

Parashat Bo

28/1/23

Miriam Cabib

In Parashat Bo we are told on 4 different occasions by G-d you must tell your children. The core question for me is: what should we tell our children?

And it's not as straightforward as you might think because parashat Bo focuses on the last three plagues: the locusts, darkness and the death of the first born. This parasha also marks a drastic change both in Moses and in Pharaoh. Moses transitions from being a very insecure figure to a confident negotiator. Pharaoh, had been totally in denial in Vaiera, questioning himself in Bo. Unfortunately, Pharaoh is too slow to redeem himself. It's only with the death of his first-born child that he's able to let the Israelites go.

So, what are we to take from this that we are supposed to tell our children?

The parasha begins with G-d who tells Moses: "Go to Pharaoh. For I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his courtiers, in order that I may display My signs among them, and that you may tell your children and your children's children how I made a mockery of the Egyptians and how I displayed My signs among them—in order that you may know that I am G-d."

This is not very nice! Has G-d tricked Pharaoh so that he can show his powers? So he can kill first-born children? Reading the parsha in this way, is theologically troubling. However, what I'd like to explore with you today is that there is another way to interpret the situation and that understanding what is going on becomes a lot easier if we look at the word used for the hardening of Pharaoh's heart.

First thing to notice is that G-d also hardened Pharaoh's heart last week in Vaiera. But in those moments, the word in Hebrew used is חזק which is from the word 'to strengthen'. In Bo G-d uses the word כבד which implies a sense of heaviness. And it's in this context of כבד, that G-d asks us to tell our children.

So maybe כבד in this context means that Pharaoh feels the overwhelming weight of his responsibilities.

Interestingly, a word sharing the root of כבד is also used in the 5th commandment כבד את אביך ואת אמך. And usually this is translated as "honour your father and your mother". This time כבד is referred as 'a great weight of responsibility' but in a positive context. In Sifrei Devarim, we are pointed to our reward for honouring our parents.

So there must be a way to describe the meaning of כבד that combines both translations, it's about seeing כבד as creating a choice for which we can be either rewarded or punished. When we feel a heaviness, this כבד that we've been talking about, we have the freedom to make good choices, or crumble beneath the weight.

Pharaoh and his courtiers are a good example of this. G-d hardens both Pharaoh and the courtiers' hearts. But, while the courtiers beg Pharaoh to let the Israelites go, Pharaoh just

can't do it. Pharaoh lets the external pressure get to him and, because he feels overwhelmed by this pressure, he makes bad choices.

But this doesn't surprise me.

In south east London, where my job is to improve the health and wellbeing of children and young people, the mortality rate for asthma is one of the worst in London. We know that one in three children lives in poverty and this often means living in a mouldy house or parents not taking their children to the doctor. Do these parents want to live in a mouldy house or not have their child treated? I don't think so. Most likely mum and dad live in a 'prison' in which if they miss work to go to the doctor, they fear they might lose their jobs.

In SEL the number of young people turning up to A&E after being stabbed as part of a gang fight and those turning to alcohol and drugs is also through the roof. More often than not, we find out that these young adults were looked after children or come from abusive families. Don't they know that their risk of being stabbed is very high if they join a gang? Of course, they do. But often they feel like they don't have a choice because that's how things go where they live.

When I think about the many families who divorce or fight over inheritance money. Did they consciously want that? Or perhaps they were also trapped in the prison that made them too proud to apologise?

These situations are complex. We all have good reasons to behave the way we do: socio-economic status, addiction, difficult family dynamics. But then aren't these external factors in which we live in, which affect the way we think and make decisions, itself a form of prison? And, in line with this, isn't Pharaoh then also a prisoner of his own mind? Pharaoh is the person in charge for continuing the Egyptian dynasty. What will the consequences be for him and his kingdom?

It's funny how suddenly it seems that there are many prisoners in this story: the Israelites who are in slavery, the Egyptians who must obey Pharaoh and Pharaoh himself. I argue that these days, in our privileged lives, the prisons we are most at risk to be trapped in are those Pharaoh is in and not the physical slavery suffered by the Israelites.

Haven't we all had moments where we've felt a heaviness? That burden that makes you feel unable to move or make decisions because you feel so overwhelmed by conflicting emotions. In those difficult situations you feel like you have too much to carry or maybe you are just in so much pain, and you can't quite express it or let it go yet. How many times have we found ourselves with a heavy heart? And how did we react to it?

G-d could have easily freed the Israelites without any plagues at all. But in Bo, instead, G-d makes Pharaoh's heart heavy, and carries on with three more plagues. My reading of this is that, through the plagues and this heaviness, G-d is giving Pharaoh an opportunity to change, to do the right thing. In this light **קָדַח** becomes the key to the lock of the cage of our mind, a wakeup call, that G-d is giving us. By making our heart heavy G-d is making us realise that something in our life isn't quite right. And it's up to us to try and correct that, even if the process is difficult and it takes a long time.

And this brings me back to my original question: what exactly should we be telling our children?

If one day Benji and I will be blessed with a child, when he or she will be old enough to understand, and we're sitting at a seder table I'd like to tell him or her the following: 'sometimes life can be really difficult. During those times you might not understand what is happening or why it's happening but you too may feel like your heart is heavy.'

In those moments, try and remember that you have a choice. There is an easy path. You can pretend that it's not happening and tell yourself that your life is miserable. Or you could take the difficult path. The one in which you honour yourself by listening to your inner voice, the one that despite the adversity you might be facing and what people might think of you, points you to the road that will free you from the heavy heart.

And in that situation, take a lesson from parashat Bo. Don't be Pharaoh. Don't be a prisoner of your own mind.'