

BO

PHARAOH'S THRICE HARDENED HEART AND TRIPLICATE REDEMPTION

A

Pharaoh—Take Your Children or Your Cattle

At the beginning of Parshas Bo, Moshe asked Pharaoh to let Bnei Yisrael go. Pharaoh responded with a question: “Whom do you want me to release? Whom should I allow to leave Egypt?” Moshe replied, “*B'nareinu u'vizkeineinu neileich, b'vaneinu u'vivnoseinu b'tzoneinu u'vivkareinu neileich ki chag Hashem lanu*, We will go with our old people and young people, with our sons and daughters, with our sheep and our cattle, for it is our holiday for Hashem.” Pharaoh responded with his blessing for the men to leave but not more than that, and definitely no children. He then chased Moshe out of the palace.

After this exchange, Hashem punished Pharaoh with the plague of *arbe*, the eighth of the *makkos*, and then *choshech*, the ninth of the *makkos*. After the black darkness enveloped Mitzrayim for three days, Pharaoh said to Moshe, “Yes, you can take your children, But I will not allow you to take cattle.” Moshe asserted, “We will take everything we need, all of our livestock.” Pharaoh said, “I will let you take the children, but not the cattle.” Pharaoh

again drove Moshe from the palace. Then, after *makkas bechoros*, Pharaoh finally relented and sent out Bnei Yisrael together with their children and their cattle.

Pharaoh changed his mind several times. What is the meaning of this progression? At first, Pharaoh allowed men but not children, then children but not cattle, and then in the end he freed all adults, children, and cattle. What are we to make of this?

B

Why Did Hashem Take Away Pharaoh's Free Will?

Hashem told Moshe from the very beginning of his mission, "I will harden Pharaoh's heart. I will strengthen his heart so that he will not give in to the plagues." Over the course of the plagues, especially the last five, the Torah says that Hashem interfered in Pharaoh's decision-making process, strengthening his heart. Hashem gave Pharaoh the resilience to resist the pressure of the *makkos*. The commentaries on the Torah address a basic question. In Torah, the principle of free will is fundamental to the human experience; all adults are free to choose between good and evil. Adam and Chava were first given free choice to choose to eat from the Eitz Hada'as or to refrain. We could say the whole Torah is about people choosing between good and evil. "*R'eih nasati l'fan-echa hayom es hachayim v'es hatov v'es hamaves v'es hara*, I have placed in front of you the choice between good and evil, between life and death" (Devarim 30:15). "You should choose life!" (ibid. 19). It is as if Hashem said, "I will not force your choices. I enable and charge you to choose." The moral choice is left completely up to people.

If so, how and why did Hashem interfere with Pharaoh's response to the moral dilemma of whether or not to free the Jews? This freedom of choice is Hashem's gift to humanity. Had Pharaoh

been left alone, he probably would have released the Jews after the fifth or sixth plague. Why did Hashem break the cardinal rule of giving man free choice?

The Shem Mishmuel offers three answers. The first is from the Rambam. In Hilchos Teshuva (6:1-2), the Rambam writes that the core of repentance is freedom of choice. We have freedom to choose whether or not to sin, whether or not to do a good deed. Even after sinning, we maintain an amazing freedom of choice. We have the choice to repent and thus retroactively revoke the bad deed. This is an amazing kindness of God. If we regret our sin and decide never to do it again, the sin can be wiped out or even turned into a good deed. This power of choice remains even after the sin.

The Rambam then asks: how did Pharaoh lose the power to repent? Pharaoh was condemned to remain evil until Hashem delivered the final punishment to Pharaoh and his people. The Rambam explains that there is an exception in very rare cases for particularly evil people such as Pharaoh. When a person reaches such extraordinary levels of evil, Hashem revokes the power to repent. Hashem will not accept his *teshuva* and, in fact, He won't even allow him to do *teshuva*. Hashem will not let him change, and he will remain evil to the very end. Similarly, in our times, Hitler died as Hitler, unrepentant. The Rambam explains that this is a punishment from Hashem, because He is so disgusted by the person that He takes away his power to change. The extreme sinner then becomes like an animal who cannot repent past deeds. These evil people have made themselves into animals, and Hashem takes away their freedom of choice. This is why Hashem hardened Pharaoh's heart.

The Ramban offers a second answer to this question. He writes that people sometimes repent for different reasons. In the best case, a person realizes the evil of his deeds. He is ashamed and regretful, so he asks God to forgive him. This is an appropriate, higher level of repentance. This is cognitive repentance, that

of the *neshama* and *seichel*, in which a person truly understands how evil he has become and wants that evil expunged from his personal history.

