

Pharoah's Hardened Heart and the Plague of Hail

R. Yaakov Bieler
Parashat VaEra, 5766

From the time that HaShem first Informs Moshe of the mission to lead the Jews out of Egypt, Moshe learns that Pharoah is going to prove to be quite obstinate.

Shemot 3:19-20

And I already know that the **king of Egypt is not going to allow you to go**, without (experiencing) a strong hand.

And I will Send forth My Hand, and I will Strike Egypt with all of My Wonders that I will Perform in his midst, and afterwards he will send you out.

Although originally, it is Pharoah himself who without any sort of outside influence refuses to grant the Jews their freedom from servitude—

Ibid. 7:13

And **the heart of Pharoah was hardened** (following the sign of Aharon's **Staff** turning into a serpent), and he didn't listen to them (Moshe and Aharon), as HaShem had Said.

Ibid. 7:22

And the magicians of Egypt did the same (with regard to turning water into **Blood**) with their secret arts, **and Pharoah's heart was hardened**, and he did not listen to them, as HaShem had Said.

Ibid. 8:11

And when Pharoah saw that there was relief (from the **Frogs**) and **he hardened his heart** and didn't listen to them, as HaShem had Said.

Ibid. 8:15

And the magicians said to Pharoah: It (the Plague of **Lice**) is the finger of God. **And Pharoah's heart was hardened**, and he did not listen to them, as HaShem had Said.

Ibid. 8:28

And Pharoah hardened his heart also this time (with respect to the Plague of **Wild Animals**), and he did not send the people (the Jews) out.

Ibid. 9:7

And Pharoah sent (an investigative team) and behold, from the herds of Israel not a single animal had died (in Goshen, as a result of the Plague "**Dever**"), and **Pharoah's heart was hardened** and he did not send the people out.

—beginning with the Plague of **Boils**, God Assures via Divine Intervention that the monarch continues to reject Moshe's demands until the enactment of the final Plague, "Makat Bechorot" (the Plague of the **Firstborn**) is completed.

Ibid. 9:12

And **HaShem Hardened the heart of Pharoah** (following the Plague of **Boils**), and he did not listen to them, as God had said to Moshe.

Ibid. 9:34-35

And when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the **Hail** and the thunder had ceased, he continued to sin and **hardened his heart**, he and his servants.

And the **heart of Pharaoh was hard** and he did not send the Children of Israel as God had said via Moshe.

Ibid. 10:1

And HaShem Said to Moshe: Come to Pharaoh, **because I Hardened his heart and the heart of his servants** in order to Place these Signs of Mine in his midst.

Ibid. 10:20

And **HaShem Hardened the heart of Pharaoh** (after the Plague of **Locusts**) and he did not send the Children of Israel.

Ibid. 10:27

And **HaShem Hardened the heart of Pharaoh** (after the Plague of **Darkness**, the plague immediately preceding "Makat Bechorot") and he did not allow them to be sent.

Just as HaShem had Told Moshe in 3:19-20 that Pharaoh would not readily accede to his demands, so too had HaShem Predicted even before Moshe travels to Egypt that it would be necessary for Him to Harden the king's heart.

Ibid. 4:21

And HaShem Said to Moshe: While you are traveling in order to return to Egypt, see all of the wonders that I have Placed in your hand and you will do them before Pharaoh, but **I will Harden his heart** and he will not send forth the people.

A careful reading of the verses listed above, particularly those following Shemot 9:12 where for the first time, the Bible explicitly states that HaShem Manipulated Pharaoh's heart so that he would refuse to release the Jews, draws attention to an apparent inconsistency reflected in the verses at the conclusion of the Plague of Hail, 9:34-10:1. Ostensibly, as opposed to the previous Plague of Boils, and the subsequent ones of Locusts and Darkness, the text attributes Pharaoh's turning down the request of the Jews to leave following the Hail, to Pharaoh himself, rather than to any Intervention on HaShem's part. Furthermore, in addition to the absence of any mention of Divine Involvement, excessive language is used—in comparison to the verses associated with the first five plagues: Blood, Frogs, Lice, Wild Animals and "Dever"—to apparently stress that in the instance of Hail, Pharaoh is once again able to summon up his own strength and say "no" to Moshe without HaShem Manipulating his mind:

Ibid. 9:34

- a) "VaYosef LaChto" (**he** continued to sin)
- b) "Va**Yachbed** Libo Hu VeAvadav" (and **he** hardened his heart, and his servants)—this is the first time that the servants are included in the hardening of the hearts.

