

## Pharaoh's Choices

In this week's Torah portion, Vaera, Moses and Aaron come again and again before Pharaoh, demanding, in God's name, "Let My people go." And Pharaoh refuses again and again. So God punishes the Egyptians with ten plagues.

But the text does not JUST say that Pharaoh refuses. It says that 'God hardened Pharaoh's heart'. This implies that Pharaoh has no choice but to refuse to let the Israelites go. And it doesn't just mention it once. It beats us over the head by repeating that line 20 times in the space of a few pages, from chapter 4 to chapter 14 in the Book of Exodus. Why?

First, let's review the text.

Ex. 4:21. And the Lord said to Moses, When you go back to Egypt, see that you do all those wonders before Pharaoh, which I have put in your hand; but **I will harden his heart**, so that he shall not let the people go.  
Ex. 7:3. And **I will harden Pharaoh's heart**, and multiply my signs and my wonders in the land of Egypt.  
Ex. 7:4. But **Pharaoh shall not listen to you**, that I may lay my hand upon Egypt, and bring forth my armies, and my people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great judgments.  
Ex. 7:13. **And he hardened Pharaoh's heart**, so that [Pharaoh] did not listen to them; as the Lord had said.  
Ex. 7:14. And the Lord said to Moses, **Pharaoh's heart is hardened**, he refuses to let the people go.

After the first plague, blood

Ex. 7:22. And the magicians of Egypt did likewise with their enchantments; and **Pharaoh's heart was hardened**, and he did not listen to them; as the Lord had said.

After the second plague, frogs

Ex. 8:11. But when Pharaoh saw that there was respite, **he hardened his heart**, and did not listen to them; as the Lord had said.

After the third plague, lice

Ex. 8:15. Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, This is the finger of God; and **Pharaoh's heart was hardened**, and he did not listen to them; as the Lord had said.

After the fourth plague, wild beasts

Ex. 8:28. **And Pharaoh hardened his heart** at this time also, and he would not let the people go.

After the fifth plague, pestilence

Ex. 9:7. And Pharaoh sent, and, behold, there was not one of the cattle of the people of Israel dead. **And the heart of Pharaoh was hardened**, and he did not let the people go.

After the sixth plague, boils

Ex. 9:12. **And the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh**, and he did not listen not to them; as the Lord had spoken to Moses.

After the seventh plague, hail

Ex. 9:34. And when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunders had ceased, he sinned yet more, **and hardened his heart**, he and his servants.

Ex. 9:35. And **the heart of Pharaoh was hardened**, and he would not let the people of Israel go; as the Lord had spoken by Moses.

Ex. 10:1. And the Lord said to Moses, Go to Pharaoh; **for I have hardened his heart**, and the heart of his servants, that I might show these my signs before him;

After the eighth plague, locusts

Ex. 10:20. But **the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart**, so that he would not let the people of Israel go.

After the ninth plague, darkness

Ex. 10:27. **But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart**, and he would not let them go.

Before the tenth plague, death of the firstborn

Ex. 11:10. And Moses and Aaron did all these wonders before Pharaoh; **and the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart**, so that he would not let the people of Israel go out of his land.

After the tenth plague, Pharaoh finally relents

Ex. 12:31. And he called for Moses and Aaron by night, and said, Rise up, and get out from among my people, both you and the people of Israel

Did God free Pharaoh's heart? Only temporarily, because after the Exodus is underway:

Ex. 14:4. **And I will harden Pharaoh's heart**, that he shall follow after them; and I will be honored over Pharaoh, and over all his army, that the Egyptians may know that I am the Lord. And they did so.

Ex. 14:8. **And the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh**, king of Egypt, and he pursued after the people of Israel; and the people of Israel went out with a high hand.

Ex. 14:17. And I, behold, **I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians**, and they shall follow them; and I will get honor over Pharaoh, and over all his army, over his chariots, and over his horsemen.

Note that it is not Pharaoh alone whose heart is hardened. Near the end, the heart of Pharaoh's servants is also hardened, and finally the hearts of all the Egyptians.

Also, note that it says only ten times that "God hardened Pharaoh's heart". The other ten times it just says that "Pharaoh's heart was hardened" or that "Pharaoh hardened his heart". So it's not God alone; Pharaoh was contributing also. During the ten plagues, the text says that Pharaoh hardened his own heart after the first five plagues; it's only after the sixth and higher plagues that God hardened Pharaoh's heart.