Sometimes, though, a person repents out of fear of punishments that will come in response to his evil deeds. Pharaoh was not repenting because he recognized the evil of his deeds. If you would have asked him if it was wrong to enslave an entire nation, if it was wrong to throw babies into the river, he would have said, "It is not wrong at all. We have the right to subjugate them, they are our possessions." Pharaoh still believed in the moral correctness of his actions. Why would Pharaoh want to release the Jews after the fifth or sixth *makka*? He himself didn't want to suffer and didn't want his people to suffer so much. This kind of *teshuva* is not morally motivated. It is just accommodating a superior force.

The Ramban says that sometimes Hashem will interfere with this kind of *teshuva*. Sometimes, Hashem will place an irrational obstinacy in the person to withstand the punishments that Hashem is sending his way. Pharaoh was given a superhuman stubbornness so that he retained the ability to maintain his immoral beliefs. He did so, in fact, until the very end. The Ramban explains that this is not an exception to the rule of free will. Pharaoh chose to keep his evil perspective even amid the horrible punishments. It is as if Hashem said, "I will not let him bend as a stick being broken in two. I will let him keep his immoral choice, because I want to punish the Egyptians some more. I want the world to learn more about My justice. I will not let Pharaoh give in due to practical considerations. As long as Pharaoh is committed to evil, I will not help him repent."

To summarize, the Rambam says God took away Pharaoh's capacity to choose good. The Ramban says the moral choice always was there. If he would have chosen to recognize that his ways were immoral, God would have given him the choice to repent. But Pharaoh wanted to repent only for practical considerations, because he was being bullied and battered. Therefore,

God bolstered him so that he wouldn't feel compelled to give in to outside pressures.

A third explanation was given by the father of the Shem Mishmuel, the Avnei Neizer. The human being is a combination of intellect and emotion. Emotions are dynamic, and they fluctuate. A person can fluctuate between hatred and love, between goodness and wickedness, between kindness and selfishness. The emotional makeup of a man or woman is kaleidoscopic. There are different phases and shades. Emotions are continuously changing; they are not monochromatic. The *seichel* of a person, on the other hand, does not change. An intellectual concept, such as the equation two plus two equals four, does not change. Whether or not I like you can change in a moment because it is an emotional concept.

Pharaoh and his intellect asserted that slavery was an important backbone of the Egyptian economy. The country was built on the work of the slaves. With slave power, Egypt was able to build pyramids. It was able to become the strongest empire on the planet. If Egypt were to free the slaves, it would collapse. This was an issue of politics, economics, and national security. Pharaoh said, "Egypt cannot bend on this issue of slavery, no matter the disasters that befall us in the form of the plagues of Moshe. The alternative, a total collapse of our empire, is worse. It is a fundamental existential threat to our way of life." Pharaoh said, "I will not free slaves, no matter the price. Freeing the slaves would be national suicide."

This was an intellectual stance. Intellect is stubborn and unchanging. If intellect believes that something is true, it does not change. Pharaoh said that the whole logic and concept of his country was built on the work of the slaves. Without slave power, there would be no Egypt. He was therefore ready to suffer any and all plagues to keep the slaves. The mind is stronger than outside circumstances. This was the stubbornness of Pharaoh, the stubbornness of *seichel*. Hashem merely helped his *seichel* be stronger than his emotional fears.

C

Three Levels of National Soul

We find three different terms in the Torah when referring to Pharaoh and Mitzrayim. Sometimes, the Torah refers to Pharaoh by name: Pharaoh. Other times, the Torah refers to him as *melech Mitzrayim*, the king of Egypt. And sometimes, the Torah refers to Mitzrayim as an acting entity. What is behind these different terms?

“Pharaoh” refers to the person who sat on the throne. “*Melech Mitzrayim*,” according to the Zohar, refers to the archangel of Egypt. Every nation has an angel that represents its national energy. The word Mitzrayim refers to the people of Egypt. Every nation, just like every individual, has three levels of existence. These levels are related to the three levels of the soul: *nefesh*, *ruach*, and *neshama*. *Nefesh* refers to the fundamental, physical life force. *Ruach* refers to the spirit, the emotional life of a person. *Neshama* refers to *seichel*, the intellectual life of a person.

This multi-level existence is true about nations as well. Every nation has an instinctive life force, a *nefesh*. Every nation has a *ruach*, a certain spirit and emotional style. Every nation also has a *neshama*—beliefs, values, and intellectual ideas that drive that nation.