Ibid. 9:35

- c) "Va**Yechezak** Leiv Pharaoh" (and the heart of Pharaoh was hardened)—note that two different verbs are employed in this instance, "LeChabed" in 9:34, and "LeChazek" in 9:35, in contrast to the previous and subsequent signs and plagues where only one or the other of these verbs was employed:
7:13—"Va**Yechezak**"

7:22— “VaYechezak”
8:11— “VeHachbed”
8:15— “VaYechezak”
8:28— “VaYachbed”
9:7— “VaYichbad”
9:12— “VaYichazek HaShem Et Leiv Pharoah”
10:20— “VaYichazek HaShem Et Leiv Pharoah”
10:27— “VaYichazek HaShem Et Leiv Pharoah”

RaLBaG offers an interesting approach to explain the seeming inconsistency in the verses describing the plague of hail that suggests that Pharoah’s refusal to let the Jews go this time was as much HaShem’s Doing as in the instances where the Biblical text explicitly states as much, albeit far more subtle.

RaLBaG on Shemot 9:30 (Moshe tells Pharoah what he expects will occur once he prays to HaShem that He Bring the Plague to a halt)

“As for you (Pharoah) and your servants, I (Moshe) know that you will not yet (actually) fear the Lord God”.

That is to say, prior to my praying on your behalf to remove this Plague, you fear the Exalted HaShem. But afterwards, “...He continued to sin and hardened his heart, he and his servants”.

RaLBaG on Shemot 9:35

“And Pharoah’s heart was hardened”—that is to say that HaShem Brought it about that his (Pharoah’s) heart would be hard as He had Said to Moshe.

In effect, as long as there are outward empirical reasons, in this case “the hailstorm to end all hailstorms” (see Shemot 9:24) for Pharoah and his assistants to feel that they cannot control the situation in which they find themselves, they are more than ready to acknowledge their weaker position and defer to HaShem’s Power. However, as soon as they regain what they perceive as their advantage, i.e., the Plague ends, they immediately resume acting as they did prior to the advent of the Hail that had so intimidated them. Consequently, by God Discontinuing the Hail, He could be said to indirectly Embolden Pharoah to once again refuse to allow the Jews to leave.

But one could then wonder why Pharoah was so certain that HaShem would not merely unleash the Hail for as many times as it would take until He Obtained a permanent commitment from Pharoah for the Jews’ freedom? In fact, a similar question could be asked regarding each of the first 9 Plagues!

One commentator assumes that Pharoah and his advisors were counting on a particular principle regarding the manner in which HaShem Sends punishments to the world.

R. Yosef Bechor Shor on Shemot 9:34

“And he hardened his heart”—Because he knew that the hail would not return upon them, because the Holy One, Blessed Be He **does not Send a Plague twice.**

It would appear that such an understanding on the Egyptian’s parts is based upon HaShem’s own Words to Noach after the Flood:

Beraishit 8:21-22

...And the Lord Said in His Heart: **I will not Curse the earth any more for man's sake.** For the inclination of man's heart is evil from his youth.

While the earth remains, planting time and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease.

Rabbinic tradition assumes that Pharaoh and his advisors took into consideration God's "Commitment" not to Send another Flood to destroy the earth when they originally plotted how to limit the Jewish population explosion in Egypt.

RaShI on Shemot 1:10 "Come let us deal wisely 'Lo' (lit. with him; an apparent reference to the entity of the Jewish people) lest they multiply...

...Our Rabbis, however, explained that the singular "Lo" refers to God, and that the words mean, "Let us use our wisdom against Him, Who would show Himself Israel's Deliverer, by sentencing them to death by water (a reference to Shemot 1:22, where a royal order was given to drown all Jewish male newborns), since He has already Sworn that He will not Bring another Flood upon the world, and He will therefore be Unable to Punish us "measure for measure" (if we transgress with water, then the concomitant punishment should be via water), as is His Way.^{1[1]}

(In some additions of RaShI, the following is added: They [the Egyptians] however did not understand that it was only upon the whole world that He had Sworn not to Bring a Flood, but that He might Bring one upon a particular nation.)

