

Parashat Va'era: The Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart

Even prior to when Moshe left Midian for Egypt, God tells him: "... I will harden his (Pharaoh's) heart so that he will not let the people go" (*Shemot* 4:21).

We can assume from these words that if not for God's active involvement in the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, Pharaoh would have released the children of Israel from their enslavement much sooner than he actually did. The punishments and disaster that befell him and all of Egypt as a result of his "refusal" to free Israel make us question God's justice on Earth.

In this lesson, we will examine four different approaches to this theological problem.

Directions: Answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. Read the following verses and fill in the chart to determine who hardened Pharaoh's heart during each plague.

Verses	Plague	Who hardened Pharaoh's heart?
7:14	<i>Dam/</i> Blood	Pharaoh
8:11		
8:15		
8:28		
9:7		
9:12		
9:34-35		
10:1-20		
10:27		
11:10		

2. a) At what point does God start hardening Pharaoh's heart?

b) What does this suggest about Pharaoh's willingness to free Israel from the sixth plague and on? Explain your answer.

3. Explain the theological problem that arises from the text.

4. One of the sources in question #1 explains God's purpose in hardening Pharaoh's heart. Copy the text and explain the verse/s.

5. Rashi (on [Shemot 7:3](#)) explains this point clearly:

“I will harden his heart”: Since he has wickedly resisted Me, and it is obvious to Me that the nations have no desire to do a proper *teshuva*, it is better that his heart be hardened in order that My signs be multiplied against him, so that you may recognize My divine power. Such, indeed, is the method of the Holy One blessed be He: He brings punishment upon the nations so that Israel may hear of it and fear Him...

a) Did God take away Pharaoh's free will according to *Rashi*?

b) Explain why or why not.

6. Read *Ramban's* explanation (ibid.) below and explain his answer.

“I will harden his heart”: Midrash Rabba writes that (God) revealed to him that He would harden his heart in order do justice with him, in order to repay him for the hard slavery with which he enslaved them... He warned him once, twice and a third time, but he did not do *teshuva*, so (God) locked the door of *teshuva* from him in order to punish him for what he deserved...”

a) Did God take away Pharaoh's free will according to *Ramban*?

b) Explain why.

7. *Seforno* (ibid.) has a different approach. Read and explain his answer below.

“I will harden his heart”: in order to strengthen him to cope with the pain of the plagues so that he will not free Israel because of his fear of the plagues.

a) Did God take away Pharaoh's free will according to *Seforno*?

b) Explain why.

8. Others have explained that through his actions Pharaoh had become addicted to his obstinacy. After taking a drug for a period of time, a person becomes addicted to it (even if they fail to realize they are addicted). Pharaoh could have originally acceded to God's demands; however, by the time the sixth plague struck he could no longer free Israel because his pride had locked him into conflict with God. The Torah describes this as “God hardening Pharaoh's heart.”

a) Did God take away Pharaoh's free will according to this explanation?

b) Explain why.

9. Summarize all the approaches in the table below:

Commentator	Who removed Pharaoh's Free Will?	Why?
<i>Rashi</i>		
<i>Ramban</i>		
<i>Seforno</i>		
Others		

10. Read about the ancient Egyptian tradition of “weighing the heart” [here](#).

a. Based on this rite, what does the “heart” represent?

b. What happens to the soul if the heart is “heavy” or “hard”?

c. Why is this prospect so frightening (or ominous)?



- d. Given this text, explain how the threat of “hardening of the heart” would sound to Pharaoh and the Egyptians (and *Bnei Yisrael*).
