



5 ways

to view Pharaoh's heart

While in some bibles all the references to Pharaoh's heart are translated as 'hardened,' in fact the Hebrew text draws on two different words: *hazaq* ('strong') and *kaved* ('heavy'). Jewish scholar Everett Fox translates as follows:

1. After the duel between Aaron's rod and Pharaoh's magicians: 'Pharaoh's heart remained strong-willed' (7:13).
2. After the plague of bloodied waters: 'Pharaoh's heart remained strong-willed' (7:22).
3. After the plague of frogs: Pharaoh 'made his heart heavy-with-stubbornness' (8:11).
4. After the plague of lice: 'Pharaoh's heart remained strong-willed' (8:15).
5. After the plague of insects: 'Pharaoh's remained heavy-with-stubbornness' (9:7).

Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (NY, 1995)

Larsson¹ notes that the Hebrew term *kaved*, when applied to a part of the body, may suggest a dysfunction in that part, akin to the biblical description of Moses' 'heavy-tongue' in 4:10. Thus *kaved lev*: 'heavy-hearted' can be interpreted as a heart that is not as responsive as it is designed to be... perhaps 'stubborn.'

So.... How does Fox translate the verse discussed overleaf? 'But YHWH made Pharaoh's heart strong-willed' (9:12).

Do these insights influence your interpretation of the text? Continue to ponder and discuss.

1. Goran Larsson, *Bound for Freedom* (Peabody, Mass., 1999), 56.

Light of Torah is a ministry arising from the Catholic community. In the spirit of Vatican II's call to Jewish-Christian reconciliation, Light of Torah encourages Torah reflection in homes and parishes, drawing on the insights of Jewish interpretative traditions. Reproduction permitted for non-commercial pastoral use.

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Exodus 6:2—9:35

Vaera:
'I appeared'

Why reflect on Torah?

In this week's Torah reading, God's liberating advances are met with repeated resistance by Pharaoh. Clearly the slavery of the Hebrews is no passing event. Already in Exodus we have seen its far-reaching devastation and as we read further it seems that any hint of freedom is doomed to be frustrated by Pharaoh's obstinacy.

Before becoming embroiled in all the action of Exodus, this is a moment for the reader—especially those who have been on this Torah journey for some time—to pause and reflect on the transition between books, Genesis to Exodus, relishing the challenge of some deeper questions...

For instance, nowhere does the biblical text give any specific reason as to why the Israelites were exiled in Egypt for so long: 400 years! Why the silence? Why this unexplained suffering? Jacob's family moved to Egypt for reasons which benefited them at the time. Could not God, or a divine representative, have warned their descendants to leave while they still had the chance? Might the closing stories of Genesis contain clues to fuel such a pondering?

Before moving further into Exodus, pause to cherish the Torah's complex depths, its power to call forth our deeper questions.



Light of Torah
www.lightoftorah.net

Text: Teresa Pirola
Design: Sarann Ryan
© Light of Torah, 2012



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Exodus 6:2–9:35

In our Torah portion this week, liberation for the Hebrew slaves has begun. With Moses and Aaron acting as agents, God confronts Pharaoh through dramatic displays of divine power over the natural world. Six of the ten plagues are covered by this Torah portion, and each is met with Pharaoh's resistance, repeatedly described in terms of his 'hardened heart.' Read 7:8—9:12 and join the sages' discussion.

Tasting Torah

'But the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he would not listen to them...' (9:12, NRSV).

In the battle between God and Pharaoh, five times we read that 'Pharaoh's heart was hardened,' presumably through his own doing. [Read these texts in 7:13,22; 8:11,15; 9:7] But after the sixth plague the text changes. It is now *the Lord* who is said to harden Pharaoh's heart (see 9:12). Does this seem strange to you? Why would a loving God wish to harden anyone's heart, let alone that of an egomaniac like Pharaoh? Ponder this with your *havrutah* partner.

Touching Torah

Down through the ages the Jewish sages have grappled with this question, especially puzzled by the idea that the Lord would violate the gift of freewill, a cherished value in Judaism. How, then, can we explain this text? Here we follow three lines of interpretation: first, that of Cassuto¹ who simply puts it down to ancient Hebrew idioms:

It was customary to attribute every phenomenon to the direct action of God. Of a barren woman it is said that 'the Lord has shut up her womb' (1 Sam. 1:5)... Consequently, the expression 'but I will harden his heart' is...the same as if it were worded: 'but his heart will be hardened.'

Convincing? 'Hardly!' reply other Jewish voices, chiding Cassuto for ignoring the significance of vital nuances in the text. So let's look further into the tradition...

Depthing Torah

A quite different approach, found in the writings of Sforno² and Albo,³ focuses on the problem of repentance through compulsion. What if Pharaoh were to repent only as a way of seeking relief from the plagues? According to these interpreters, where the text refers to the Lord 'hardening the heart' it actually means a strengthening of Pharaoh's capacity to endure the plagues. Thus the plagues are divine signs rather than intolerable punishments, so as to leave Pharaoh free to make a real choice, without compulsion.

Do you agree? Not all the sages do! As an alternative view, let's hear from Maimonides⁴ who proposes that Pharaoh '*forfeited the opportunity to repent.*' How so? Maimonides points to the inbuilt freedom in every person by God's design. When a person chooses the path of good it becomes easier and easier to walk that way. When a person chooses the path of sin it is increasingly easy to commit even greater sin, until the path seems irreversible. When, after six plagues and Pharaoh's repeated refusals, the text describes *the Lord* as hardening Pharaoh's heart, it refers to the radical extent of Pharaoh's sin. Pharaoh persists in choosing the path of evil. And *how* does he choose? At the root of his choice is God's irrevocable gift: freewill.

Doing Torah

In conversation with the sages, and drawing on your own close reading of the text, offer your best solution to the puzzle posed by 9:12 and tell us why you find it convincing.



From the midrash

Say to him, "the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you to say, 'Let my people go...'" (Exodus 7:16, NRSV).

In commenting on the above verse, the midrash notes that normally an enemy will try to catch his foe unawares,

"but God warned Pharaoh with every plague, in the hope that he might repent." [Ex.R. 9,9]

1. Cassuto, Umberto: Italian-Jewish Torah scholar, 1883-1951.
2. Sforno, Obadiah ben Jacob: Italy, c. 1470-1550.
3. Albo, Joseph: Spain, c. 1380-1444.
4. Maimonides, Moses ben Maimon (also known as Rambam): Spain, Egypt; 1138-1204.

Bibliography. Freedman and Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah: Exodus* (London/NY, 1983); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (Jerusalem, 1996).