Bechor Shor's approach assumes "magical thinking" by Pharaoh and his advisors, which is highly likely in the eminently superstitious ancient world in general, and Egypt which was so enamored with magic, in particular. However, such an explanation does not provide the modern reader with much of a lesson if his/her sensibilities are not given over to viewing the world in this manner.^{2[2]} Furthermore, RaLbAG's interpretation of HaShem's Indirect Responsibility for Pharaoh's changing his mind concerning granting the Jews their freedom should have led the Biblical text to similarly omit mention of HaShem's Controlling the king's heart in the instances of Boils, Locusts and Darkness as well, since in these cases a royal rejection occurs after each plague is discontinued!

^{1[1]} The most logical form of punishment is when what is done to the perpetrator precisely matches the crime that s/he committed, in the spirit of (Shemot 21:24; VaYikra 24:20) "An eye for an eye". Whereas God is Capable of precisely calibrating a punishment to its transgression, human beings are deemed unable to do so, and therefore are called upon not to take "Ayin Tachat Ayin" literally—see Bava Kama 83b-84a.

^{2[2]} An unfortunate example of contemporary Jewish religious magical thinking is the tendency for some, when something goes wrong in their lives, to limit the extent of their soul-searching and readiness for self-improvement to inspecting some finite part of their immediate universe, e.g., the state of their "Mezuza" parchments, rather than subjecting their personal attributes or quality of interpersonal relationships with people as well as HaShem, to careful review. When the Talmud states, (Berachot 5a) "Raba, and some say R. Chisda, says: If a person sees that painful sufferings come to him/her, let him/her examine his/her **conduct**." Although an individual should strive to fulfill all Commandments, including "Mezuza", for which s/he is obligated, nevertheless on the scale of things, it is likely that it would be appropriate to consider in such a circumstance more fundamental changes in one's religious and moral lifestyle.

Another approach which can prove more fruitful when considering even contemporary religious attitudes and does not encounter the textual difficulties that RaLBaG appears to run into, maintains that specifically in the case of Hail, HaShem has Given Pharoah cause to draw the conclusion that if he manages to weather this Plague, he would be "home free":

Shemot 9:13-16

And HaShem Said to Moshe: Get up early in the morning, and stand before Pharoah and say to him, "Thus Says the Lord God of the Jews: 'Let My People go that they may serve Me.

For at this time I will Send **all My Plagues** on your heart, and on your servants and on your people. That you should know that there is none like Me in all the earth.

For now I could Stretch out My Hand and Strike you and your people with Pestilence, and you would be cut off from the earth.

However, for this purpose have I Preserved you, in order to Demonstrate to you My Power and in order that you will recount My Name throughout the earth.^{3[3]}

Pharoah had never been told how many Plagues in total Egypt was going to be subjected to were he to refuse to give the Jews their freedom. Consequently, Pharoah could reasonably assume from the phrase "All My Plagues" that the Hail was the final Divine Attack against him and his nation. While Moshe had been told by HaShem to threaten Pharoah with the death of his firstborn—Shemot 4:23 "And He Says to you (Pharoah): Send forth my son (Israel) that he may serve Me, and if you refuse to send him, behold I will Kill your firstborn son"—we are never informed within the Biblical text if and when this threat was actually delivered. Furthermore, since people died during Hail—Shemot 9:25 "And the hail smote throughout the entire land of Egypt everything that was out in the field, from **man** to animal, and all of the plants in the field the Hail smote and all of the trees of the field it broke"—it was possible that Pharoah could have understood such a warning regarding the firstborn as already having been fulfilled by the Plague of Hail. Such possibilities lead one commentator to present the following hypothesis:

Ketav Sopher on Shemot 9:34 "And Pharoah saw that the rain and the hail and the thunders had ceased, he continued to sin and hardened his heart, he and his servants."

The Ibn Ezra^{4[4]} took note of the text's stating here "he continued to sin", a phrase that does not appear in connection with the other plagues.

It seems to me that in this case too, HaShem Hardened Pharoah's heart (although the text appears to state otherwise). RaMBaM^{5[5]} has

^{3[3]} This verse parallels the theme of Coleridge's "The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner".

