressions that he has performed willingly and knowingly, is that teshuva will be withheld from him and he will not be allowed the right to turn from his evil, so that he may die and be lost in the sin that he performs... Therefore it is written in the Torah, "I shall harden Pharaoh's heart": because he first sinned on his own initiative, and did evil to the Israelites living in his land, as it is written, "Let us deal wisely with them..." - therefore it was ruled that teshuva would be withheld from him so that he may be punished; therefore God hardened his heart. But why does He then send a message to him via Moshe, saying, "Let [My people go] and repent [your evil ways]," if He has already told him, "You will not send them out" - as it is written, "You and your servants I know..." but for this I have placed you?" In order to teach everyone that when God withholds teshuva from a sinner, he is not able to repent; he dies in his

wickedness which he performed at first of his own free will. Likewise Sichon: because of his sins he was punished by having teshuva withheld from him, as it is written, "For the Lord your God hardened his spirit and toughened his heart." And likewise the Canaanites: because of their abominations, teshuva was withheld from them and they waged war against Israel, as it is written, "For it was from God that their heart was hardened for battle against Am Yisrael, in order that they may be annihilated...." God did not decree upon Pharaoh to cause evil to Israel, nor did He cause Sichon to sin in his land, nor the Canaanites to perform abominations, nor the Israelites to engage in idolatry. All of these sinned of their own accord, and all were punished by having teshuva withheld from them." (Laws of Teshuva, 6:3)

Ramban agrees, in principle, with Rambam, but to his view the withholding of teshuva throughout the ten plagues is not a punishment for the subjugation. During the first five plagues, where we read "Pharaoh's heart was hardened," "Pharaoh hardened his heart," etc., Pharaoh still had free choice. But after he had repeatedly refused God's command, God withheld the ways of teshuva from him, and thereafter the dominant expression in the final plagues is, "God hardened Pharaoh's heart."

Still, we are troubled. How is it possible that the gates of teshuva are locked? Furthermore, we know about Pharaoh's sins as well as those of the Canaanites. But the Torah makes no mention of the great sins of Sichon that precede his war against Israel; why, then, does God harden his heart? If we wish to rely on the contention that if God hardened his heart, and we know that all of God's ways are just, then obviously he must have been evil - then we can no longer presume to try and understand the justice of anything in Tanakh; we must simply believe that God acts justly, without any ability on our part to observe this. What, then, is the point of all these stories if there is nothing that we can learn from them?

THE WAY OF REDEMPTION

Let us return to the essence of the story of the plagues in Egypt. Moshe and Aharon come to the nation, tell them about the Revelation at the burning bush, and perform the wonders before them. Renewed faith and new hope blossom in the hearts of the nation:

"Aharon spoke all the things that God had told Moshe, and he performed the signs before the eyes of the nation. And the nation believed, and when they heard that God had remembered Benei Yisrael and that He had seen their affliction, they bowed and prostrated themselves." (4:30-31)

But it very quickly becomes apparent that the miraculous redemption is going to take a bumpy road. Time after time, Moshe and Aharon, with their staffs and their wonders, are banished from before Pharaoh, and the servitude becomes increasingly oppressive. In their first meeting with Pharaoh in his palace, he sends them away and publicizes his decree concerning the straw. After Aharon's staff turns into a crocodile - even though it swallows the staffs of the magicians - Pharaoh's heart is hardened, and Moshe and Aharon return empty-handed. In the plague of blood, the magicians

(almost) succeed in producing blood as Moshe and Aharon have done. Pharaoh returns to his palace, paying no attention to the plague, and it appears that the inhabitants of Egypt found a way of bypassing the problem:

"The magicians did likewise with their magic, so Pharaoh's heart was hardened and he did not listen to them, as God had said. Pharaoh turned and came to his home; he paid no attention to this either. All the Egyptians dug around the river for water to drink, for they could not drink from the water of the river. Thus seven days passed after God's smiting of the river." (7:22-25)

In the next plague, the magicians once again manage to produce frogs, as Aharon did. The nation's spirit flags.

