

WHEN CHOICE IS NO LONGER FREE

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Come to Paroh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants so that I can place these signs of mine in his midst. And so that you will relate in the ears of your son and grandson how I mocked Egypt...

Be'er Yosef: Chazal² record an exchange between R. Yochanan and Reish Lakish about a fairness issue raised by these pesukim. R Yochanan observed that heretics could conclude that Paroh was set up for failure. It was impossible for him to repent, since Hashem artificially hardened his heart. Reish Lakish responded that heretics had no cause for concern, even if Hashem did harden Paroh's heart. G-d will warn a person again and again, but after a number of warnings, He will block the sinner's heart from the ways of teshuvah. Presumably, teshuvah is a privilege that can be revoked for a person who has committed excessive evil.

This midrash provides the basis for the famous words of the Rambam:³ "It is possible that a person might sin a great sin or many sins, so that the judgment reached by the great Judge demands that the payment exacted from the sinner (who sinned of his own knowledge and will) be that they prevent him from repenting. They do not permit him to repent of his evil, so that he will die, lost to the sin that he committed...For this reason the Torah writes, 'I will harden Paroh's heart,' because Paroh first sinned of his own accord....Why did Hashem continue to warn him through Moshe, 'Send [them out] and repent' after He had already told Paroh 'You will not send them out?' - in order to teach humans that when G-d withholds the possibility of teshuvah from the sinner, it is impossible for him to repent, and he will die in his evil."

This understanding allows a different approach to our pesukim. We usually read the part about hardening Paroh's heart as Hashem's clueing in Moshe about what reaction he could expect from Paroh, and why. We now see, however, that this is not necessarily the best way to approach these verses. Rather, Hashem tells Moshe to go to Paroh and deliver a message. The message includes the information to be given to Paroh that Hashem would harden his heart! Moshe tells Paroh that his choices are no longer his own; he would be unable to extricate himself from his stubbornness. As a result, Hashem would have even more opportunities to visit His plagues upon the Egyptians.

Additionally, we've arrived at another way of looking at the word *bekirbo* in his midst. We ordinarily understand this to mean in the midst of the Egyptian people, but it might instead mean in the midst of Paroh's own mind and heart, as we will explain.

Rashi⁴ calls barad/ hail a miracle within a miracle. The hailstones themselves wreaked havoc all around, as they struck objects and people with the force of large stones. Inside them, fire raged. This fire failed to melt the ice; neither was the fire extinguished by the water. The two immiscible elements coexisted harmoniously, making peace with one another to do Hashem's bidding.

In our approach we find another dimension to the plague of hail. The dynamic between fire and water played out not only within each hailstone, but bekirbo, in the midst of Paroh himself. By now, thoughts of the makos burned furiously within the minds of all the Egyptians. They were angry, fed up, and ready for a return to normalcy at any price. If it would take freeing the Jews to make this happen, then so be it!

This fire burned inside Paroh as well. Yet, it did not succeed in melting his heart. His icy resistance continued as before. It was maintained by Hashem Himself, who ensured that Paroh would not give in as we would expect. Hashem hardened his heart, maintaining his strong rejection of Hashem, contrary to the interests of his subjects, and to sanity itself.

Sources:

1. Based on Be'er Yosef, Shemos 10:1-2 2. Shemos Rabbah 13: 3. Rambam, Hilchos Teshuvah 6:3 4. Rashi 9:24