^{4[4]} **Ibn Ezra on Shemot 9:34**

Because he had admitted and said (9:27) "And Pharoah sent and he called to Moshe and Aharon and he said: **I have sinned this time**. HaShem is the Righteous One and I and my people are evildoers", (implying that he was repenting and bringing an end to his sinfulness in not letting the Jews go, when he ultimately again insists that they remain in Egypt, the text indicates that Pharoah continues to sin, i.e., he is picking up where he had led everyone to believe that he had left off.)

^{5[5]} **RaMBaM, Mishna Tora, Hilchot Teshuva, 6:3**

written that sometimes, a person has sinned so extensively that the ways of repentance are closed before him/her, because HaShem does not Wish this individual to come closer to Him. And so was the case with Pharoah. And it seems to me that the sins that a person commits after, against his/her will, repentance has been withheld from him/her, cannot incur additional punishments for the sinner since this occurred as a result of Divine Decree.^{6[6]} The individual can only be punished for that which s/he did while s/he still had the opportunity to repent, before HaShem Hardened his heart and strengthened his/her evil heart. This is true regarding Pharoah, who did not deserve to be punished for not allowing the Jews to leave after the Plagues,^{7[7]} since HaShem Hardened his heart, and therefore Pharoah was unable to do any additional sins or transgressions once this condition set in, His punishments came to him as a result of his evil actions prior to the plagues.

After the Plague of Hail the Tora writes, "He hardened his heart, he and his servants", and it does not state, "And HaShem Hardened his heart", it seems to me, that following this plague it was unnecessary for HaShem to Harden his heart, and he was capable of doing so himself, since Moshe had said to him in HaShem's Name, "For at this

And it is possible that an individual sins a great sin or many sins to the point where the Judgment that is Rendered by the True Judge is that the punishment for this sinner as a result of these sins that s/he did willingly and consciously, is that repentance will be denied to him/her and s/he is not given permission to repent from his/her evil in order that s/he die and be lost due to his/her sin that s/he committed. This is what the Holy One Blessed Be He Said by way of Yeshayahu (6:10), "Thicken the heart of this people and make heavy its ears and blind its eyes lest it see with its eyes and hear with its ears and understand with its heart and repent and be healed." And similarly it says (II Divrei HaYamim 36:16) "And they were mocking the Messengers of God and disparaging His Words, and taking lightly His Prophets to the point that the Anger of HaShem Arose against His People, to the point where there was no healing," i.e., they willingly sinned and they continued to sin until they were culpable for not being given the opportunity to repent, which is the "healing". For this reason it is written in the Tora, (Shemot 14:4) "And I will Harden Pharoah's heart", because at first he sinned by his own volition and treated badly Israel who were sojourning in his land, as it is said, (Shemot 1:10) "Come let us deal with them wisely"—the judgment was rendered that repentance would be withheld from him until he received punishment, and it to this end that the Holy One, Blessed Be He Hardened his heart. And why did he send Moshe to say to him, "Send forth and repent" if already God had Decreed, "You will not send forth", as it is said, (Shemot 9:30) "But as for you and your servants, I know that you will not fear the Lord God"? (Ibid. 16) "However for this purpose I have Preserved you in order to Demonstrate to you My Power and in order that you will recount My Name throughout the earth," in order to make known to all in the world that when the Holy One, Blessed Be He Withholds repentance from the sinner, s/he is unable to repent, but rather s/he will die in his evildoing which s/he originally perpetrated willfully. So too in the case of Sichon, due to the sins that he had already transgressed, he was deserving of repentance being withheld from him, as it says, (Devarim 2:30) "Because HaShem your God Hardened his spirit and Strengthened his heart". Similarly the Canaanites, due to their abominations, repentance was withheld from them to the point that they waged war with Israel, as it says, (Yehoshua 11:20) "Because it was from HaShem that their hearts were hardened for the sake of waging war with Israel in order to destroy them. And the same applied to Israel during the time of Eliyahu, since they had sinned exceedingly, repentance was withheld from those who had transgressed so much, as it says, (I Melachim 18:37) "And You Caused their hearts to turn backwards," i.e., You denied them the opportunity to repent. It is therefore possible to say: HaShem did not Decree that Pharoah should do harm to Israel, or that Sichon should sin in his land, or that the Canaanites should engage in abominations, or that the Jews should engage in idolatry, but rather all sinned by their own volition, and all of them earned for themselves that repentance be denied to them.

