**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**PARASHAT VAERA**

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**"And I will harden the heart of Pharaoh"**

**Harav Yaakov Medan**

I.

In its account of the first plagues, the Torah describes Pharaoh's refusal to send Israel out with the words: "And Pharaoh's heart was hardened" (*Shemot* 7:22) or some similar phrase. Beginning with the plague of boils, the wording is: "**And the Lord hardened** the heart of Pharaoh" (*Shemot* 9:12). So too, when Moshe goes from the house of Yitro to Egypt, God promises him: "**But I will harden** his heart, and he will not let the people go" (*Shemot* 4:21). Similarly, at the beginning of our *parasha*, we read: "**And I will harden** Pharaoh's heart" (*Shemot* 7:3).

The Rambam and the Ramban explain these words in their plain sense, that it is God who hardens Pharaoh's heart; were He not to intervene, Pharaoh would have submitted and let Israel leave earlier. The Rambam explains all ten plagues in this manner:

For these reasons, it is written in the Torah (*Shemot* 14:4): "And I will harden Pharaoh's heart." Since he began to sin on his own initiative and causes hardships to the Israelites who dwell in his land, as is it stated (*Shemot* 1:10): "Come, let us deal wisely with them," justice requires that he be prevented from repenting so that he will suffer retribution.

Therefore, the Holy One, blessed be He, hardens his heart… to make known to all the inhabitants of the world that when the Holy One, blessed be He, withholds repentance from a sinner, he cannot repent, but he will die in the wickedness that he initially committed willfully.

Similarly, Sichon is held liable for repentance to be withheld from him, because of the sins he committed, as it is stated (*Devarim* 2:30): "The Lord, your God, hardened his spirit and strengthened his heart." Also, the Canaanites were held back from repenting, because of their abominable acts, so that they would wage war against Israel, as it is stated (*Yehoshua* 11:20): "This was inspired by God, to harden their hearts so that they should come against Israel in battle in order to utterly destroy them." (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 6:3)[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Ramban, commenting on our *parasha* (*Shemot* 7:3), follows a similar path but restricts it to the second half of the plagues. According to the Midrash, argues the Ramban, God hardens Pharaoh's heart only in the last five plagues (beginning with the plague of boils), as punishment for Pharaoh's own hardening of his heart during the first five plagues.

According to both the Rambam and the Ramban, God directly intervenes regarding Pharaoh's capacity to freely choose his conduct and cancels it. In this situation, Pharaoh is under the impression that he has free choice, and that it is in his hands to choose one way or the other, but his thinking is incorrect. His heart compels him, against his will and by Divine decree, to stand firm in his refusal to let Israel go, in order that he may be brought down by the hand of God before the entire world. The hardening of Pharaoh's heart is a punishment for his previous sins.

We have two difficulties with their explanation:

Firstly, the greatest commentators made enormous efforts to reconcile this understanding with the plain sense of *Tanakh*; but all their answers do not put our minds to rest, and the verses still cry out that Pharaoh and his people are punished time after time for their continued refusal to send out the people of Israel, and not only for previous sins. If God hardens the heart of Pharaoh and withholds from him the power to choose, why is he punished?

Secondly, is this the way of the judge of the entire earth, who shows mercy to all of His creatures — to prevent a person from changing his ways and repenting? This flies in the face of the *U-ntaneh Tokef* prayer which we recite on the High Holy Days: "Until the day of his death You shall wait for him; if he repents, You will immediately accept him!” What room do we give sinners standing at the gates of *Gehinnom* and considering repentance, if they know that God may prevent them from returning to Him?

If, as *Chazal* understand (*Gittin* 57b), God accepted the repentance of Nevuzaradan, Nevukhadnetzar's general who destroyed the Temple and slaughtered 940,000 Jews in Jerusalem, why should Pharaoh's opportunity for repentance be any less?

Moreover, even if Pharaoh sinned, what is the sin of Sichon that, according to the Rambam, prevents him from repenting? One might argue that the very fact that Sichon is denied the possibility of repenting attests to his previous sins, but that undermines our sense of justice concerning *Tanakh*'s stories.[[2]](#footnote-2) What can we learn from *Tanakh*, if we proceed from the assumption of just reward and the assumption that we can "reconstruct" the biblical story?

