

# PARSHAS VAERA

*by Rabbi Dr. Meir Tamari*

Throughout Moshe's mission to Pharaoh we read verses like: "I know that Pharaoh will not hearken to you and I will harden his heart" or "I will harden his heart so that My wonders, might and greatness will be known" and so too in other places during the 10 plagues. It is extremely difficult to understand this heartening of Pharaoh's heart. Surely it would have been better if Pharaoh would have listened to Moshe and would have sent Israel out of Egypt immediately? Furthermore, if Hashem was the cause of Pharaoh's sustained rebellion then how could he be punished for it? There are other examples in the Torah of this action that raise the same questions, for instance, Sichon, Melekh Haemori. After all the only way in which he differed from the kings of Edom and Moav, who too refused to let Israel pass through their territory, was that G-d hardened his heart.

Rambam, both in his introduction to Avot (Shemoneh Perakim) and in the Mishneh Torah (Sefer Hamadah), deduces argues from the verses in our parshah and the one after it, that sometimes a person, of his own will and understanding, sins a serious sin or many sins and is prevented by Hashem from doing teshuvah so that he will die and the evil he has done will be utterly destroyed. Basically, the Ramban agrees with him, finding support in the Midrash that Hashem revealed to Moshe that He would in the future harden Pharaoh's heart, whereby he would be liable to the full measure of the law and therefore be punished for his persecution of Israel. "Rav Nachman said that from this, the evil doers have an opening to say there is no teshuva. Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel said they will be silenced by these examples of the hardening of the heart, since only when there has been prior pressure [of repetitive warning and threat of punishment] are the gates of teshuvah closed" (Shmot Rabbah 5:13).

However, these explanations and this way of understanding the question, are strange and niggardly, in view of all that our prophets have taught us regarding the ways of Hashem. All of them have prophesied that He does not await the death of sinners but rather that they return and repent. "Repent, wayward children and I will hear your dwellings " (Yermiyahu, 3), or "Just and pleasant is Hashem, therefore sins will be shed (Tehillim, 25:8). Who can be compared to Achav and Menashe in sin . Yet G-d said to Eliyahu that because Achav had humbled himself before Him when he heard the words of the prophet, the punishment would be postponed (Melakhim Alef, 21; 29). When Menashe did tesuvah because of being tortured by the Assyrians, Hashem returned him to his kingdom (2 Chronicles 33:12:-13). The Rambam himself, when discussing those who have no share in the World to Come, rules that if they do teshuva it is accepted and they change their future. He tries to solve the problem raised by this evidence from the Prophets, by writing that it is not for humans to

question the ways of Hashem, but that too is unsatisfactory. It would be immoral and fraudulent for G-d to mislead and help men to sin by hardening their hearts, and then to punish them for doing so. Therefore, we have to explain the hardening of Pharaoh as being part of his punishment rather than the cause of his refusal to obey Hashem.

There are 3 perspectives, that make this action just and truthful.

**1.** When humans sin against Heaven as in idolatry or rebelling against the Chukim and Eiduyot, then they can find atonement through teshuva. We see that even when there is Chillul Hashem, for which there is no atonement, nevertheless death and teshuvah bring atonement. However, for all the mitzvot bein Adam Le Chaveiro, whether they be monetary ones or bodily ones, Yom Kippur, chatat and asham, and viduy do not open the gates of teshuvah. Bet Din inflicts fines and corporal punishment even when the robber, thief or the mazik is sorry for his actions, regrets them and weeps over them. So too, the death penalty is applied to a murderer, even if he shows remorse; It is corruption and desecration of the kedusha of the Land and makes it impure, when we accept compensation from a murderer or have mercy for him. These social sins are not given over to teshuvah; to allow otherwise would empty all their legislation of content and make a mockery of morality.

Now Pharaoh and all the Egyptians harmed and damaged Israel through bloodshed, sexual immorality and theft, when they cast the sons into the Nile and made their lives bitter. Pharaoh and Egypt did not do these things because they wanted to fulfill the brit but only out of their own hate. In this they maliciously and from the evil in their hearts, added burdens on Israel, to the gezeirot of the brit bein ha betarim. "I will avenge Yerusalim and Zion greatly against the nations. I punished Israel a little but they added to the evil manifold" (Zechariah 1). Therefore they deserved to bear the full brunt of their punishment and there was no place for teshuvah to mitigate it; hence it was moral and in keeping with G-d's attributes for Him to harden Pharaoh's heart so that this punishment would come about.

**2.** Although it is just and right that the nefesh that sins shall die and that every man should be judged in full according to his deeds, the remedy of teshuvah is chesed that Hashem grants to Israel. Since His hashgachah extends over them eternally and constantly, whenever they repent and cry out to Him, He hears their repentance immediately. Moshe referred to this when he said, "What a great nation who has G-d so close to them whenever they call out to Him. When you shall be in dire straits, you shall return unto the Lord your G-d". However, for other nations teshuvah is not so readily and easily achieved, since their prayer, sorrow and penance is not definitely done wholeheartedly and with all their power. They basically remain idolaters, so that they are "tovel u sheretz beyado". [It is perhaps similar to the idea of the Shem Mi Shmuel of Sochochow, that the gentile nations are quick to repent but that such teshuvah is shallow, so that reversal comes just as quickly]. There is really no difficulty to this idea from the people of Nineveh. Hashem did not want to send Yonah to Nineveh in order to warn and convince them of their impending destruction, rather He wanted them

to be a suitable rod whereby to smite and punish Israel; so gave them a chance to repent and thereby be fitting for this role. That explains Yonah's fleeing, rather than accepting his task to prepare this enemy from succeeding in punishing Israel. So, for any nation to do true teshuvah that is accepted in Heaven, they have to at the same time desire to save and help Israel, thereby showing that they truly wish to cleave to Hashem. Since neither Pharaoh nor his nation wished in any way to benefit or save Israel it was fitting that the gates of teshuvah should be closed before them.

**3.** It seems that the most correct explanation is that the hardening of Pharaoh's heart was not the result of Hashem's action but rather his own reaction to the plagues. When he saw that the plagues were only temporary phenomena, the text tells us that Pharaoh hardened his heart. We may query that since in the later plagues we read that Hashem hardened his heart. However, far be it from us to imagine that this means that He prevented Pharaoh from obeying and fulfilling His commandment. Rather, Hashem sent the last plagues, the severity and the permanence of their effects led to a difficult and hard resolve on Pharaoh's heart; thereby leading the Torah to ascribe the hardening to G-d.

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*Dr. Tamari is a renowned economist, Jewish scholar, and founder of the Center For Business Ethics ([www.besr.org](http://www.besr.org)) in Jerusalem.*