

## Parshat Bo – Ian Abrahams

In this weeks Parshah we find the last plagues, and the first steps in the Exodus from Egypt.

At the end of the last sidrah, the plague of the BARAD, Hail, had destroyed most of the crops in Egypt. Yet again Pharoah had refused to allow Moshe and the people to go and worship the Lord in the desert.

Hashem has told Moshe once more **Bo el Paro** “Go to Pharoah” but also that he has hardened Pharoah. heart, and we are told why:

*in order that I may display these My signs among them, and that you may recount in the hearing of your child and of your child’s child 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 the LORD.”*

Moshe warns Pharoah again of another plague to come if the all the people men, women children and livestock aren’t allowed to go to worship, Pharoah replies that only men may go.

So as commanded Moshe stretched forth his rod over the land of Egypt, and the LORD brought the east wind full of locusts.

*They...hid all the land from view, and the land was darkened; and they ate up all the grasses of the field and all the fruit of the trees which the hail had left, so that nothing green was left, of tree or grass of the field, in all the land of Egypt.*

Pharoah again summons Moshe and Aharon and admits for the first time he has sinned against the Lord, and seeks relief - the plague is lifted, and Pharoah’s heart is stiffened once more.

The Lord now tells Moshe of the 9<sup>th</sup> plague – a darkness so profound that it can be felt, and that will come with no further warning or discussion with Pharoah.

3 days of “thick darkness” followed so heavy no Egyptian could see each other or move from their houses.

Now Pharoah summons Moshe back and says that the people including children could worship but not take their cattle. – But Moshe can’t accept this and Pharoah’s heart is hardened again. He issues a warning to Moshe

*‘Get thee from me, take heed to thyself, see my face no more; for in the day thou seest my face thou shalt die.’*

This sets the stage for the one more plague, which the Lord assures Moshe will end with the expulsion of the people from Egypt.

Firstly the people are told to ask their Egyptian neighbours for jewels of silver and gold, Moshe is then told of the nature of the final plague, the killing of first-born males of man and beast, and its consequences.

There is then a detailed description of the preparations for the night when this plague is to happen – taking of a lamb and how, when and where to eat it along with the marking of the doorposts with its blood.

Seven days of eating unleavened bread with 1<sup>st</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> days as Holy is established as a memorial *"throughout the generations"* of these momentous events.

The terrible event is described as:

*And it came to pass at midnight, that the LORD smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the first-born of Pharaoh that sat on his throne unto the first-born of the captive that was in the dungeon; and all the first-born of cattle.*

Pharaoh too, was a firstborn, but he alone was allowed to remain alive – to see the effects of his actions, then, and at the Red Sea in the next Parshah.

Finally Pharaoh relents and the Children of Israel numbered as some 600,000 men along with women, children, and cattle.

There is also the 'mixed multitude' of other people – voluntary converts according to some commentators, troublemakers along for the ride according to others.

We are told this is after 430 years of living in Egypt, but Rashi amongst others splits this into a period from when the slavery in Egypt was prophesied, before the birth of Isaac, and the last 210 years from the time of Joseph.

The last part of the Sidrah deals with laws about who may eat the Pesach sacrifice, and the fate of the first born of Israelite boys and animals – to be sanctified to the Lord, but the first born boys shall be redeemed.

Time and again in these first sections of Shemot we hear about the hardening of Pharaoh's heart.

Even before Moshe returns to Egypt from Midian he is told that "G\_d will harden his heart, and he will not let the people go."

In last week's sidrah – when Moshe is back in Egypt and prepared to go to see Pharaoh. he is told

*"But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, that I may multiply My signs and marvels in the land of Egypt. When Pharaoh does not heed you, I will lay My hand upon Egypt and deliver My ranks, My people the Israelites, from the land of Egypt with extraordinary chastisements. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch out My hand over Egypt and bring out the Israelites from their midst."*

Then after each of the first 5 plagues we hear that Pharaoh's hardened his heart, and then from the 6<sup>th</sup> plague that God had hardened Pharaoh's heart.

It was only the terrible consequences of the 10 plague – the death of the first-born, that led finally to the release of the B'nai Yisrael.

So what are we to understand by the idea of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart – Did he have a choice and chose not to act; or was he really powerless?

At one level, why would the king of the most powerful nation on earth agree to liberate his slave population merely because a turncoat Egyptian asks him to? What would the rest of his people think – what would it do to his status – even as the plagues build up – how can he change his mind? But we are told that it is God's will that he shouldn't relent!

Throughout the ages this has challenged our greatest thinkers.

Rashi in commentary on these verses indicates that after the 5 opportunities to repent, that God had had enough - "From now on, even if you wish to send them away I will not accept it." And that the last 5 plagues were the inevitable punishment to show Pharaoh, the Egyptians and the Israelites of God's power – as stated even before Moshe first appeared before Pharaoh.

Maimonides takes a similar view – that after the free-will opportunities to turn back in the first 5 plagues that God withholding it was so that just punishment – the weight of the latter 5 plagues will follow.

Other commentators note that it wouldn't have been sufficient for Pharaoh to give way under the weight of the suffering or torture from the each of latter plagues, but needed to recognise that supremacy of the God of the Hebrews – and this would only come after all of the plagues.

They all accept that God can overrule or constrain the free will of people in extreme circumstances.

A more modern view can be seen in In Dr Hertz's commentary in our Chumash. Where the hardening of Pharaoh's heart is first mentioned (p. 220 if you want to look), he says that each time Pharaoh say "I will not" it makes it less likely he will eventually listen to the Word of God –

- *"Each time the voice of conscience is disobeyed, it becomes duller and feebler, and the heart grows harder."* and *"if a man deliberately chooses evil, it proceeds to enslave him, it blinds and stupefies him and makes repentance well-nigh impossible"*

We can understand this in the modern context – in the bible this same idea is seen as part of the Divine ordering of things, and the direct work of God.

– we only have to look back at the last Century to see examples of great evil, and the suffering of the masses as well as the leaders of nations due to their evil intent and actions.

So personally - Are there things that we harden our hearts to? – people we avoid, events we turn away from, inconvenient facts we choose to ignore?

Whilst we can't take on all the problems of the world, but we can look at what each of us in our own way, and collectively can do to look at our hearts and try to exercise gemilut chassidim – acts of compassion and kindness to try to keep our hearts supple and open, and not hard.

Shabbat shalom.

### **What are the lessons**

1. To teach us that just as we find strength within us for a difficult situation, so to one can overcome an impossible situation in spiritual struggles as well.[\[19\]](#)
2. The consequence of doing nothing and ignoring events [\[20\]](#)
3. The downward spiral of sin[\[21\]](#)