II.

Let us try a different approach to explain the hardening of the hearts of the aforementioned kings, starting with the case of Sichon:

But Sichon king of Cheshbon would not let us pass by him; **for the Lord your God hardened his spirit, and made his heart obstinate,** that He might deliver him into your hand, as appears this day. (*Devarim* 2:30)

Our argument is that God does not plant a chip in Sichon's brain that deprives him of free choice.

However, prior to the war with Sichon, Moshe requests permission from the king of Edom and the king of Moav (*Shofetim* 11) to pass through their lands. The two refuse, and Israel is forced to circumvent them. The Torah explains this with God's promise of an inheritance to the descendants of Lot and the descendants of Esav, but in the atmosphere of the peoples of the region, this is interpreted as a sign of weakness and cowardice on the part of the people of Israel, which prevents them from contending with Edom and Moav. While it is true that the people of Israel have an army of six hundred thousand soldiers, and the peoples of the region remember God's mighty acts in Egypt, forty years have passed since then. Perhaps that unknown God has lost His power, and perhaps those hundreds of thousands of armed men are involved with their families and not eager to fight.

Sichon draws conclusions from Israel's "capitulation" before Edom and Moav, adorns himself with a mantle of boldness and bravery, and blocks Israel's way to the land of Canaan. The people of Israel, who presumably complain about the fact that they have been forced to go around the lands of Edom and Moav, do not understand that with their very circumvention of Edom and Moav,[[3]](#footnote-3) God hardens the heart of Sichon to fight against them and then fall into their hands. The hardening of his heart does not contradict his freedom of choice to do what is right and logical: not to challenge the nation of God, its power and the power of its God.

God also hardens the hearts of the Canaanites not to make peace with Israel, and to wage war against them and suffer defeat, as the Rambam states in the passage cited above:

This was inspired by God, to harden their hearts so that they should come against Israel in battle in order to utterly destroy them. (*Yehoshua* 11:20)

We contend that God does this by way of Israel's first rout in the battle at Ai. The Canaanites learn that despite Israel's crossing of the Jordan and despite the fall of the walls of Yericho, it is still possible to defeat Israel. They certainly do not hear about the sin of Akhan, which brings God to lead them to defeat. Israel's rout at Ai is certainly a punishment for their sin in the incident involving Akhan. However, in the circumstances of God's hidden ways, bitterness leads to sweetness, and the hearts of the Canaanites strengthen and bring them to wage war against Israel, and thus they fall before Israel outside their fortified cities. Much can be learned from this about our relationship today with our neighbors from a religious perspective of how God hardens the hearts of our enemies, but this is not the forum to expand upon this issue.

III.

There are other instances in *Tanakh* where God is said to have turned the hearts of men, e.g., with Shimshon, the sons of Eli, and the division of the monarchy in the days of Rechavam. Let us say a few words about these cases:

And Shimshon went down to Timna and saw a woman in Timna of the daughters of the Pelishtim. And he came up, and told his father and his mother, and said: “I have seen a woman in Timna of the daughters of the Pelishtim; now therefore get her for me to wife.”

Then his father and his mother said to him: “Is there never a woman among the daughters of your brothers, or among all my people, that you go to take a wife of the uncircumcised Pelishtim?”

And Shimshon said to his father: “Get her for me; for she pleases me well.”

But his father and his mother knew not **that it was of the Lord; for he sought an occasion against the Pelishtim.** Now at that time the Pelishtim had rule over Israel. (*Shofetim* 14:1-4)

Was Shimshon in fact drawn to Pelishti women, not by virtue of his free choice, but only by way of a Divine decree? If so, why is he punished for this? Why do *Chazal* say about him: "Shimshon went after his eyes, and therefore the Pelishtim blinded his eyes" (*Sota* 1:8)?

