

# DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

## Parshas Vaeira

### Left with No Choice

#### Understanding the Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart

וְאֲנִי אֶקְשָׁה אֶת לֵב פַּרְעֹה... וְלֹא יִשְׁמַע אֲלֵכֶם פַּרְעֹה וְנִתְתִּי אֶת יָדִי בְּמִצְרַיִם וְהוֹצֵאתִי אֶת צְבָאתִי  
אֶת עַמִּי בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בְּשִׁפְטִים גְּדֹלִים

*I shall harden Pharaoh's heart... Pharaoh will not listen to you, and I shall put My hand upon Egypt, and I shall take out My legions – My people, the Bnei Yisrael – from the land of Egypt, with great judgments.<sup>1</sup>*

#### INTRODUCTION: WHEN “YES” WAS NOT A OPTION

One of the major questions pertaining to our redemption and Exodus from Egypt relates to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. As our verses state, Hashem removed Pharaoh's capacity to agree to let the Jewish people go, in response to which he was visited with Hashem's retribution in the form of the ten plagues. This presents us with a basic problem: If Pharaoh was rendered unable to say “yes”, how could he then be punished for saying “no”?

Various classic answers have been provided for this question by the early commentators:

- ▷ The Rambam states<sup>2</sup> that, in subjugating and persecuting the Jewish people as he did, Pharaoh had sinned to such a heinous extent that his punishment itself entailed having his free-will removed from him and then being punished for saying no.
- ▷ The Ramban,<sup>3</sup> based on Midrash, explains that Pharaoh hardened his own heart during the first five plagues, in response to which Hashem hardened his heart regarding the second five.<sup>4</sup>

#### THE MAASEH HASHEM: A NATURAL PROCESS

A fascinating and illuminating approach to the entire concept of Hashem hardening Pharaoh's heart is

1 Shemos 7:3-4.

2 Hilchos Teshuva 6:3.

3 Commentary to Shemos 7:3.

4 See also Commentary of Seforno to Shemos ibid.

found in the writings of the Maaseh Hashem.<sup>5</sup> Rather than understanding that Hashem reached into Pharaoh's decision-making apparatus and turned off the switch, leaving him fundamentally incapable of deciding to let the Jewish people go, the Maaseh Hashem explains this idea in a much more natural way.

Often, people are in situations where they may say that they 'have no choice' but to pursue a certain course of action, when in reality what they mean is that the personality traits that govern them leave them no choice. Someone who has been insulted may feel that he is 'forced' to leave the room. Of course he *can* choose to stay if he wants, but his pride will not allow him to do so. Similarly, someone who subscribes to the notion that he is all-knowing or all-powerful may feel 'compelled' to cover up a mistake or a weakness. In truth, he is fully capable of admitting his error, but the way in which he wishes to see – or project - himself effectively bars this option from him.

The Maaseh Hashem explains that it was in this sense that Hashem hardened Pharaoh's heart.

### **FIRST ENCOUNTER: STEPPING BACK TOWARD REDEMPTION**

It is quite striking to note that the first meeting between Moshe and Pharaoh did not go very well at all. In fact, as a result of that meeting, things only got worse for the Jewish people, and Pharaoh actually increased their workload. Indeed, following that first episode, Moshe returns to Hashem and complains on the Jewish people's behalf: Not only had the redemption not begun moving forward, things had actually moved backward!

To this, Hashem responds:

עֵתָּה תִּרְאֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶעֱשֶׂה לְפָרְעֹה כִּי בְיַד חֲזָקָה יִשְׁלַחֵם

*"Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh, for with a strong hand he will send them out."<sup>6</sup>*

Let us ask :How has Hashem's response addressed Moshe's complaint ?Moshe asks why things went badly *so far*, and Hashem responded that *from this point on* things will go well! Seemingly, the question still persists: why did the first meeting have to go badly?

The answer is, Hashem is telling Moshe that now that things have gone badly in the first meeting, *that* is what has set the scene for Pharaoh sending the Jewish people out "with a strong hand". According to numerous commentators, the term 'strong hand' refers to the idea of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. Why is Hashem mentioning this idea to Moshe at this stage? Because it is this effect that has achieved through the first meeting going badly for Moshe, and well for Pharaoh! This initial victory allowed Pharaoh to conclude that he was indeed stronger than whatever force Moshe represented – a conclusion which he was egotistically only too happy to embrace. Once Pharaoh had adopted this view, it was then possible to smite him with any number of plagues with confidence that he would not relent, for to do so would be for him to admit that his initial assessment of the situation had been mistaken. Pharaoh's ego would never allow him to make such an admission, and thus was his heart hardened.

