



The Curse and Blessing of a Hardened Heart

From the archives: Written as hostages still remained in captivity, Rabbi Hauer highlights the ability of the Jewish People to not take the path of least resistance of freeing unrepentant murderers, and instead stay the course for the goal of long-lasting peace in Israel.

Is a hardened heart a curse or a blessing?

In the end, as the Reich imploded ... the scientific side of the Final Solution broke down or was abandoned and ... merged into one insensate force: the desire, right up to the last possible moment, to kill any Jews who remained.... As the front collapsed, the SS made determined efforts to march columns of Jews away from it so they could be killed at leisure. The fanaticism with which they clung to their duties as mass murderers long after the Third Reich was irretrievably

doomed is one of the gruesome curiosities of human history. (Paul Johnson, History of the Jews p 512)

It was not only the Nazis whose fanatical hatred of the Jews persisted to the point of self-destruction. We sense the same in the diabolical evil of Hamas and their many Palestinian supporters who continue to celebrate their monstrous attacks on Israel despite the destruction it has brought upon them by their own design. And it all may originate in what we read in the Torah (Shemot 7:3, etc.) about the hardening of Pharaoh's heart that led him to continue his enslavement and persecution of the Jews to the point where his own people beseeched him to let the Jews go, saying, (Shemot 10:7) "Do you not yet realize that Egypt is being destroyed?!"

Seen this way, the hardening of Pharaoh's heart was not a one-time mind game played by G-d on the wicked Pharaoh, but a salient and harsh feature of the Jewish historical experience throughout the generations (ma'aseh avot siman l'banim), a pattern we find in the pathological antisemitism we repeatedly encounter.

While the notion of a pathological hatred of the Jews gives us a framework to understand the biblical story of Pharaoh, we nevertheless need to understand Hashem's role in breeding this hatred. The Torah regularly describes this

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hardening as G-d's doing, "I will harden Pharaoh's heart," raising the philosophical problem that if G-d had removed from Pharaoh the freedom to choose otherwise, how could Pharaoh be culpable for decisions that were not his to make? Many explained that Pharaoh was liable as it was he alone who had originally chosen the path of hatred that he then became locked into, punished as it were with a loss of free will to choose a better path (see Rashi and Ramban to Shemot 7:3, Rambam Hilchot Teshuva 6:3).

Rav Ovadya Sforno (Shemot 7:3; see also Ramban there) offered another interpretation that has its own painful resonance in current events. He suggests that in fact Pharaoh was not precluded from making a truly better choice and breaking free from the spiral of hatred, and that the hardening of his heart was what preserved his ability to make that choice. The hardening was a divine boost of fortitude to stubbornly withstand the pressure campaign of the plagues and not simply release the Jews as the path of least resistance, the easy way out. To reach the end goal of Egypt knowing Hashem, Pharaoh needed to hold out until he and they would finally encounter Hashem himself passing through Egypt on the night of the Exodus. Had Pharaoh's heart not been hardened, the campaign would have ended earlier, and that goal would never have been achieved.

In this light, hardening of the heart may be a blessing worth seeking as it may be vital to our own future. Klal Yisrael can easily buckle under the painful pressures it has been subject to through almost 500 days of cruel imprisonment and conflict. The path of least resistance would move Israel to immediately do whatever it takes to end the conflict and bring the hostages and its soldiers home, even if it entails freeing horrific and unrepentant murderers and ending the war before having achieved essential goals.

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As that is the case, we would benefit from the kindness G-d extended to Pharaoh, that He harden our hearts, not heaven forbid by making us callous to anyone's suffering, but by giving us the fortitude and determination to stay the course if and as necessary and make the choices that will yield a more completely and continuously peaceful future, impacting generations. ■

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