

STUBBORN LEADERS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

Many people are stubborn. Stubbornness, tenacity, purposefulness are all ambivalent characteristics. They can be positive and constructive traits under certain circumstances and they can be terribly destructive and negative under others. Pharaoh has his heart hardened by God and refuses to let the people of Israel leave Egyptian slavery. But God only gives Pharaoh the courage of his convictions. Pharaoh sincerely does not wish to allow the Jews to leave his bondage and he is prepared to be very stubborn about it. Ordinarily, Pharaoh's stubbornness would hardly be tested. But with plagues raining down on Egypt, Pharaoh is sorely tested. Even his advisers, who had until now supported Pharaoh's stubbornness fully, finally are brought to their knees by the blows falling upon Egypt. They tell Pharaoh, "Do you not realize that Egypt is lost?"

But Pharaoh himself remains unconvinced. And his stubbornness affects Moshe and the Jewish people. There is an apparent wavering of faith among the Jews. Maybe they will never be redeemed. Perhaps Moses' promises are only dreams that will never become actualized. Facing a stubborn and intractable foe weakens one's resolve and saps the belief of triumph that is so necessary for the achievement of victory. So Pharaoh looks like a winner after all. But Pharaoh eventually will not only bend, he will break. Stubbornness is not necessarily synonymous with martyrdom.

When Pharaoh himself faces the Angel of Death on the night of Pesach, he relents and frees the Jewish people. But he will turn stubborn again when he feels that the odds are in his favor. For he is not convinced of the power or rectitude of Moshe's mission and of the God of Israel. He will therefore pursue his stubborn course till its bitter and unnecessary end in the deep waters of the Yam Suf. Pharaoh thus becomes the paradigm for all those tyrants and megalomaniacs who have followed him throughout the centuries. The past century especially has spawned this breed of cruel stubbornness in earnest and in numbers. From the Kaiser to Hitler, from Lenin and Stalin to Chairman Mao, from the Grand Mufti to Sadaam Hussein and Yassir Arafat the imitators of Pharaoh are clear to see. Stubbornness in the name of evil, in the cause of conquest and hatred of others, is a very negative and dangerous trait. It destroys many innocent people but eventually it destroys the stubborn person as well.

Evil is an infection of the soul. Unless it is fought and controlled it will ravage the entire body. But you will say, "Is not the secret of Jewish survival somehow rooted in our own stubbornness?" And the answer to that must be "yes." But there is stubbornness and stubbornness. The stubbornness of morality, of kindness, of Sinai and its basic commandments for our civilization (one of which has

become particularly public and pertinent in our political and governmental lives) and of commitment to do the right and the just, is an admirable quality. Thus, a truly sophisticated and intelligent Jew is stubborn and flexible at the same time. In worldly matters, in the marketplace, in the tactics of home and family and education, flexibility is the watchword. "Do it my way or don't do it all," is a dangerous policy in everyday living. Openness to others and to new ideas and situations guarantees greater success and accomplishment in the world.

Parents who are flexible and not rigid in the management of their home will usually see happier results from their children. But in matters of the spirit and soul, in issues of ethics and morality, in the defense of the code and traditions of Sinai, stubbornness and backbone are the traits required for success. "But everyone is doing it," is the refrain that is used to justify negative and costly conduct. One must have the strength to say "not everyone, not me, not us, not our family, not the Jewish people." The Jewish world is reeling from a lack of stubbornness regarding the vital issues of the Jewish world - Torah, observance, the Land of Israel, Torah education, family and Jewish grandchildren. It has too much flexibility regarding these issues. It is far too stubborn regarding defending current politically correct and slogan-prone issues. Pharaoh exemplifies the wrong stubbornness. Moshe represents the correct stubbornness. We should certainly attempt to be the followers of Moshe.

Shabat Shalom.
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