It seems that God does in fact set in Shimshon's heart an attraction for Pelishti women, just as the heart of every one of us is attracted to a woman of one's liking. However, Shimshon has the free choice to convert the Pelishti woman whom he loves and to live with her a full Jewish life. Shimshon may act in this manner with the woman from Timna, and indeed he is not punished for having married her. On the contrary, God allows Shimshon to smite the Pelishtim three times on account of the incident connected to the woman from Timna. However, in his love for Delila, Shimshon acts in a forbidden manner, and even desecrates "the crown of his God" on his head. He does this by virtue of his free choice, and not because of a Divine decree, and he is punished for this.

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Regarding the sons of Eli, it is stated:

But they hearkened not to the voice of their father, **because the Lord would slay them.** (I *Shemuel* 2:25)

Their father, Eli, rebukes them for their evil deeds. Does God indeed deprive them of their free choice to heed his rebuke? If so, why does He punish them? Will the judge of the entire earth not do justice? Are the gates of repentance shut to sinners?

Indeed, it seems that owing to their evil deeds, God does not out of His mercy prepare a special path of repentance for them, but He certainly does not shut the gates of repentance before them. Their father, Eli, tries to rebuke them and to persuade them to mend their ways, but the circumstances are that they do not feel themselves obligated to listen to him. He is old and weak, and control over the *Mishkan* is in effect in their hands, and therefore they allow themselves to continue what they have been doing. God's involvement in depriving them of the possibility of repentance finds expression in the fact that the circumstances that are independent of them — the age and weakness of their father, the High Priest — are not strong enough to stop the sons of Eli in their tracks. Still the circumstances that depend on them (their freedom of choice) are strong enough to stop their sinning, were they to want to do so.

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At the time of the division of the kingdom in the days of Yerovam and of Rechavam the son of Shelomo, it is stated:

And the king answered the people roughly and forsook the counsel of the old men which they had given him; and spoke to them after the counsel of the young men, saying: “My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke; my father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions.”

So, the king hearkened not unto the people; for it was a thing brought about of the Lord, that He might establish His word, which the Lord spoke by the hand of Achiya the Shilonite to Yerovam the son of Nevat. (*I Melakhim* 12:13-15)

It is within Rechavam's power to act wisely, to listen to the advice of the elders, and to reach a compromise with the people on the authority of the government. God does not deprive him of his free choice in this way. However, the external circumstances (which we will not detail here) bring him to think that he can threaten the people and control them with a strong hand. God directs these circumstances as a punishment for the house of David because of the sins of Shelomo. Still, God does not deprive Rechavam of the moral judgment stemming from his love for Israel and his inner integrity to relinquish some of his powers for the sake of the unity of the nation.

IV.

Let us return to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. We will examine it first from the perspective of a Hebrew slave who hears the tidings of redemption from Moshe and Aharon just a few days earlier, and now awaits the salvation of God and his redemption from Egypt.

His anticipation increases when he sees the force of the plague of blood, and he prepares himself and his family for immediate redemption. However, Pharaoh returns to his house, "and he did not lay even this to his heart" (*Shemot* 7:23). With the plague of frogs, Pharaoh's yielding and retreating inspires the Hebrew slave with new hope, but his spirit presumably falls when Moshe and Aharon promise Pharaoh that the plague will stop in exchange for his promise to release the Jews with no guarantees for their return, a promise that nobody thinks will be fulfilled. After the frogs die and Pharaoh reneges on his promise to Moshe and Aharon, this Hebrew slave has reason to despair.

With the plague of lice, Pharaoh does not break, and with the plague of wild beasts, after Moshe answers Pharaoh's supplications and removes the plague, Pharaoh once again reneges on his promise. The Hebrew slave understands that the power concealed in the rod will not suffice to bring about Israel's exodus from Egypt, and that a leader less naïve than Moshe and Aharon is needed. What is required is a leader who knows how to conduct tough negotiations, not to believe empty promises, and not to remove the plagues until Pharaoh actually frees the people of Israel. He is unable to understand God's plan for the redemption, which will be explained in the coming lines, as it appears to us.

V.