### **VIEWING COMPASSION AS WEAKNESS**

This idea will also explain to us something else that happened during that first encounter,

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5 Shemos chap. 11

6 Ibid. 6:1

namely, Moshe's threat in Hashem's name that He will smite Pharaoh's firstborn.<sup>7</sup> As we know, the smiting of the firstborn was the last of the ten plagues. That being the case, we may wonder why Moshe is warning Pharaoh about it before even the first plague has begun!

This, too, was part of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. Being the tenth plague, the smiting of the firstborn was clearly the most severe blow to Pharaoh and to Egypt; and indeed, Hashem brought nine relatively lesser plagues first. The reason why Pharaoh was warned about the tenth plague first was that, being the most severe, it was also the plague whose foretelling was most likely to cause Pharaoh to consider letting the Jewish people go. Indeed, had Pharaoh responded to this warning, he could have thereby avoided all of the plagues.

In Pharaoh's mindset, however, the exact opposite was true. For if *he* was capable of inflicting such a harsh blow to his enemy, he would not settle for a milder one. In his lexicon, there was only one possible reason why one would not inflict the harsher blow – because he was unable to do so! The alternative suggestion, i.e. that Hashem was fully capable of killing his firstborn but was refraining from doing so as an act of compassion, sadly did not register with Pharaoh. And thus he weathered the first nine plagues clinging on to his conviction that Moshe's Deity was not as powerful as He seemed to be; after all, had He not threatened to kill Pharaoh's firstborn and yet had not done so?<sup>8</sup>

Here, too, the hardening of Pharaoh's heart took the form of presenting him with a statement which the corrupt forces that governed him were then able to develop into a narrative that effectively guaranteed he would not relent.

## **SECOND ENCOUNTER: AN INDECISIVE VICTORY**

In a similar vein, the next meeting between Moshe and Pharaoh sees Pharaoh demanding a sign to demonstrate the veracity of Moshe's claim. In response to this, Moshe tells Aharon to throw his staff on the ground, where it turns into a snake. Pharaoh then tells his magicians to do likewise, and their staffs also turn into snakes, at which point Aharon's staff devours those of all the magicians.<sup>9</sup> This encounter, too, requires some reflection. For while it ultimately ended in victory for Moshe and Aharon and defeat for the Egyptians, nonetheless, there was a stage early on where they seemed well capable of matching Aharon's sign. As such, the victory somehow does not seem to have been quite as decisive as we might have hoped. To phrase it in more contemporary terms, Moshe and Aharon would appear to have won this encounter on points, while we might have rather been expecting a knockout.

Here we see a progression in the process of hardening Pharaoh's heart by allowing him to form the initial impression that his magicians' powers were equal to those of Aharon. After all, didn't they, too, all turn their staffs into snakes? In manipulating his ego-driven tendency to reach conclusions instantly and then stick with them even as they unraveled before his eyes, Hashem was furthering the hardening of his heart, allowing him to conclude that he was winning even as he was losing! And so, while Pharaoh's wise men all left that meeting in a hurry to go acquire new magic staffs, Pharaoh went home to celebrate another round of victory.

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7 Shemos 4:23

8 R' Yaakov Ettliger, *Minchas Ani*, Parshas Tazria, quoting his father

9 Shemos 7:8-13.

Indeed, the commentators point out that this process continued in each of the ten plagues. Even as his country was being systematically devastated in front of him, there existed some form of anomaly in each plague, whereby the way in which the plague arrived or was removed did not match up entirely with the way this was predicted. Although these discrepancies did nothing to mitigate against the essential impact of the plague even slightly, nonetheless, they allowed Pharaoh to cling to his assessment that Moshe's God was not as powerful as He claimed to be. Each plague contained, as it were, a "loophole for delusion," such that Pharaoh's heart was effectively hardened on an ongoing basis during the plagues by the plagues themselves!

