



Light of Torah

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By Teresa Pirola

Pharaoh's hardened heart

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

By the time we reach chapter 6 of the book of Exodus, liberation for the Hebrews enslaved in Egypt has begun. With Moses and Aaron acting as agents, God confronts Pharaoh through dramatic displays of divine power over the natural world in the form of ten plagues.

Here, let's explore a portion of the narrative where six of the ten plagues are presented: chapters 7, 8 and the first 12 verses of chapter 9.

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 quoted above). Does this seem strange to you? Why would the God of love wish to harden anyone's heart?

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, let's follow the opinions of the Jewish sages along three paths of interpretation.¹ We start with that of Cassuto² 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...

A different approach, found in the writings of Sforno³ and Albo,⁴ 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 not intolerable punishments, leaving 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 Maimonides⁵ 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.

So what do you think? Is Maimonides' interpretation a convincing one? Now it's your turn... In conversation with the sages, with a friend, and drawing on your own close reading of the text as well as from life experience, offer *your* best solution to the puzzle posed by 9:12 and tell us why you find it convincing.

Blessings on your Torah reflections. •

1. This presentation draws from Nehama Leibowitz's article in *New Studies in Shemot* (NY: Lambda, 1996), 149-160.

2. Cassuto, Umberto: Italian-Jewish Torah scholar, 19-20th century. Quoted in Leibowitz, 152.

3. Sforno, Obadiah ben Jacob: Italy 15-16th century.

4. Albo, Joseph: Spain 13-14th century.

5. Maimonides, Moses ben Maimon (also known as Rambam): Spain, Egypt. 12th century.