

BRING IT ON! STARRING PHARAOH & BRUCE ALMIGHTY

by Jon Erlbaum

- This Week's **RRR** (Relevant Religious Reference): "**Pharaoh saw that there had been a relief (from the plagues), and kept making his heart stubborn**" - *Exodus, 8:11*

- This Week's **SSCs** (Suitable Secular Citations):
 - **SSC 1:** "**Okay, God. You want me to talk to you? Then talk back... Give me a sign...**" **A truck pulls in front of Bruce transporting various road signs: 'YIELD', 'WRONG WAY', 'DEAD END', 'DO NOT ENTER', 'STOP'. Oblivious, he comments about the truck: "Oh, what's this joker doing now?!"** - Jim Carrey as Bruce in "*Bruce Almighty*"
 - **SSC 2:** "**Smite me, oh mighty smiter! What, no pestilence? No boils?**" - Jim Carrey as Bruce in "*Bruce Almighty*"

"GO AHEAD - MAKE MY DAY"

You've got to be kidding me, Pharaoh! You just received an uncontested whooping from the first few plagues; the frogs and the wild beasts had you begging for mercy; and now you're back for more as if none of it happened, essentially challenging G-d to "bring it on" and to "go ahead - make your day"! No offense Pharaoh, but: what's your problem?

If Pharaoh were around today, he might be justified in saying back to us, "What's *YOUR PROBLEM*, Jews? How is your track record when it comes to learning the correct lessons from history's plagues and miracles? Aren't you the ones that are referred to as the stiff-necked people? Aren't you known for being headstrong, opinionated, stubborn - even blind at times? Haven't you hit the collective snooze button rather than respond to obvious wake up calls throughout the ages?"

Regrettably, Pharaoh may have a point. The Jews are indeed a stiff-necked people! The difference is that Pharaoh channeled his stiff-neck qualities² to the negative point of no return. The Jews, however - beginning with our illustrious ancestors Abraham and Sarah - are also known for positively channeling our "stiff-neckedness", by stubbornly standing against the popular immoralities and injustices that have surfaced throughout the generations.... But back to the negative pitfalls of this

character trait: why is that we use the imagery of a "**STIFF NECK**" to illustrate this concept?³

THE "STIFF-NECK SYNDROME" OF BRUCE ALMIGHTY

1. **NEVER LOOKING BACK**: a stiff neck conjures up the image of steamrolling forward with the tunnel vision of self-interest, never bothering to look back and reevaluate our course of action. Numerous danger signs are placed in front of us to reveal that our actions are destructive, immoral, illegal, or inappropriate. Numerous roadblocks are set in our path, all but begging for us to turn back. But somehow, our ego, laziness, pleasure-seeking drive, or other vice of choice has manufactured a prescription pair of blinders for us⁴. As long as we leave these blinders on, our neck becomes figuratively frozen, as if we can't turn our head to reassess our decisions (my Son Akiva referred to this phenomenon as "'neck-tied' in one direction").

Jim Carrey in "Bruce Almighty" clearly suffers from the "stiff-neck syndrome" when he asks G-d for signs, ignores them, and then smashes his car into a light post (see this week's SSC above) - symbolizing how his life might unfold if he proceeds down the path of cluelessness and recklessness. If his similarity to Pharaoh is not evident enough by this point, it becomes absolutely apparent when he looks heavenward and blasphemously challenges the Infinite: "Okay, if that's the way you want it. The gloves are off, pal! Let me see a little wrath! SMITE ME OH MIGHTY SMITER! WHAT, NO PESTILENCE NO BOILS?" But Bruce and Pharaoh are not alone. We all wear these blinders, especially when we tend to view ourselves as being a tad too *almighty*.

BLOCKING THE FLOW FROM HEAD TO HEART

2. **HEAD FROM HEART**: a stiff neck is also like an impenetrable impasse, blocking what we know in our heads from flowing down to our hearts. Information we gather remains clogged up in our brains - and as a result, our knowledge never gets the chance to become wisdom. Through "stiffening our necks", we are deciding not to live with what we know to be true. We are blocking ourselves from allowing important truths to filter down and express themselves in our actions.

May we all have the good sense to avoid these pitfalls and to channel our tenacious tendencies in a positive direction! May we respond to the Pharaohs of the world that while our Jewish necks are undeniably stiff, we will only use our stubborn natures to live in opposition to what the Pharaohs of the world stand for!

Have a Wonderful Shabbos! Love, Jon & The Chevra

1. From Clint Eastwood as Harry Callahan in *Dirty Harry*
 2. The Hebrew word for "Pharaoh" itself gives us a clue about his stiff-necked tendency, since it can be scrambled to spell the word "HaOref", which means "the back of the neck".
 3. There are various reasons given by the sages. The two ideas I suggest in this article are adapted from those reasons, as well as from general rabbinic principles.
 4. The insights of this paragraph were gleaned from Shimon Apisdorf's fantastic [Passover Survival Kit](#)
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