

A Word for Torah - Congregation Darchei Noam – Bo 5772

**“Don't tell my heart, my achy breaky heart, I just don't think it'd understand”
(Billy Ray Cyrus)**

”And God said to Moses: Come to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, that I might show these signs of mine in his midst.” (10:1)

Why so many references to hardening Pharaoh's heart? Doesn't this take away Pharaoh's free choice and opportunity to return and repent?

There are many approaches to this question. The classic answer offered by Rashi suggests that past a certain point of Pharaoh's evil deeds, there was no chance he would repent. Thus God was justified in ignoring this issue in order to “show these signs of mine in his midst.” R. Joseph Albo (15th Century Spain) and R. Obadiah Sforno (16th century Italy) suggest that "hardening of the heart" is not a removal of free will but rather a toughening of the endurance to bear difficulty. Thus, any decision Pharaoh might make to let the Jews go would still be his own, rather than resulting from the pressure of the plagues. Rambam, offering a totally different approach, believes that after a certain point, the "hardening of the heart" was part of Pharaoh's punishment and consequences. In this type of drama, there comes a moment when one has lost the capacity to make intelligent, rational and moral choices. Psychologically, this could be seen as one who countenances and encourages injustice for a long period. The person becomes immune, not losing any sleep over the atrocities. One could easily compare this to many of the Nazis and their allies, whose hearts over time were hardened as they became completely insensitive to the horrors they were perpetrating. After a point, whatever they themselves suffer in war becomes part of the consequences. After all, if Hitler had said in 1944, "I do *teshuvah*!" the war certainly would not have stopped at that point!

But is there really no chance for return and repentance? There is a delightful Midrash that states that after the splitting of the Red Sea, Pharaoh escaped and settled in Nineveh, Assyria. He was chosen (elected?) King and, in fact was the king of Nineveh in the Book of Jonah. When Jonah came with the message of God's threatened imminent destruction of Nineveh, Pharaoh no longer hardened

his heart. He had seen the consequences of this and immediately repented, bringing his entire community with him! This Midrash teaches us that return and repentance is indeed possible, and people can truly be rehabilitated. That is, I suppose, one of the many reasons we read Jonah on Yom Kippur afternoons.

This can be a powerful message for all of us. Pharaoh had to endure a “rock-bottom experience” – the splitting of the Red Sea and the loss of his army. But somehow, when faced with another situation of imminent Divine destruction, he acted differently. So the hope for change is always present even under the direst of circumstances.

Shabbat Shalom – a Good Shabbos

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