

## **Parashat Bo: Overcoming the Ordinary Hardening of the Heart**

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In President Joseph Biden's inauguration speech on Wednesday, his central message was a call to unite the country. The urgent call for unity reflects that it is elusive. Why is it so hard to unify? We are all created to be different. We have different life experiences that lead us to have different opinions. Naturally, we might seek out people who have different opinions than us, but Biden urges: "We must end this uncivil war that pits red against blue, rural vs. urban, conservative vs. liberal. We can do this *if we open our souls instead of hardening our hearts*. If we show a little tolerance and humility, and if we're willing to stand in the other person's shoes, as my mom would say, just for a moment, stand in their shoes."

I do not know if President Biden or his speechwriters were aware of *parashat hashavua* - both the concept and the current *parshiyot* - but tucked into his speech is one of the major themes of Parashat Bo, as well as last week's *parasha*, Va'eira. Throughout the extended narrative of the ten plagues, the Torah highlights how Pharaoh hardened his heart, or, at later points, Hashem hardened his heart. It is apparent that a trait as such is not merely a character flaw but is the root cause and manifestation of his wickedness.

We perceive Pharaoh as being an objectively cruel tyrant. If the Torah is emphasizing Pharaoh's hardened heart in his refusal to release B'nei Yisrael, it must mean he mastered this *middah*.

But we have learned nothing if we believe Pharaoh has the monopoly of a hardened heart. I would like to survey the concept and zoom in on a few aspects of what it means to harden one's heart: Who are those individuals prone to harden their hearts? When does it become common for a heart to harden? Why do we harden our hearts? What are the consequences of our having hardened hearts? And where does one find the means to overcome this destructive trait? To be sure, most of us are not guilty of all of the ways in

which hearts can be hardened. I do not wish to create the impression that good people are liable in this regard. Yet, we can all benefit from analyzing the hardened heart in order to avoid this mistake and to help us understand the qualities good leaders do not possess.

**Who** are those individuals prone to harden their hearts? It is not just Pharaoh. Perhaps it is of little surprise that an individual with absolute power has absolute ego and may be difficult to persuade. His self-interests in remaining steadfast are easy to understand. But his obstinacy was enabled and encouraged by the *chartumim*, the “magicians.” Ramban (9:12) suggests a distinction between earlier plagues and later plagues. Earlier, the *chartumim* wanted לְהַתֵּפֶר אֶצְלָו בְּחִכְמָתָם, they wanted to glorify themselves with their wisdom. A hardened heart comes with smugness, overconfident pompousness. Able to perform the same feats of Moshe and Aharon, they convince themselves and Pharaoh that they are as savvy as Moshe and Aharon. While Ramban notes that by the boils, they were stripped of their inflated egos, as they were affected by the plagues as well, our *parasha* begins: - *כי אני הכבדתי את לבו ואת לב פרעה* Hashem hardened Pharaoh’s heart as well as the hearts of his servants, perhaps because if this hardening is a punishment, the advisor are culpable as well.

We might consider asking ourselves, when are we in this category of those whose self-perceived intellect creates smugness. When do we dismiss someone else’s ideas because they are seemingly not as smart as us? When do we entirely shut down an opposing idea because someone who does not think like us is an “idiot” or a “moron,” or one of the “deplorables?” When do we block out messages of faith because the intellect does not make room for anything not purely rational? These can all be forms of being מתפאר אצל חכמה, in which we over-glorify our own smarts at the expense of letting in truth we have not considered. Intellectual elitism ironically does not always make us wise.

**When** does it become common for us to harden our hearts? The smugness we describe can lead to the possibility that we dismiss the reality under our noses. In the middle of the mayhem of unprecedented hail, Pharaoh declares חטאתי הפעם, I stand guilty this time

- ה' הרשעים עמי ואני הצדיק. Hashem is in the right, and I and my nation are in the wrong. For someone who is chronically stubborn, this is quite a strong admission. Seforno (10:1) writes that maybe it was a lost cause for Pharaoh to concede out of fear of God, but perhaps he would concede from a lack of ability to tolerate the onslaught of plagues. After all, Pharaoh was ready to admit that he stands humbled to Hashem. Yet, somehow Pharaoh is able to remain obstinate despite clear reality!

In contrast, we as Jews are the namesake of Yehuda. It was Yehuda who accused his daughter-in-law of committing infidelity when he was, in fact, the one who committed the act. When reality hit him in the face, he realized his shortcomings to her and declared צדקה מני, she is more right than me. He took full responsibility. Many people of influence today pay others to pretend that no wrong was done, even when they admit they did wrong. Admitting wrongdoing waits until we have no other choice instead of being seen as a noble step that begins repair before the tremendous damage caused. What is more is that even in the face of reality, we have become more enabled to manipulate facts to deny or downplay the significance of an event. Conspiracies abound in today's world that betray faith in God; instead of accepting truth as God's will, we seek ways to subvert it. This is the opposite of declaring Hashem's rightness.

**Why** do we harden our hearts? Sometimes events and phenomena are not black and white, and people can genuinely see different perspectives. Truth is not always absolute. But sometimes, we do not want to face the truth and its consequences for our convictions. Another insight from Seforno powerfully conveys this point. After the plague of צפרדעים, despite a possibility that they could reemerge and that he would need to put up with the foul odor of decaying frog carcasses, Pharaoh hardened his heart כדי שילא ישמעו לקויל הקל יתברך, in order to avoid hearing the voice of God (8:11). Here, too, he does not deny God's role and presence in his misfortunes. It is much worse; he *b'meizid*, intentionally, runs away from truth, avoids it all costs. God's providence and power is a huge inconvenient truth for Pharaoh.

