

Parashat Bo: Grant Me a Heavy Heart

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Dear Friends,

This week we leave Egypt! Three more plagues and two hundred and ten years of exile will come to a very dramatic end.

Locust

Darkness

Death of the Firstborn

We take the plagues for granted and they are so ingrained into our tradition and psyche, but have you ever stopped to wonder, what, exactly, their purpose was?

We recite the ten plagues while dipping our finger into the red wine ten times during the Passover Seder. But why? Was there no other way for God to deliver Bnei Yisrael from Egypt?

To convince Pharaoh to let the people go? To impress Bnei Yisrael and convince them that they should submit to their new spiritual leader – God, and his prophet Moshe - and set out on an insane journey into the unknown? Perhaps the plagues were simply revenge? Or to teach us the idea of "an eye for an eye" - the Nile flowing red with blood and the firstborn Egyptians are killed for having killing Israelite babies, etc.

Perhaps...

None of these answers feel satisfying to me. After all, the story of the Exodus is our most formative narrative to this day. We don Tefillin as a daily reminder of the Exodus. We scrub our homes every year and rid ourselves of miniscule specks of Hametz, in anticipation of the Exodus. The first of the Ten Commandments is the reminder that God is the force that delivers all people from narrow places (Mitzrayim) and from bondage, and that there shall be no other God besides Him. There has to be a more meaningful message hidden behind the dreadful plagues.

Indeed. Right at the beginning of Parashat Bo God gives us a very clear hint:

And the LORD said to Moses: 'Come to Pharaoh, for I have made his heart heavy, and so too the hearts of his servants, that I might show these My signs in the midst of them, and that you may tell it in the ears of your son, and of your son's son, what I have wrought upon Egypt, and My signs which I have done among them, that you may know that I am the LORD.' (Sh'mot 10, 1-2)

I have to admit – this is a very strange reason! What exactly does God want us to relate to the coming generations? That He abuses people? That He manipulates people's hearts in order to justify His abuse? That we would not know He is God if we had been delivered in love and compassion, without anyone being hurt? Would we not celebrate Passover every year? Would we not sing His praises?

Having been born in modern times, I am not a great fan of punishment. For what is the point of punishment? Deterrence? Possibly. Revenge? Also possible. Indeed, revenge can be sweet at times. But the God I believe in is not vengeful. The God I believe in does not punish! He is not capricious or blinded by pride.

There is the God of nature who keeps tabs on cause and effect, with each action carefully recorded. But my personal version of God, the one I feel closest to, is the God of the "heavy heart."

We all know how a heavy heart feels. It is a very basic human sensation. And that sensation, that heavy heart made the grand Exodus possible.

God appears to be trying desperately to make Pharaoh's heart heavy. **But Pharaoh's heart is not heavy, and this is the problem.** A heavy heart is one that actually feels emotion. A heavy heart is saddened and compassionate. But Pharaoh's heart is not heavy, it is hard. It has been hardened by years of oppressing his subjects. So hard that it can no longer feel.

A heart that can experience heaviness is like a compass that tells us when something is not right, when something needs to be explored and figured out, even if we don't yet know what it is. Without this sensation there can be no healing and therefore no redemption.

Pharaoh was willing to free his slaves earlier on in the story, but for all the wrong reasons. Being sick and tired of drinking blood, or disgusted at the sight of frogs in his bed were not good reasons to let the slaves go. Being human and feeling the heaviness of heart are! Compassion, not disgust, will bring redemption. The plagues are of no significance if you are incapable of such compassion.

God is offering Pharaoh a wonderful gift: a heavy heart with which to feel pain, so that he may be shocked by injustice. A heavy heart is attentive and open.

And this may be the great lesson that God wishes to teach Bnei Yisrael, and demand that they pass on to their children and their children's children: **Beware of a hardened heart. It can happen to anyone. When one's heart is hard God cannot enter, and there is no room for compassion.**

God could not command a heavy heart. He tried repeatedly, but Pharaoh's heart remained unmoved.

Lest you think that God took away Pharaoh's freedom of choice by "messing" with his heart, I would suggest that the exact opposite is true: The choice is between a hardened, stiff heart and a heavy heart.

A heavy heart is painful, because a heavy heart feels pain. To escape the pain we sometimes choose to harden our hearts and shut them down, sealed so that even God cannot enter.

It is up to each of us, then, to determine if we allow our hearts to be heavy, to experience compassion and feeling.

Is there a greater lesson in being human?

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha