



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Bo 5775

By Rabbi Rachel Timoner

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In Parashat Bo, we gain some fascinating insight into the psychology of Pharaoh as Moses requests the Israelites' freedom and the king repeatedly refuses. The text opens: "Then Adonai said to Moses, "Come to Pharaoh. For I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants..."¹

This raises a question that has troubled our ancestors for generations: Why would God make Pharaoh's heart less flexible, less sensitive, less tender—if the goal was to set the Israelites free? Wouldn't it be preferable for God to *soften* Pharaoh's heart so he could recognize the Israelites' suffering and turn his heart toward God, like the king of Nineveh who repented in response to Jonah? The very fact that God prevents Pharaoh from changing his mind is troubling. What kind of just God takes away free will, even of an oppressor?

In Genesis Rabbah, a midrashic collection of the first several centuries of the common era, the Rabbis pursue this line of questioning as Rabbi Yochanan asks: "Doesn't this provide heretics with grounds for claiming that he [Pharaoh] had no means for repenting, since it says, 'for I have hardened his heart'?" To which Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish replies: "Let the mouths of the heretics be stopped up... When God warns a man once, twice, and even a third time, and he still does not repent, then God closes his heart against repentance so that God should not exact vengeance from him for his sins. Thus it was with the wicked Pharaoh. Since God sent five times to him and he took no notice, God then said, "You have stiffened your neck and hardened your heart, so I will add to your uncleanness."²

In other words, according to the Midrash, Pharaoh had hardened his own heart against the Israelites first—God simply solidified a psychological change that Pharaoh brought upon himself. After habituating himself to not feeling, to not bending, Pharaoh loses the ability to feel and to change.

Social psychologist and humanistic thinker Erich Fromm notes that this is part of human nature: "The more man's heart hardens, the less freedom he has to change; the more he is determined by previous action. But there comes a point of no return when man's heart has become too hardened and so deadened that he has lost the possibility of freedom."³

¹ Exodus 10:1

² Genesis Rabbah 13:3

³ Erich Fromm, *You Shall Be as Gods*, p. 81

In the Biblical story, it is interesting to note that it is not Pharaoh alone whose heart is hardened. It is Pharaoh and his servants. It is easier and more convenient to pin the hardened heart on a single bad actor, but often the roots of injustice lie in the mindset of the greater society, many of whom benefit from perpetuating systems of injustice.

In our world today there are injustices that take place every day—and most of the time we simply look away—our hearts hardened so that we are aware of suffering but don't act to alleviate it. But when we take action to promote human rights and human dignity, we are seizing an opportunity not to look away, not to become indifferent, not to harden ourselves beyond return.

A few weeks ago, I was with my 12-year-old son when the Eric Garner verdict came down, and suddenly the shocking footage of Mr. Garner's gruesome death was playing right in front of our eyes. I looked over and saw my son's stricken face. He already had been following the story of Michael Brown and the police brutality against the protesters in Ferguson with outrage. "Why?" he asked me again and again. "How can they do that? He asked similar questions again, after seeing the film *Selma*. He wanted to know about the police who viciously beat the peaceful marchers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. He asked: "How can people be like that?" He became quiet and put his head down, and I saw tears drop onto the kitchen table.

I had forgotten what it was like to have such a tender heart. I had a different reaction to the movie: I knew the story and thought it was moving and well-timed for the voting rights struggles of today; but by the next morning I was already thinking about other things, going on with business as usual.

We all begin with tender hearts. We all begin soft and open and vulnerable, able to be moved by the face of another, by injustice, by brutality, by neglect. Ready to change, wanting to change, determined to change what so obviously must be changed.

At some point in our lives—out of fear, out of routine, out of assimilation into the world as it is—we steel ourselves against human suffering—the bleeding and bruises of the innocent, the obscene brutality of people in power and those who enforce it. We who benefit from structural injustice lose our sense of shock, our sense of outrage. We choose to harden our own hearts. We toughen up, and this allows us to be in the broken world without falling apart ourselves.

Although this hardening is a protective choice at first, before we know it, the choice to harden our own hearts is taken away from us. We suddenly find that even in the midst of the plagues all around us, we don't feel much at all. We look at conditions every day that should break us apart, or spur us to urgent action, yet often they do not.

That is why we must seize every opportunity we are given to soften our own hearts, by taking action for justice and against human suffering. That is why we must join campaigns like AJWS's *We Believe* campaign to stop violence against women, girls and LGBT people—campaigns that insist we not lose hope, that we not accommodate ourselves to the world as it is, but demand a world in which women, people of color, and LGBT people can live free of the violence that binds their lives.

Rabbi Leonard Beerman, of blessed memory, the Founding Rabbi Emeritus of my synagogue, Leo Baeck Temple, died on December 24. His life's work was to soften our hardened hearts. In his last sermon, on Yom

Kippur, he put out this call: “Our world needs troubled people, Jews even. Men and women who care. Who are not afraid to be sensitive and tender... who can resist all those, friends and enemies, who seek to prevent us from seeing the utter uniqueness and irreplaceability of our own and others’ souls. ”

During this year, when structural racism and inequality have been so clearly unmasked in our country, and violence against women and LGBT people persists throughout the world, let us dare to break open our hardened hearts. Let us not fall victim, as Pharaoh did, to our hearts becoming so hard that we can no longer respond to suffering. Let us break the habit of shielding our tenderness out of fear that we cannot tolerate the pain. Let us feel, and from that tenderness, begin to change.



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