^{6[6]} If the sinner had been allowed to repent, s/he would have ceased sinning!

^{7[7]} Although Ketav Sopher uses a term that applies to all the Plagues, his argument would seem to apply only from the Plague of Boils onwards, unless he accepts RaLbaG's premise cited above, and then in effect, whatever Pharoah does once the Plagues begin is out of his true control.

time I will Send all My Plagues” and My Anger on his head. Pharaoh thought that no plagues remained by which he could be struck. For this reason, once the plague was removed, Pharaoh hardened his heart by himself, and he said to himself, “What more can He Do to me since He has now Sent against me all of His Plagues and Anger?” Therefore he hardened his heart, he and his servants, until the plague of Locusts, which proved to be even more devastating than the Plague of Hail. Consequently, he was unable to naturally harden his own heart (following the succeeding Plagues, now that he realizes that there potentially could be an infinite number of them, should God Choose to Persist in his Subjecting Egypt to these afflictions), and HaShem had to Do it for him. For this reason, regarding Plagues prior to Hail,^{8[8]} where it states that HaShem Hardened his heart (boils), the Tora does not say, “And he continued to sin” because when HaShem Hardened his heart, what he did as a result cannot be deemed a sin. However, after the Plague of Hail where HaShem did not Harden Pharaoh’s heart, his subsequent refusal to let the Jews go could be counted as his own transgression and it consequently says, “And he continued to sin.”

By misleading Pharaoh into thinking that no more plagues were to follow, HaShem Exposed to all the degree of sincerity, or lack thereof, in Pharaoh’s ostensibly heartfelt confession in 9:27, “...HaShem is the Righteous One, and I and my people are evildoers”.

Yeshayahu Leibowitz^{9[9]} presents a third approach which combines the words of a medieval commentator with those of a contemporary scholar which assume that rather than guaranteeing that Pharaoh and the Egyptians will be duly punished for their prior sins, the hardening of the heart was a strategy intended to inspire sincere repentance within them.

R. Ovadia Sephorno notes on the verse (Shemot 7:3) “And I will Harden Pharaoh’s heart and I will Increase My Signs and Wonders in the land of Egypt” the following:

“And I will Harden”—Since HaShem is Desirous of the repentance of the evildoers rather than their deaths, as it is said, (Yechezkel 33:11) “By My Life, Says HaShem, if I Wish the death of the evildoer, as opposed to the repentance of the evildoer and he will live?” He Says that He will increase His Signs and His Wonders, and all this is in order to cause Egypt to repent, by Making known to them His Greatness and His Kindness by means of Signs and Wonders, as it is said, (Shemot 9:16) “It is for the sake of this that I have Preserved you, in order that I will Show you My Power”. Along with this there was also the Intent that the Jews would see and fear, as it is said, (Shemot 10:1-2) “In order that I will Place these My Signs in his midst, and in order that you will put this in the ears of your children and grandchildren”. And there is no doubt, that without the hardening of the heart, Pharaoh would have sent out the Jews, but not as a result of repentance and

^{8[8]} Once again, Ketav Sofer implies that all of the Plagues, with the exception of Hail, exempt Pharaoh from responsibility for his actions in connection to them.

^{9[9]} Sheva Shanim Shel Sichot Al Parshat HaShavua 1976-1982, Keter, Yerushalayim, 2000, p. 221-2.

subservience to the Blessed God due to regret over having rebelled now that he recognizes His Greatness and Goodness, but rather because he is unable to withstand any further the troubles of the plagues, as his servants stated, when they said, (Shemot 10:7) "Do you not already realize that Egypt is destroyed?" And this would not have constituted repentance at all. But if Pharaoh would have wished to concede to the Blessed God and to repent completely, there would not have been anything stopping him from doing so. And behold, the Blessed God Stated, "And I will Harden Pharaoh's heart" so that he will have the strength to withstand the plagues and he will not send out the Jews due to the fear of the plagues, "in order to Place these My Signs in his midst" that as a result of them, they will recognize My Greatness and Goodness and the Egyptians will repent a type of true repentance.

