

Parshat Vaeira  
by Ben Flax

Shabbat Shalom

Parshat Vaeira is one of the most familiar stories in the Torah. God tells Moses to speak on his behalf, with a twist of the arm Moses agrees and goes with Aaron to the Pharaoh's court. They argue over freeing the Israelites and it becomes a duel of magical proportions. Aaron's rod gets cast down and turned into a snake, the Egyptian do the same. Aaron turns the Nile to blood, the magicians do the same. They bring frogs, and finally we see a potential for freedom, but no the hardening of hearts keeps us enslaved. Aaron causes the dust to become lice, and the magicians cannot. Swarms of insects are loosed upon the Egyptians, but not Goshen where the Israelites lived. Pharaoh agrees to let the people go, and then once again his heart is hardened and he will not. The livestock are struck with pestilence, save those of the Israelites, soot from the kiln is used to cause boils on man and animal. Finally Moses tells all the people a warning of hail unlike anything seen before. He tells the Egyptians to bring in their cattle so they would not die—those who did not fear the God of Israel left their livestock in the field. Pharaoh pleads for the hail to stop, again promising to free the people—but Moses knows Pharaoh does not fear God. We end on a note that the flax and barley had been destroyed, but the wheat and spelt would ripen later.

So we get 7 of the plagues, the story of the Grinch, and a wonderful spiritual—all around a solid Parsha.

Looking more into the actions of the Magicians and the plagues we see some interesting conversation and disagreement from the commentators.

In Exodus 8:15 the magicians state “This is the finger of God,” in regards to the lice. Rashi says this is the magicians recognizing the Omnipresent. However the Rashbam says that since the plague was not pre-warned by Moses and Aaron it must have been a natural disaster, hence God, but not specifically the God of Israel. This goes into the discussion of the difference between Elohim and the Tetragrammaton. That is supported in the commentary from Ibn Ezra, Malbim, and the Chizkuni.

But Nachmanides disagrees through the fact that after the lice, Pharaoh no longer asks the magicians to try to recreate the plagues themselves. Which is then expanded on by Nahum Sarna. It is Aaron, not Moses, who turns his rod into a snake. Moses is now tacitly equal in negotiating with Pharaoh as the representative of the Israelites. Pharaoh has his magicians to do bidding, Moses has Aaron. Aaron then only acts as long as the magicians are also used, once they concede on the lice it is Moses who personally brings about the remaining plagues.

Regardless if they magicians are recognizing Our God or a God, they focus now shifts. This is not magic, but the will of God—while Pharaoh is allegedly a god he cannot submit to being lesser.

Of these 7 plagues, 4 of the times it mentions hardening Pharaoh’s hearts are passive, 2 are Pharaoh’s own action, and one is an act of God, that being the 6<sup>th</sup> plague of boils.

I always wondered about these actions and why God makes Pharaoh more and more stubborn. The flow of this narrative makes it feel as though he might be coming around until God hardens his heart. How is that okay?

Maimonides concluded that a person could commit such great a sin or a vast number of sins that the punishment from God is to remove the privilege of teshuvah. Basically saying to knowingly and repeatedly do harm—can one fully accept an apology from that transgressor?

This comes about in Isaiah 6:10 when God says, "Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and their eyes weak, lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears, and their hearts will understand, do repentance and be healed."

Again it is seen in 2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles 36:16, , "They ridiculed the messengers of God, disdained His words and insulted His prophets until the anger of God rose upon the people, without possibility of healing."

Maimonides interpreted these verses to teach that they sinned willingly and to such an egregious extent that they deserved to have repentance withheld from them. And because Pharaoh sinned on his own at the beginning, harming the Jews who lived in his land, God issued the judgment that repentance would be withheld from Pharaoh until he received his punishment

Maimonides made clear that God did not decree that Pharaoh harm the Jewish people; rather, Pharaoh sinned willfully on his own, and he thus deserved to have the privilege of repentance withheld from him.

The arguments with this story are vast. It questions free-will, the value of teshuvah, the idea of predestination. But what about the equilibrium?

A beaten, abused Pharaoh does not have the freedom to make a rational, dispassionate decision regarding belief in God. In order to allow Pharaoh the

freedom of choice to either accept or reject God, his heart had to be hardened, effectively restoring the equilibrium.

When people heard direct communication with God, their freedom was effectively curtailed. As seen very vividly in Jonah and Job or by the people at Mount Sinai when God makes a revelation to them. Knowing explicitly of the omnipresent makes our actions fake, the value of belief is not genuine. The golden-calf dilemma is no longer a turn against God, but a regaining of free-will.

We learn from this for belief and teshuvah to be real we must face temptation. The hardening of Pharaoh's heart is not to perpetuate a twisted goal of killing the first born, but rather to make Pharaoh's actions that from a man of strength. We must learn to not only make the right choices when we are down trodden.

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