ASTORIA CENTER OF ISRAEL
Judaism With Open Arms

Parashat Vaera: Pedagogical Hardening

Rabbi Joshua Rabin, Astoria Center of Israel, Astoria, New York[1]

Shemot 4:21	
וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה בְּלֶכְתְּךָ לָשׁוּב מִצְרַיְמָה רְאֵה כָּל־הַמֹּפְתִים אֲשֶׁר־שַׂמְתִּי בְיָדֶךָ וַעֲשִׂיתָם לִפְנֵי פַרְעֹה וַאֲנִי אֲחַזֵּק אֶת־לִבּוֹ וְלֹא יְשַׁלַּח אֶת־הָעָם:	And GOD said to Moses, “When you return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the marvels that I have put within your power. I, however, will stiffen his heart so that he will not let the people go.

1. **What Happened to Pharoah’s Free Will?**

Rashi on Shemot 7:3	
ואני אקשה. מֵאַחַר שֶׁהִרְשִׁיעַ וְהִתְרִיס כְּנֶגְדִּי, וְגָלוּי לְפָנַי שֶׁאֵין נַחַת רוּחַ בָּאֻמּוֹת לָתֵת לֵב שָׁלֵם לָשׁוּב, טוֹב שֶׁיִּתְקַשֶּׁה לִבּוֹ, לְמַעַן הַרְבּוֹת בּוֹ אוֹתוֹתַי, וְתַכִּירוּ אַתֶּם אֶת גְּבוּרָתִי. וְכֵן מִדָּתוֹ שֶׁל הַקָּבָּ"ה, מֵבִיא פֻּרְעָנוּת עַל הָאֻמּוֹת כְּדֵי שֶׁיִּשְׁמְעוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל וְיִירְאוּ, שֶׁנֶּאֱ' "הִכְרַתִּי גּוֹיִם נָשַׁמּוּ פִּנּוֹתָם … אָמַרְתִּי אַךְ תִּירְאִי אוֹתִי תִּקְחִי מוּסָר" (צפניה ג'); וְאַעַפְ"כ בְּחָמֵשׁ מַכּוֹת הָרִאשׁוֹנוֹת לֹא נֶאֱמַר וַיְחַזֵּק ה' אֶת לֵב פַּרְעֹה, אֶלָּא וַיֶּחֱזַק לֵב פַּרְעֹה (תנחומא):	**But I will harden**— Since he has wickedly resisted Me, and it is manifest to Me that the heathen nations find no spiritual satisfaction in setting their whole heart to return to Me penitently, it is better that his heart should be hardened in order that My signs may be multiplied against him so that ye may recognise 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, as it is said, (Zephaniah 3:6, 3:7) “I have cut off nations, their corners are desolate etc. … I said: Surely thou wilt fear Me, thou wilt receive correction” (cf. Yevamot 63a). Nevertheless, in the case of the first five plagues it is not stated, “The Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart” but “Pharaoh’s heart was hardened.”

Ramban on Shemot 4:21	
אֲנִי אֲחַזֵּק אֶת לִבּוֹ וְלֹא יְשַׁלַּח אֶת הָעָם בְּכָל הַמּוֹפְתִים, **וְאָמַרְתָּ** אֵלָיו בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא **הִנֵּה אָנֹכִי הֹרֵג אֶת בִּנְךָ בְּכֹרֶךָ** וְאָז יְשַׁלְּחֵם, כִּי לֹא מָצִינוּ שֶׁהוֹדִיעוֹ מִיתַת בְּכוֹרֵיהֶם רַק בָּעֵת הַהִיא, וְהִנֵּה לֹא כָּל הַדִּבּוּר הַזֶּה עַתָּה.	*And I will harden his heart*, but do not despair from doing them [the plagues] because of his obstinacy, and you will yet warn him again on the last plague [the slaying of the firstborn] which will cause him to let them [the Israelites] go.”

Ramban on Shemot 4:21	
וְהִנֵּה פֵּרְשׁוּ בַּשְּׁאֵלָה אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁאֲלוּ הַכֹּל, אִם הַשֵּׁם הִקְשָׁה אֶת לִבּוֹ מַה פִּשְׁעוֹ, וְיֵשׁ בּוֹ שְׁנֵי טְעָמִים וּשְׁנֵיהֶם אֱמֶת, הָאֶחָד, כִּי פַּרְעֹה בְּרִשְׁעוֹ אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה	The Rabbis have thus discussed the question which all ask: “If God hardened his heart, what then was Pharaoh’s sin?” For this there are two explanations, and both of them are true. One is that Pharaoh in his

[1] All translations are from Sefaria, unless otherwise noted.

