

Kashrut, Tzedakah, the festivals of Sukkot, Pesach, and Shavout, slaves, and free will are all part of one remarkable parsha, Parsha Re'eh. Interestingly though, with so much material to choose from, three words impacted me the most.

The three words are "harden your heart." In chapter 15:7, the Torah states, "Do not harden your heart and do not close your hand from your impoverished brother."

It was not the obvious meaning of the passage or the beauty of the imagery that impacted me, but rather that the phrase may be the one phrase in the Torah that has troubled me the most. In Exodus, the discussion that G_d hardened Pharaoh's heart after the fifth plague has truly confounded me. If G_d hardened Pharaoh's heart, then how could Pharaoh and the Egyptians be responsible for their actions? If they did not make the poor choices of their own free will, then how could they be deservedly punished? Why would G_d do that?

The interpretations and explanations I have studied never really satisfied me. The explanation that merely by continuing to act in an evil manner entrenched Pharaoh, thus G-d hardened his heart to finish the job or to set an example. Again this explanation is hardly satisfying, especially to a person who deals with crime and punishment on a daily basis.

It just did not seem fair, because maybe just maybe, Pharaoh would make a different choice at some point.

Why? Because we still have free will.

Why? Because it is rare for a person to be completely evil or completely good. What makes the difference are the choices a person makes.

So I spent much time trying make sense of why G_d would harden Pharaoh's heart, yet the Torah would warn us not to harden our hearts, regardless of the return on our investment and reach out to those less fortunate.

Truthfully, up until Monday of this week, I could not conceive of an explanation or meaning for this use of these three words in such disparate situations... Until I read the passages for what seemed like the hundredth time.

It made me think that sometimes in order to survive, we must compartmentalize our lives, which in some way unintentionally hardens our hearts. Doctors, treatment providers, first responders, survivors, and those who love, help, or give voice to those without voice must sometimes harden our hearts to merely survive.

Sometimes, good kind people must inoculate and insulate themselves against the constant barrage of news of horrible tragedy, injustice, hatred, intolerance, or overwhelming feelings that no matter what we do, nothing will ever be enough.

At times, we seem to harden our hearts in order to be able get through the day, just so we can continue to be able to help, to care, and to give. But to what end, is the empathy still there? Is the feeling still genuine when one is present, but is protecting oneself from the pain? If the heart is heavy, is the cure or aid as potent?

I believe I finally understand the juxtaposition of the phrase “hardening our hearts.” I can see that the more the heart is entrenched in hatred or evil in Pharaoh’s case, or in protecting itself, in the case of those who desperately want to make our world a better place, the more challenging it is for the heart to feel anything at all. I still disagree with the removal of Pharaoh’s free will in anticipation of the continual hardening of his heart, without giving him a chance to choose otherwise. I also vehemently disagree with punishing Pharaoh and Egypt for actions that were not of their own free will.

However, I think what the G_d is trying to remind us in Parsha Re’eh is that the we must absolutely give and absolutely open our hands to those in need, but we also must be careful to prevent the agonies we experience or see those in our world endure to irreparably harden our hearts.

G_d was warning us to be careful to give to the needy with a balance of practicality, pragmatism, and compassion, but also to allow ourselves to feel even when it feels like we can feel no more, and at times to

support those who have hardened their hearts for their own survival, no matter how difficult or painful it might be.

Only then will we have fulfilled the commandment of tzedakah, to give not only with our hands, but also our hearts. Our greatest gifts to those who need are not only financial or tangible, but are of spirit, empathy, and love. Life is wonderful, and life hurts. G_d tells us in the very first sentence of the parsha “See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse.” Our choices are presented to us as a blessing and a curse.

May we always choose to feel and to be a blessing, no matter how hard for our hearts that may be.

Shabbat Shalom