In order to explain God's plan regarding the plagues, according to our approach, we will follow a haphazard young man of our generation, who has just received his driver's license. He proudly invites his friends for a "spin" in a car that he has taken from his father. The spin drags on, and the young driver goes over the speed limit, but unfortunately he is caught in a police ambush. He gets out of the car in tears, and he convinces the policeman to feel sorry for him. The policeman lets the young driver off, but he warns him to drive properly and accepts his promise that he will do so. The young man gets back in the car, and proudly tells his friends that he knows how to work the police, and thus there is no reason to fear a surprise ambush. He begins to speed, gets caught in another ambush, and manages to get off in a similar way of pleading for mercy and promising to be good in the future. The policeman who stops the young man the fourth time is not in uniform and not a man. This “policeman” is a concrete wall or a cement mixer; he does not hear the promise, or show mercy…

At the funeral of the young man and his friends, there are those who say that the soft-hearted policemen hardened the driver's heart and caused his death with their pity.

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Pharaoh is like the young man in our story. Panic-stricken, he calls out to Moshe and Aharon to remove the plague, and he promises to behave properly. Time after time, he learns that he can make promises to Moshe and not fulfill them. He learns that the plagues stop as soon as he asks the two old men to stop them. We might expect that after a series of broken promises Moshe would say to Pharaoh that the plague will stop only after he lets the people go. However, Moshe works together with God, who decides to harden Pharaoh's heart until he gets all that is coming to him. Pharaoh has free choice until the last plague! He can keep his promise, and he can understand the power of God with whom he is dealing. Still, Moshe's naivety has its effect. Pharaoh alone, by virtue of his free will, is responsible for what is happening to him and to his people — despite the fact that God has hardened his heart.

VI.

Let us try to look at Pharaoh, who is hardening his heart, from a different perspective. Elsewhere we asked about God's words to Moshe in Midian:

And you shall say to Pharaoh: “And you shall say to Pharaoh: ‘Thus says the Lord: “Israel is My son, My firstborn. And I have said to you: Let My son go, that he may serve Me; and you have refused to let him go. Behold, I will slay your son, your firstborn.”’”(*Shemot* 4:22-23)

Why does God tell Moshe only about the plague of the firstborn, and not about all ten plagues?

We will formulate the question from the opposite direction: God informs Moshe of his plan to punish Pharaoh and Egypt measure for measure and kill their firstborns, just as Pharaoh has hurt Israel, God's firstborn. This short statement clarifies, that in the wake of the plague of the firstborns, God intends to take Israel out of Egypt. Indeed, this is what happens; but if this is the case, why does God bring upon Egypt the first nine plagues?

Let us formulate our question in the language of the Mishna in *Avot*:

The world was created with ten statements… but surely it could have been created with one statement?

We too ask: Israel left Egypt after ten plagues; but surely they could have left after one plague, the plague of the firstborns?

It is possible that God brings the first nine plagues on Pharaoh with the attribute of mercy that is mixed with the attribute of justice of the harsh plagues. The first nine plagues cause economic damage to the flocks and fields (plague, hail, locusts) and great discomfort (the rest of the plagues). However, they are not deadly plagues.[[4]](#footnote-4) The role of these plagues is to try and convince Pharaoh to let Israel go before he is struck by the plague of the firstborns, the deadly plague. Were Pharaoh to do so, he would spare himself and his people all that killing.

However, Pharaoh stubbornly refuses to let Israel go until the last plague, when the attribute of mercy can no longer stop the death in the plague of the firstborn. Pharaoh has free choice up until the last moment, but he fails to use it.

(Translated by David Strauss)

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1. The Rambam explicates his approach in great detail in the last of the *Eight Chapters*, the Rambam's introduction to his commentary to tractate *Avot*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Though there are those who might disagree, *Tanakh*, in my opinion, is a complete book which allows us to judge "the way of God to do righteousness and judgment" from within, and not only by way of the faith that we received from our forefathers concerning God's righteousness. I have addressed this principle in many places, especially in my book, *David U-Vat Sheva: Ha-chet, Ha-onesh Ve-hatikkun* (Alon Shevut: 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This is done for the reason explicitly stated in the Torah, that God gives them their inheritance owing to the fact that they are descendants of Avraham. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. We will discuss the plague of the wild animals in a different forum. The plague of hail brings about the deaths of some of the slaves. From the perspective of the Egyptians, the death of slaves is a matter of monetary damage, and not an issue of the loss of human life. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)