Today we have so much information at our fingertips. We have so much control of what we access and what we do not that we can choose to entirely filter out any voices that provide inconvenient truths instead of embracing the complexity of a situation or even the possibility that we are not right at all. We might have a personality trait or a way we conduct ourselves that could stand to improve, but we do not want to hear someone express that truth to us because we cannot stand to face it. If we do not like the medical guidance of a particular doctor during the pandemic, we will find ourselves a different expert, even if they are a completely minority opinion. We might do the same with halacha, the manifestation of the voice of God. Instead of saying “I don’t understand” a halachic ruling that troubles and seeking to objectively learn its logic, one might dismiss or even mock the ruling and its expositor. And this, too, can manifest in political discourse today. When an event takes place in the black-and-white, we do not want to face the inconvenient truth of our team’s blunder and mistake. We resort to “whataboutism” when legitimate criticism is raised, when self-reflection warranted, in order to say “*maybe* they would have a point if they were not worse than me.”

**What** are the consequences of the hardening of our hearts? The *parasha* begins, in the opening *pasuk*, with an instruction to Moshe, - בָּא אֶל פְּרֻעָה כִּי אַנְי הַכְּבָדָתִי אֹת לְפָנֶיךָ וְאַת לְבָב עֲבָדֵי come to Pharaoh because I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants. The Chasam Sofer wonders in *Toras Moshe*, what is the connection between “coming to Pharaoh” and Hashem hardening Pharaoh’s heart? At this point, Pharaoh has entrenched himself as a denier of God and a renegade. Perhaps, Moshe should not come within *daled amot*, he should not come near Pharaoh, as he represents impurity; he has no spark of holiness left within him. Therefore, Hashem tells Moshe that he in fact should approach Pharaoh because at this point *Hashem* is hardening Pharaoh’s heart. If not for Hashem’s instruction, however, Moshe should not step into the presence of such a toxic person.

What are the consequences of our own hardening of hearts, then? A culture of having a hardened heart makes for endemic toxicity. We end up finding ourselves in a culture of cynicism that ensures that we do not take people with different viewpoints seriously.

Snark and scorn win the day on television and internet media. While skepticism, used judiciously, can be an important tool for weeding out falsehood, an extreme of cynicism and skepticism within a person, and within an entire society, can contribute to even greater falsehood. We cannot arrive at truth if those who have different ideas than us or represent a different faction are automatically acting out of poor faith. We cannot reach the compromises we need to effect for the greater good if we instantly reject any possible merit that another person or idea maintains. This rooted cynicism is destructive, and we should be cautious to not make that *middah* part of our own personalities. We can say something similar about our own relationships with Ribono Shel Olam. It can be easy to question the religious motivation of someone who seems either too religious or not religiously mainstream. But if we get past the cynicism of the seemingly too religious individual, we can learn from their thirst for God to fuel our own spiritual striving. From those who take a different religious path than us, perhaps we may find that they represent one of the 70 faces of Torah. Perhaps they excel in aspects of serving God that we do not emphasize sufficiently. But hardening our hearts from appreciating those who are different from us will leave us impoverished of the lessons we can learn that bring us to truth and to spiritual elevation.

Finally, **where** can we look to overcome the hardening of our hearts? What will be our inspiration? We need not look beyond our own hearts. The Slonimer Rebbe, in *Nesivos Shalom* (Bo), analyzes the connection between Pharaoh's hardening of his heart, free will, and *teshuva*. Many scholars have dealt with the conflict between our narrative and the Jewish doctrine of free will, and they explain that Pharaoh's removal of free will was a punishment to prevent him from doing *teshuva* that he did not deserve. But the Slonimer Rebbe says that we all have supernatural strength that we use when our lives depend on it. God gives us supernatural strength to do *teshuva* as well. On the one hand, Pharaoh used his supernatural strength to further harden his heart and deny God. On the other hand, B'nei Yisrael, despite their seemingly gloomy situation, used their supernatural strength to develop faith in God.

When we live in a culture with so many hearts hardened against truth, reality, openness to being wrong, and openness to differences of opinion, it can be challenging to emerge above the fray. As polarized as our society is, it can be hard not to have strong opinions, hard as stone.

But it is ultimately within us. To be cynical and stubborn is a choice, but so is to be optimistic, civil, tolerant, and humble. Megan Phelps-Roper grew up part of the Westboro Baptist Church, in the trenches of intolerance. She was one of those people on Twitter bringing her snark and scorn to Twitter. But then she began to speak with people and realized it was possible to be civil. And to see others as human beings. She left out of a realization that a way of life of hardening the heart was not viable. It took courage and hard work, but she recognized that choice.

We each have a choice. With an understanding of how and why we harden our hearts - the fact that so many of us are prone to do it - can we be aware and catch ourselves. We can actively choose to seek out other perspectives that will allow us to better judge our actions and convictions. If we can listen to President Biden's call to open our souls instead of hardening our hearts, we can create a society where we see the other as an opportunity to learn and expand our horizons. We will do no less than recognize Hashem's presence in our lives and pave the way to come ever closer to Him.