Pharaoh represents the *neshama*, the highest level of intellectual life. *Melech Mitzrayim*, the archangel, represents the *ruach*, the spirit of Egypt. The people of Egypt are the fundamental life force of the nation, corresponding to the *nefesh*.

D

Three Main Sins

The three main sins of human beings—idolatry, licentiousness, and murder—stem from these three levels of human existence.

The *nefesh*, the fundamental biological life force, is corrupted by the sin of murder. The higher, spiritual life force is corrupted by *giluy arayos*. And the sin that corrupts the human intellect is idolatry. Egypt corrupted all three levels. There was much murder in Egyptian society. We know this all too well, because we were the victims! Egypt also had a corrupt spirit, full of licentiousness, as stated in the book of Yechezkel (chapter 23). At the intellectual *neshama* level, Pharaoh refused to acknowledge the existence of God. Instead, Pharaoh insisted and said, “I have made myself.”

These three levels of Egyptians were all corrupt. Therefore the plagues attacked the country on all three levels—the basic life force, the spiritual, and the intellectual values.

Kabbala and Chassidus explain the split in the *parshiyos* that detail the *makkos*. Parshas Va'eira recounts seven plagues, while Parshas Bo has the last three. Kabbala teaches that there are ten levels of spirituality in the world (*sefiros*), divided into two sections. The higher section consists of *mochin*, the three intellectual manifestations of God in the world. The lower section consists of *middos*, the seven emotional states of God's interaction with the world. These seven represent the *nefesh* and *ruach*. The higher three *mochin* represent Hashem's intellect as it comes into the world. Together, these *sefiros* represent God's creative, life-giving energy on three levels: as a life force, as a spiritual drive, and as an intellectual power.

Interestingly, the plagues worked backwards. The first plagues started by attacking the life force of Egypt. Then they worked their way up to the spirit. The last three *makkos*, the ones mentioned in Parshas Bo, attacked the top three intellectual *sefiros* of *keser*, *chochma*, and *bina*. Thus, the plagues attacked and deconstructed the defiled intellect, spirit, and physicality of Egypt.

E

Three Hardened Hearts

We find three terms in relation to Pharaoh's obstinate refusal to release the Jews: 1) *hiksha*, Pharaoh's heart was hard; 2) *vayechezak*, he strengthened his heart; and 3) *kaveid lev*, his heart was heavy.

The Shem Mishmuel explains that these three terms relate to the different levels of Pharaoh's soul. At the level of *nefesh*, Pharaoh should have instinctively responded to the first *makkos*. But *kaveid lev Pharaoh*, his instinct was dense and dead, like a finger that has lost too much blood. Even if damaged, the body doesn't respond. This is why Pharaoh didn't respond like any normal person would have responded to the pain of the *makkos*.

Sometimes, people respond to emotional stimuli. Pharaoh should have been overwhelmed by fear when he saw the wild animals, locusts, and other plagues. Normal people would have been terrified. But he wasn't, because Hashem gave him bravery, *hiksha es libo*. No matter what was happening around him, Pharaoh had courage. The Shem Mishmuel calls this courage *k'shei ruach*.

Finally, Hashem gave Pharaoh strength of heart, meaning Hashem empowered Pharaoh's intellect to maintain his stance. Pharaoh held his conviction that the slaves must remain in Egypt under all costs. This is *chazak lev Pharaoh*, strong conviction of mind.

Thus, we see that Hashem strengthened Pharaoh on all three levels: *nefesh*, *ruach*, and *seichel*.

F

Pharaoh's Debate with Moshe

During the eighth plague, the sorcerers said to Pharaoh, "Don't you know that Mitzrayim is doomed?" They appealed to his reason. Even with Pharaoh's beliefs about what was necessary for

the survival of Egypt, it didn't matter. Egypt was being utterly destroyed. Pharaoh's *nefesh* and *ruach* had already been defeated by the earlier plagues. Now, Pharaoh's own intellect was beginning to wonder. "Maybe I was wrong? Maybe the country actually is being destroyed?" So, he called to Moshe and asked, "Who will leave?" "Men and children," Moshe responds. Pharaoh accepted that the men could go, but not the children. "If you are going to celebrate a holiday for your God, what do little children know about God and celebrations? They are wearing diapers; how can they celebrate with God?! This is an illogical request, you must be tricking me. I will not accept this illogical request, even though I am already willing to release you and relax the slavery demand." Moshe insisted, though, that the people must take their children with them.

