

Pharaoh's Sin: A Failure to Humanize and Respect

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As the Makkot progress, we see a recalcitrant Pharaoh beginning to break. After the plague of hail, for example, Pharaoh temporarily admits his guilt and the righteousness of Moshe's cause, agreeing to free the Jews.

שמות ט':כ"ז-כ"ח

(כז) וַיִּשְׁלַח פְּרַעֲוֹה וַיִּקְרָא לְמֹשֶׁה וּלְאַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם חֲטָאתִי הַפְּעַם הַזֶּה הִצַּדִּיק וְאֲנִי וְעַמִּי הָרָשָׁעִים:
(כח) הִעֲתִירוּ אֵלַי וְרַב מְהִיֵּת קִלְתִּי אֲלֵהֶם וּבִרְדּוֹ וְאַשְׁלַחְתָּה אֶתְכֶם וְלֹא תִסָּפֹן לְעַמִּד:

Exodus 9:27-28

(27) Thereupon Pharaoh sent for Moses and Aaron and said to them, "I stand guilty this time. ה' is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong. (28) Plead with ה' that there may be an end of God's thunder and of hail. I will let you go; you need stay no longer."

In the first plague in this week's Parsha, Pharaoh similarly acknowledges his crime.

שמות י':ט"ז

(טז) וַיִּמְהַר פְּרַעֲוֹה לִקְרֹא לְמֹשֶׁה וּלְאַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמֶר חֲטָאתִי לֵה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וְלָכֶם:

Exodus 10:16

(16) Pharaoh hurriedly summoned Moses and Aaron and said, "I stand guilty before your God ה' and before you.

Rabbi Yehuda Herzl Henkin (Chibbah Yeteira ad loc) notes a glaring lack in his admission. Pharaoh claims that his guilt before God, Moshe, and Aharon (those standing before him and thus referred to as "you"). However, considering that Egypt's primary crime was enslaving the Jews for hundreds of years and Pharaoh stood guilty for his continuation of this oppression (as well as other violence towards the Jews such as infanticide), leaving the Jews how of his admission is shocking.

Rabbi Henkin suggests that

קונטרס חיבה יתירה, שמות י':ט"ז א'

לכם למשה ולאהרן, אך לא אמר שחטא גם לבני ישראל כי היו בזויים בעיניו ולא היה בכבודו להודות בן.

Chibbah Yeteirah on Torah, Exodus 10:16:1

"To you": To Moshe and Aharon. However, he did not say that he sinned to the Jewish people for they were disgraceful in his eyes and it was not becoming of his honor to admit this.

Rabbi Henkin notes that the throughout the story, God or Pharaoh are described as hardening Pharaoh's heart. One root used for many of these instances is כבד, which can mean honor or heavy. (This

connection between heaviness and honor is captured by the English word gravitas as well). Take, for example,

שמות י'א:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה בֹּא אֶל־פַּרְעֹה כִּי־אָנֹכִי הִכְבַּדְתִּי אֶת־לִבּוֹ וְאֶת־לֵב עֲבָדָיו לְמַעַן שִׁתִּי אֶתְתִּי אֵלָה בְּקִרְבּוֹ:

Exodus 10:1

Then ה' said to Moses, "Go to Pharaoh. For I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his courtiers, in order that I may display these My signs among them,

שמות ט'ז:

וַיִּשְׁלַח פַּרְעֹה וְהִנֵּה לֹא־מָת מִמִּקְנֵה יִשְׂרָאֵל עַד־אֶחָד וַיִּכְבַּד לֵב פַּרְעֹה וְלֹא שָׁלַח אֶת־הָעָם: (פ)

Exodus 9:7

When Pharaoh inquired, he found that not a head of the livestock of Israel had died; yet Pharaoh remained stubborn, and he would not let the people go.

This hints at two aspects of Pharaoh's sins, and specifically the attitudes that prevented his ability to change. The first is his own pride. Even when intellectually people know they have erred, they often refuse to accept this emotionally to protect their own pride. Second, is that people often hurt others because they fail to value them. It is the lack of care, or the development of an attitude that makes it almost beneath one's dignity to care, that makes it easiest to harm others. This can be seen in extreme cases, such as the Nazis who made it easier to kill the Jews by first dehumanizing them, portraying them as vermin and other sub/non-human species. A similar phenomenon may be hinted at early in Shemot when the Jews fecundity is described as וַיִּשְׂרְצוּ, to become numerous like insects. However, at some level we do this all the time. If we truly internalized that those around us were as deserving of respect as we are, we would take more care to avoid harming them, intentionally or accidentally.

Rabbi Henkin suggests that Pharaoh only freed the Jews after the Plague of Firstborns because the specter of death removes concerns for honor. When people realize that their own humanity is fragile, they can become aware of the humanity of others. Note the connection between the realization that all of Egypt had been touched by death and Pharaoh's final decision to free the Jews.

שמות י"ב:ל"א

(ל) וַיִּקָּם פַּרְעֹה לַיְלָה הַזֶּה וְהוּא נִכְלַע עַבְדָּיו וְכָל־מִצְרַיִם וַתִּהְיֶי צַעֲקָה גְדֹלָה בְּמִצְרַיִם כִּי־אֵין בֵּית אִישׁ אֶיִן־שָׁם מָת: (לא) וַיִּקְרָא לְמֹשֶׁה וְלְאַהֲרֹן לַיְלָה וַיֹּאמֶר קוּמוּ צֵאוּ מִתּוֹךְ עַמִּי גַם־אַתֶּם גַּם־בְּגַן יִשְׂרָאֵל וּלְכוּ עַבְדֵי אֶת־ה' כְּדַבַּרְכֶּם:

Exodus 12:30-31

(30) And Pharaoh arose in the night, with all his courtiers and all the Egyptians—because there was a loud cry in Egypt; for there was no house where there was not someone dead. (31) He summoned Moses and Aaron in the night and said, "Up, depart from among my people, you and the Israelites with you! Go, worship ה' as you said!

Our challenge is to come to the realization, and emotional internalization of the importance of those around us without being forced to by extreme circumstances. Thus we can avoid the downfalls of Pharoah.

(See Rabbi Henkin's piece for the importance of God asserting his own glory to counter the pride of Pharoah).