Now comes the great moment when the magicians are unable to remove the frogs. Pharaoh cracks; he calls Moshe and Aharon and asks them to remove the plague, promising to free the people:

"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.'" (9:8-10)

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 plagues and 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.

The same can be said concerning Sichon, king of the Emori. The hardening of his heart was not effected by means of God connecting an electrode to his brain or his heart, against his will. God does not do such things to His creations! Benei Yisrael ask the king of Edom for permission to pass through his land on the way to Eretz Kena'an. The king of Edom refuses, and comes out to meet them with a great show of force. Am Yisrael could have waged war against them, but God forbade them to do so, because He had promised that land to the children of Esav. So Benei Yisrael withdrew, and journeyed around the land of Edom. They did the same in the case of Moav (according to what we learn from Yiftah's words to the king of Amon in Shoftim 11), once again turning away for a similar reason.

Sichon misjudged these actions. He could not conceive of the measure of God's goodness towards the children of Lot and towards Esav, son of Yitzchak, and interpreted Israel's actions as arising from weakness and fear of war against the nations on the east of the Jordan. Sichon calculated as follows: if Moav, whom I conquered in war, had the courage to refuse Israel's request and Israel was afraid - then why should I be afraid of them and allow them to pass through my land?! Sichon gathered his army for war against Israel, and was vanquished. Concerning this we read,

"Sichon, king of Cheshbon, did not agree to let me pass through his land, for the Lord your God hardened his spirit and toughened his heart in order that He could deliver him into your hands this day." (Devarim 2:30)

The same picture emerges once again from the war against the nations of Kena'an. The fear that Rachav exposes in her words testifies to the fear of the nations of Kena'an prior to the arrival of Benei Yisrael:

"For we have heard how God dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you left Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Emori on the other side of the Jordan - to Sichon and to Og, whom you annihilated. We heard - and our hearts melted, and no-one had any spirit rise up in him against you, for the Lord your God is the God in the heavens above and upon the earth below" (Yehoshua 2:10-11).

Why, then, did the Canaanites not surrender to Benei Yisrael and make peace with them? To the view of most poskim, had they made peace, they would have been allowed to remain where they were! But the Tanakh answers this question explicitly:

"It was from God to harden their hearts before the war with Israel, in order that He could annihilate them, leaving them no favor, but that He might destroy them, as God had commanded Moshe" (Yehoshua 11:20).

I believe that the key to the meaning of this verse is to be found in the war against Ai. There the Canaanites learned that Israel can be defeated. Although Ai was destroyed in the second war, the sweet taste of victory from the first battle never disappeared, and they understood that they could defeat Israel if they invested the required effort. In this matter, God hardened their hearts.

I cannot resist including at least one modern parallel to the above descriptions in Tanakh.

The Palestinians had almost received everything they wanted, at that stage, from the Barak government, some three and a half years ago. An agreement had almost been signed that would have dismantled most of the Jewish settlement in Yehuda, Shomron and Gaza. Altogether by chance, during that very same period, the hurried and disgraceful flight of the I.D.F. from Lebanon took place, leaving behind computers, valuable ammunition, and even soldiers' tefillin. The Palestinians, viewing this, drawing its conclusions as to the staying power of an Israel seemingly dominated by the "Four Mothers" movement - and notified the Israeli Prime Minister that they had no interest in an agreement; they would liberate the land as Saladin did in his time. And that was how the present war broke out. Later, the modern "Saladin" sat in his ruins, in the Mukata, his Palestinian Authority crumbling before his eyes.

"For the Lord your God hardened his spirit and toughened his heart, in order that He might give him into your hands this day!" (Devarim 2:30)

"For straight are the ways of God; the righteous shall walk in them, while the sinners shall stumble in them." (Hoshea 14:10)

Translated by Kaeren Fish