

Va'era: Exodus 7:1-20

Hard Hearted

Because he (Pharaoh) spoke disdainfully of Me and it is clear to Me that the gentiles take no satisfaction in wholehearted repentance, it is best for his heart to be hardened in order that I might perform many wonders against him, so you Israel will recognize my might. Such is God's method: He punishes the other nations so that Israel will heed and fear Him. Nonetheless, for the first five plagues the text says Pharaoh hardened his own heart. *Rashi*

According to Exodus Rabbah, God here reveals to Moses that He intends to harden Pharaoh's heart in order to give him the punishment he deserves for having enslaved the Israelites so harshly. The midrash adds: "I have hardened his heart' (10:1}. R. Johanan said: This gives heretics an opening to say that he had no opportunity to repent! R. Simeon ben Lakish said: The heretics can just shut up. 'At scoffers He scoffs' (Prov. 3:3-4). God warns a man once, twice, even thrice, and he does not repent? At that point. God locks the door of repentance on him in order to punish him for his sin. Thus it was with Pharaoh the wicked. The Holy One messaged him five times, and he paid no attention. The Holy One said to him: You have stiffened your neck and hardened your heart; now I will add uncleanness to your own uncleanness."

Ramban quoting the Midrash

I will harden Pharaoh's heart. Many have wondered how Pharaoh can be considered to have sinned if God hardened his heart. Some great minds reply that what God did was to strengthen Pharaoh's ability to bear his troubles. My answer is that God gives man wisdom and plants within his heart the intelligence to receive a higher power that enables him to increase his pleasure, or to lessen his pain. *Ibn Ezra*

Seeing that God is interested in the sinner's repentance rather than his death (as we know from Ezekiel 33:11 "by My life, I do not want the death of the wicked but that he return from his wicked path and live"), God told Moses that He would bring on numerous plagues, all in order to increase the chances that Pharaoh would finally see the light and become a genuine penitent. He hoped that by demonstrating His greatness and His power this would eventually cause the Egyptians to recognize all this.

At the same time, God also spelled out a similar thought in 9:16 but aimed at the Israelites, when He said: "that the only reason He had not yet killed Pharaoh was so that in the course of more plagues you, the Jewish people, would come to recognize both God's greatness and His patience." He also wanted the Jewish people to learn how to both love and revere Him when they witnessed and thought about the meaning of all these plagues.

There can be no question that without stiffening Pharaoh's attitude from time to time, he would have collapsed much sooner and would have sent the Israelites on their desired journey. However, this would not have been the result of his repentance and humbling himself before the Lord, involving genuine regret about his previous errors, but the result of his impotence to withstand the pressure applied to him. He would have acted out of terror of what the next plague would do to him and to his country. If we needed confirmation of this, all we have to do is look at what his servants said to him when Moses threatened with the plague of locust. They said to him: "how long will you be obstinate, do you not see that Egypt will go down the drain'?" There was not a single word of regret of past errors, no word of recognition that could have killed them all long before this and that He must therefore be very patient, and kind, but mere terror forced them to utter these words. (10:7) Keeping all this in mind, it is foolish to ask

how God could punish Pharaoh after he Himself had interfered with his decision-making process by “stiffening his heart,” Seforno

I will stiffen the heart of Pharaoh not in order to punish him but in order to finally trigger repentance in his heart. The operative clause is “in order that I can demonstrate all these miracles of Mine in his midst” (10:1), the purpose being to bring about his humbling himself in repentance and genuine contrition. If that wish of God would indeed materialize, the Jewish people also would tell of greatness, (having observed at firsthand how the mightiest secular power on earth turned into God fearing human beings.) They would tell their children and children’s children the lesson they had learned that God’s apparent cruelty is actually an act of loving kindness as it results in His creatures coming to love and to revere Him. The basic lesson in ethics we derive from all this is that when suffering an affliction we must first and foremost examine our past actions to find out where we went wrong, and try to find out what these afflictions are intended to trigger in our memory so that we can improve our conduct both with God and our fellow man. Seforno

And Pharaoh will not listen to you: not before the plague materializes after the warning, nor even after the plague did come to pass. He will not listen to you even after having endured many such plagues. Seeing that this is so, I will be forced to bring retribution upon them. This retribution will take the form of the killing of the firstborn as well as the drowning of all the military might of Egypt in the sea. The retribution will be seen as a punishment to fit their crimes. All the other plagues are only designed to encourage repentance, not as a form of retribution. Seforno

1. **Blood:** And the magicians of Egypt did likewise with their enchantments, and Pharaoh's heart was hardened, nor did he listen to them, as the Lord had said. And Pharaoh turned and went to his house, nor did he set his heart to this. (Exodus 7:22-23)
2. **Frogs:** But when Pharaoh saw that there was respite, he hardened his heart, and listened not to them, as the Lord had said. (Exodus 8:11)
3. **Lice:** Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God." And Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he listened not to them, as the Lord had said. (Exodus 8:15)
4. **Swarms of flies:** And Pharaoh hardened his heart at this time also, neither would he let the people go. (Exodus 8:28)
5. **Cattle:** And Pharaoh sent, and, behold, there was not one of the cattle of the people of Israel dead. And the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he did not let the people go. (Exodus 9:7)
6. **Boils:** And the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he listened not to them; as the Lord had spoken to Moses. (Exodus 9:12)
7. **Hail:** And Pharaoh sent, and called for Moses and Aaron, and said to them, "I have sinned this time; the Lord is righteous, and I and my people are wicked..." And when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunders had ceased, he sinned yet more, and hardened his heart,³ he and his servants. And the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, nor would he let the people of Israel go, as the Lord had spoken by Moses. (Exodus 9:27,34-35) And the Lord said to Moses, "Go to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart, and the heart of his servants, that I might show these my signs before him. (Exodus 10:1)
8. **Locusts:** But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, so that he would not let the People of Israel go. (Exodus 10:20)
9. **Darkness:** But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he would not let them go.(Exodus 10:27)
10. **Death of Firstborn:** "And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, that he shall follow after them, and I will be honored over Pharaoh, and over all his army, that the Egyptians may know that I am the Lord." And they did so. And it was told the king of Egypt that the people fled, and the heart of Pharaoh and of his servants was turned against the people, and they said, "Why have we done this, that we have let Israel go from serving us?" (Exodus 14:4-5)