Moshe could have brought the adults to Har Sinai to receive the Torah and then returned to take the children. Why did Moshe need to take the children out of Egypt? The Jewish People in Egypt were completely enveloped by the society of that country, like a fetus in its mother's womb. Moshe reasoned, "How can we bring Torah to children who are completely absorbed in Egypt? If they would remain inside that country, we would not be able to reach them." Moshe therefore insisted, "We must take them out of this environment so they will have a chance of knowing what Torah is. We can't train them in this country."

Pharaoh had no grasp of the human soul. We already analyzed his failure at the levels of *nefesh*, *ruach*, and *seichel*. But there still are two more levels: *chaya* and *yechida*, life and oneness. These two levels of the soul are outside of the body. Most people are aware of their instincts, emotions, and their intellect. But there are things beyond instinct, emotion, and intellect. With instinct, we act. Emotion makes us feel. We think with intellect. But who is the identity who employs these faculties and acts in these ways? This is our *chaya* and *yechida*. They are us, but they are beyond our awareness. The Shem Mishmuel calls this a *makif*. A *makif* surrounds us. It is beyond the individual details of who we are as

we understand ourselves. There is something beyond each of us that we don't understand.

Many people ponder the question: Who am I? What is the central *it* that is I? It is difficult to come to the essential I. I am more than my instincts, emotions, and intellect. I exceed all three and am deeper than them. This essential I is called the *chaya*. As much as I search for this part and I know it is there, it still is beyond me. The Shem Mishmuel sometimes refers to this level as *tzelem Elokim*, the image of God. Obviously, the image of God cannot be contained completely within the human body. My *tzelem Elokim* is of a much greater magnitude. I know that I am more than my thinking, emotions, and instincts. It is a deep, broad, undefinable identity. This is *me, myself*. This is *chaya*.

Moshe told Pharaoh, "We must take our children. You cannot understand it." This is a *makif*, a concept beyond logic. We cannot fully explain the commitment of a parent to a child, even though it has many factors of intellect, instinct, and emotion. The commitment of Jewish parents to their children is especially difficult to explain. Our children are more important to us in some ways than we ourselves are. They are a *makif*, an enveloping, overarching purpose for our lives. This dedication is beyond our understanding, but it is essential to who we are as Jews. It is at our core identity as God's people. As the Torah states about Hashem's choice of Avraham to begin the Jewish People, "*Ki y'dativ l'ma'an asher y'tzave es banav v'es beiso acharav v'sham'ru derech Hashem*. I have recognized him and know that he will train his children and his household after him to keep the way of Hashem" (Bereishis 18:19).

After the next plague, Pharaoh asked, "Why would you need to take the animals? Don't take them!" The Shem Mishmuel explains that the second *makif* is called *yechida*. *Chaya* envelopes me and includes my children with me. But there is an even greater envelope, that of the *yechida*. At this level, everything is interrelated, connected in a mysterious, cosmic connection. We are all

connected; not just parents and children, but all people, animals, inanimate objects, and the whole world.

Moshe proclaimed to Pharaoh that freedom is not just for adult people. Freedom must include children, animals, and all things. The freedom from Mitzrayim extends into the possessions and surroundings of the Jewish People. Everything has to be free. This is why Moshe insisted that we must take our animals out with us. This may also explain why Hashem instructed the Jews to take things from the Egyptians. The Exodus from Egypt brought everything out of Egypt, thereby bringing freedom to the entire world.

This lesson of the *makif* carries amazing implications. Beyond our basic interests and experiences, there are greater, unfathomable elements that are eternal. This aspect of *yechida* unites all elements of creation. This is a sacred value and a secret of Torah, Kabbalah, and Chassidus. We should recognize the existence of things that are beyond us. The great Chassidic Rebbes would experience the *chaya* and *yechida* in their daily lives as they walked through the world, and so can we.

May we make good choices and develop all the levels of our individual and communal souls, the soul within us and the soul around and beyond us. May we merit the universal redemption of the world and all of its peoples, especially the Jewish nation and each individual Jew.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What level of the soul did the last three plagues attack?
2. Give three explanations of how and why Hashem hardened Pharaoh's heart.
3. What levels of Pharaoh's heart were unmoved by the plagues?
4. What is the Chassidic interpretation of *hiksha*, *vayechezak*, and *kaveid*?
5. What is a *makif*?
6. What is *chaya*?
7. What is *yechida*?
8. Why did Moshe insist on taking children to Har Sinai? Why the animals, too?

EXERCISE

1. For a week, chart your activities and thoughts. Identify from which of the five levels of your soul they emanate.