לְיִשְׂרָאֵל רָעוֹת גְּדוֹלוֹת חִנָּם, נִתְחַיֵּב לִמְנֹעַ מִמֶּנּוּ דַּרְכֵי תְּשׁוּבָה, כַּאֲשֶׁר בָּאוּ בָזֶה פְּסוּקִים רַבִּים בַּתּוֹרָה וּבַכְּתוּבִים, וּלְפִי מַעֲשָׂיו הָרִאשׁוֹנִים נִדּוֹן. וְהַטַּעַם הַשֵּׁנִי, כִּי הָיוּ חֲצִי הַמַּכּוֹת עָלָיו בְּפִשְׁעוֹ, כִּי לֹא נֶאֱמַר בָּהֶן רַק "וַיֶּחֱזַק לֵב פַּרְעֹה" (להלן פסוק יג, כב, ח טו), "וַיִּכְבֵּד פַּרְעֹה אֶת לִבּוֹ" (להלן ח כח, ט ז). הִנֵּה לֹא רָצָה לְשַׁלְּחָם לִכְבוֹד הַשֵּׁם, אֲבָל כַּאֲשֶׁר גָּבְרוּ הַמַּכּוֹת עָלָיו וְנִלְאָה לִסְבֹּל אוֹתָם, רַךְ לִבּוֹ וְהָיָה נִמְלָךְ לְשַׁלְּחָם מִכֹּבֶד הַמַּכּוֹת, לֹא לַעֲשׂוֹת רְצוֹן בּוֹרְאוֹ. וְאָז הִקְשָׁה הַשֵּׁם אֶת רוּחוֹ וְאִמֵּץ אֶת לְבָבוֹ לְמַעַן סַפֵּר שְׁמוֹ	wickedness had unjustifiably perpetrated such great evils against Israel that justice required that the ways of repentance be withheld from him, as is so indicated in many places in the Torah and in the Writings. He was judged according to his wickedness which he had originally committed of his own will. The second explanation is that half of the plagues came upon him because of his transgressions, for in connection with them it is only said: *And Pharaoh's heart was hardened; And Pharaoh hardened his heart*. Thus Pharaoh refused to let the children of Israel go for the glory of God. But when the plagues began bearing down upon him and he became weary to suffer them, his heart softened and he bethought himself to send them out on account of the onslaught of the plagues, not in order to do the will of his Creator. Then *God hardened his spirit and made his heart obstinate*, so that His name may be declared [throughout all the earth].

Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance 6:3

וְאֶפְשָׁר שֶׁיֶּחְטָא אָדָם חֵטְא גָּדוֹל אוֹ חֲטָאִים רַבִּים עַד שֶׁיִּתֵּן הַדִּין לִפְנֵי דַּיַּן הָאֱמֶת שֶׁיְּהֵא הַפֻּרְעָנוּת מְזֻמֶּה הַחוֹטֵא עַל חֲטָאִים אֵלּוּ שֶׁעָשָׂה בִּרְצוֹנוֹ וּמִדַּעְתּוֹ שֶׁמּוֹנְעִין מִמֶּנּוּ הַתְּשׁוּבָה וְאֵין מַנִּיחִין לוֹ רְשׁוּת לָשׁוּב מֵרִשְׁעוֹ כְּדֵי שֶׁיָּמוּת וְיֹאבַד בְּחֶטְאוֹ שֶׁעָשָׂה. …לְפִיכָךְ כָּתוּב בַּתּוֹרָה (שמות ד כא) "וַאֲנִי (אֲחַזֵּק) [אַקְשֶׁה] אֶת לֵב פַּרְעֹה". לְפִי שֶׁחָטָא מֵעַצְמוֹ תְּחִלָּה וְהֵרַע לְיִשְׂרָאֵל הַגָּרִים בְּאַרְצוֹ שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (שמות א י) "הָבָה נִתְחַכְּמָה לוֹ". נָתַן הַדִּין לִמְנֹעַ הַתְּשׁוּבָה מִמֶּנּוּ עַד שֶׁנִּפְרַע מִמֶּנּוּ. לְפִיכָךְ חִזֵּק הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא אֶת לִבּוֹ.	A person may commit a great sin or many sins causing the judgment rendered before the True Judge to be that the retribution [administered to] this transgressor for these sins which he willfully and consciously committed is that his Teshuvah will be held back. He will not be allowed the chance to repent from his wickedness so that he will die and be wiped out because of the sin he committed..For these reasons, it is written in the Torah [Exodus 4:21], "I will harden Pharaoh's heart." Since, he began to sin on his own initiative and caused hardships to the Israelites who dwelled in his land as [Exodus 1:10] states: "Come, let us deal wisely with them," judgment obligated that he be prevented from repenting so that he would suffer retribution. Therefore, The Holy One, blessed be He, hardened his heart.

Seforno on Shemot 4:21

ואני אחזק את לבו. כי בהיותו בלתי יכול לסבול המכות היה משלח את העם בלי ספק, לא מפני שיכנע לאל יתברך לעשות רצונו, ולזה חזק את לבו שיתאמץ לסבול המכות ולבלתי שלחם:	**And I will harden his heart,** for if he could not endure the plagues he would let the Israelites go, not because he was finally humbling himself before the Lord and do His will, but only in order to get relief from the plagues. This was not a good enough reason to grant him relief; therefore God reinforced his natural obstinacy.

2. Pedagogical Hardening

Dr. Shaul Magid, "The Ethical Problem of Hardening Pharaoh's Heart," TheTorah.com, Parashat Vaera

…we now learn the source of God's "knowledge" of Pharaoh's recalcitrance: God will make Pharaoh unable to liberate Israel "so that" the plagues can continue.. Both the plagues and the hardening of Pharaoh's heart (which seem to be inextricably intertwined) are now given pedagogical value.

Big Question: What is God trying to teach us through the hardening of Pharoah's heart? How do feel about that lesson?