### FROM EGYPT TO THE RED SEA

In truth, it is possible to see the Maaseh Hashem's more "natural" approach to our topic in the verses that describe the final chapter of the Exodus – the splitting of the Red Sea. In the prelude to that episode, Hashem instructs Moshe regarding drawing Pharaoh out from Egypt to the sea:

דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיָּשׁוּבוּ וַיַּחֲנוּ לִפְנֵי פִי הַחִירֹת... וְאָמַר פַּרְעֹה לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל נִבְכִּים הֵם  
בְּאֶרֶץ סֹגֵר עֲלֵיהֶם הַמִּדְבָּר וְחִזַּקְתִּי אֶת לֵב פַּרְעֹה וְרִדְף אַחֲרֵיהֶם וְאֶפְבְּדָה בְּפִרְעָה וּבְכָל  
חֵילוֹ

*Speak to the Bnei Yisrael and let them turn back and encamp before Pi Hachiros...  
And Pharaoh will say of the Bnei Yisrael, "They are confused in the land, the  
wilderness has locked them in." I will strengthen the heart of Pharaoh and he will  
pursue them, and I will be glorified through Pharaoh and his entire army.<sup>10</sup>*

Let us ask: Through what means, practically, was Pharaoh drawn out? The first verse implies that it was done through the Jewish people acting as if they were lost, thereby emboldening Pharaoh to chase after them. However, the second verse states that Hashem would "strengthen" Pharaoh's heart so that he would pursue them. If so, then why was the ruse necessary?

Here we see quite clearly that these two ideas were not distinct from each other; rather, they worked together. The "strengthening" and "hardening" of Pharaoh's heart took the form of his acting in accordance with his interpretation of events, as presented to him by Hashem.

### LATER EXAMPLES – SICHON

It is most interesting to note a similar discussion of the concept of 'hardening someone's heart', as relates to a lesser known case of this phenomenon later on in the Chumash.

When the Jewish people were approaching the land of Israel at the end of their forty-year sojourn in the wilderness, Sichon, the king of the Emorites went out to wage war against them.<sup>11</sup> The Midrash points out that this was an act of great folly on his part, for his cities were heavily fortified, and in leaving that protected setting he exposed himself to enormous harm. Why did he leave his cities? In referring to this event later on in the Torah, the verse states:

כִּי הִקְשָׁה ה' אֶלְקֵיךָ אֶת רוּחוֹ וְאִמְץ אֶת לִבּוֹ לְמַעַן תִּתּוֹ בְּיָדְךָ

*"For Hashem hardened his spirit, and fortified his heart, in order to deliver him into  
your hands."<sup>12</sup>*

10 Shemos 14:2-4.

11 See Bamidbar 21:21-24

12 Devarim 2:30

Once again we encounter the idea of Hashem hardening someone's heart and forcing them to make a decision which they otherwise would not have made .How was this done ?The Sefer Ha'ikarim<sup>13</sup> explains that the background to this event is described earlier on, when the Jewish people send a delegation to the king of Edom and ask for safe passage through his territory into the land of Israel. The king of Edom refuses this request, and then threatens the Jewish people with military action should they try and pass through his land. In response to this threat, the Jewish people back away move towards the territory of Sichon with the same request.<sup>14</sup> Sichon views the evasive action of the Jews as a sure sign of weakness, for he reasons that if they were capable of conquering the army of Edom, surely they would have done so! Having thus concluded that the Jews are not as strong as Edom, Sichon, who is stronger than Edom, is convinced that he will be able to go out and destroy them. Thus, he leaves his fortified cities, and rushes headlong to his defeat.

Here, too, we see the idea of Hashem 'hardening someone's heart' through a presentation of events which is then interpreted by their corrupt perception, leading them to make decisions which are ultimately their undoing.

### **CONCLUSION: ACTING ON EGO AND PLEADING EGOMANIA**

In light of this approach, let us now return to the question with which we opened this discussion. We will appreciate that understanding the idea of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart in this way will have major implications when we come to consider whether he was ultimately responsible and culpable for his decisions. At every point in the proceedings he was *essentially* capable of choosing the right path, but his corrupt character traits prevented him from doing so. A person cannot claim immunity from the consequences of his wrongful actions simply because they are product of ego and stubbornness. With the fundamental capacity to say yes intact, Pharaoh was thus held accountable and culpable for each of the times he said no.

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13 Sefer Ha'ikarim Sec 4 chap. 25

14 See Bamidbar 20:17-21