Why did God do that? A simple interpretation is that God made sure Pharaoh would remain stubborn so that God could display flashy miracles. The text practically says so. This would show, to Egyptians and Israelites alike, who is boss. It would also make it easier for the Israelites to accept the Torah later, since they will have seen tangible signs and wonders.

But this raises more questions than it answers. First, is it fair to Pharaoh? Second, is it fair to the Egyptians, who had to endure the plagues? Third, is it fair to the Israelites, since it delays their deliverance? Finally, do we human beings have free will or not? God said we do, when He said "I have placed before you life and death; choose life" (Deut. 30:19). So why this apparent exception?

As you might expect, a lot of commentators have tackled the issue. Let me review some important contributions.

The Midrash, in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, says that God will take away free will as punishment for past sins:

R. Johanan said: [One can always repent.] [When God says] 'for I have hardened his heart' (Ex. 10:1), does this not provide heretics with grounds for arguing that he [Pharaoh] had no means of repenting?

To which R. Simeon b. Lakish replied: Let the mouths of the heretics be stopped up... When God warns a man once, twice, and even a third time, and he still does not repent, then God closes his heart against repentance so that He should exact vengeance from him for his sins. Thus it was with the wicked Pharaoh. Since God sent five times to him [the first 5 plagues] and he took no notice, God then said: 'You have stiffened your neck and hardened your heart; well, I will add to your uncleanness' (Shemot Rabbah 13,3)

Nevertheless, standard Jewish teaching is that repentance is always available.

Rashi, in 11<sup>th</sup> century France, and Maimonides, in 12<sup>th</sup> century Egypt, agree: Pharaoh is beyond rescue through repentance, so God might as well use him to display his powers to both Egypt and Israel.

Abravanel, in 15<sup>th</sup> century Spain, notes that God hardens Pharaoh's heart AFTER each plague is over. This means that Pharaoh has concluded that the plagues were only natural disasters which Moses was able to predict in advance, and this conclusion allows Pharaoh to harden his own heart. So therefore, 'God hardened Pharaoh's heart' means 'God provided Pharaoh with the opportunity and the temptation to harden his own heart', and Pharaoh succumbed.

Sforno, in 16<sup>th</sup> century Italy, gives a very original explanation based on the notion that the best form of defense is attack. He says that God is actually PRESERVING Pharaoh's free will by hardening his heart! How so? Well, he says, the impact of the plagues was so devastating that Pharaoh would have been compelled to let the Jewish people go, just to stop the suffering. This would not be a sign of true submission. His repentance would not be genuine, but simply a means to an end. Therefore, God makes him less sensitive to the pain inflicted around him, so that he will have the free will to truly repent if he so chooses.

The Chafetz Chayyim, in 19<sup>th</sup> century Eastern Europe, gives an original explanation based on the siddur. He argues that God did not exactly take away Pharaoh's free will, but rather took away God's assistance to those who sincerely want to repent. Indeed, recall that in the fifth blessing of the Amidah, we say:

*Veha-chazirenu bit'shuva shlema lefanecha*

That is, we ask God to "cause us to return in complete repentance before You."

So the Amidah tells us we need God's help us achieve true repentance. By hardening Pharaoh's heart, God is saying to Pharaoh, "If you want to repent, you'll have to do it on your own. I won't help you".

Jonathan Sachs, the current chief rabbi of the United Kingdom, said that Pharaoh ruled everyone except himself. It was not the Israelites but he who was the real slave: Slave to his obstinate insistence that he, not God, ruled history. As Ben Zoma said in Pirkei Avot (Avot 4:1): "Who is mighty?" Not one who conquers his enemies but "One who subdues his passions."

So there you have it. God hardened Pharaoh's heart because Pharaoh was too far gone to be allowed to repent, because Pharaoh convinced himself that the plagues were natural disasters, because God wanted Pharaoh to make his decision without being pressured, because God would not grant divine assistance to Pharaoh's repentance, or because Pharaoh could not control his passions. Take your pick.

This answers the first question, "Why did God harden Pharaoh's heart?" It does not answer the second question, "Why is that line repeated twenty times in a few short pages? Why is it that significant?" That, I am afraid, is left as an exercise for the reader.

No, this is not Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur is far, both forwards and backwards. But repentance is not for Yom Kippur alone. It says in Pirkei Avot, 'Repent one day before your death' (Pirkei Avot 2:10). Since you don't know when your death will be, the Talmud tells us this means that you should repent and make amends every day, while there is still time (Shabbat 153a).

Submitted for your consideration on this Shabbat Vaera, in the year 5770.

Shabbat shalom.