(Leibowitz now comments): According to Sephorno, the Blessed God Places within Pharaoh the strength to resist and withstand the plagues coming upon him, so that he will eventually reach the state where from his mouth he can make the following announcement, (Shemot 9:27) "HaShem is the Righteous One, and I and my people are the evildoers". And in this manner he will repent and send the Jews out of Egypt, not because of the pressure that has been brought to bear upon him and effected him, but rather because this pressure has brought him to the realization of the Righteousness of HaShem as well as his own evildoing.

Therefore this Hardening of the heart was for Pharaoh's benefit, in order to open before him a gateway to repentance, and to allow for true free choice.

It is questionable whether this interpretation is the literal meaning of the text; nevertheless the approach of this commentator is interesting who summarizes his words as a continuation to his explanation on Shemot 9:16 with the following:

"In order to Show you My Power"—in order that you will repent, because I do not Wish the death of the evildoer.

"And in order that My Name be recounted"—"And many He has Brought back from sin". And by means of this, others will be influenced to come to recognize the righteousness of God, and not to give in due to pressures that are brought to bear upon them.

The modern commentator, **Ehrlich**, in "**Mikra KePeshuto**" focuses upon the Plague of Hail beginning with a unique warning, as it is said, (Shemot 9:14) "For at this time I will Send all My Plagues on your heart, and on your servants and on your people. That you should know that there is none like Me in all the earth". Consequently **Ehrlich** says: In my opinion, the commentators did not comprehend the Way of God in this Plague, and they did not recognize that there is within it elements that are not part of the other Plagues. Know, that when one sends Plagues, if his intention is nothing other than to afflict the victim with afflictions, it is altogether possible for the victim to strengthen himself and refuse to learn any lesson from what s/he is being made to suffer. But when the one sending Plagues reveals his intention that he is causing suffering in order to warn rather than just to cause pain, and the victim is aware of the intention of the afflicter, s/he will pay

attention to what is happening and possibly repent and be healed. Consequently, when HaShem Perceived that Pharoah was not paying attention to the first set of Plagues, He Chose to Proceed in a different manner with respect to the Plague of Hail, and he warned Pharoah concerning it, and He Commanded him to gather up all that was out into the field and find shelter for it, in order for the Hail not to destroy it. This (the manner by which the Egyptians could save themselves from the ill-effects of the Plagues) was not done with regard to the original Plagues, and by means of this approach, HaShem Revealed that He was not Interested in the destruction of Pharoah and his servants, but rather He was only Interested in Afflicting them in order to Chastise them and Get them to comply with His Will. This all teaches regarding HaShem's Intentions, that He Intended via His Plagues to Do good for Pharoah, rather than Harm him. Therefore He Said to Pharoah within the context of the Plague of Hail: "For at this time I will Send all My Plagues **on your heart...**" i.e., the lessons of the first Plagues will now enter into your heart, that you will take to heart the meanings of those plagues, that I Send afflictions against you for your benefit rather than your detriment.

(Leibowitz comments:) In these words of Ehrlich, one can observe a deep humanistic approach to Biblical commentary applied to the Plagues of Egypt, which constitutes a great surprise when contrasted with the normal understanding of this topic in the Tora.

Yeshayahu Leibowitz does well to link together Sephorno and Ehrlich, who not only are giving HaShem "the benefit of the doubt", as it were, and understanding the sufferings of Egypt not as one-dimensional punishments for past transgressions, but rather as encouragements to do the right thing and begin to forge a new path of integrity and justice. To the extent that it is our obligation to attempt to walk in HaShem's Ways, very different images emerge regarding what the lessons to us should be with regard to the Plagues of Egypt. Should we understand these chapters in Shemot as a fulfillment of rendering to evildoers their just deserts rather than looking the other way and avoiding confrontation, something that we should do as well in our own personal contexts, **or** is there at least an additional dimension with respect to over and over attempting to educate and extending the possibility of rapprochement to even those with whom we have had profound differences in the past? The meta-Mitzva of "Walking in God's Ways" does not let us off the hook so easily when we say that human beings cannot do what God Does. They may be true in terms of scale, but is it at all true with respect to "Middot" (personal attributes), and the striving for peace and goodness?

Shabbat Shalom.
