



Changing the Conversation

In Memory of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

By Rabbi Chaim Metzger

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1. Shemot 7:3

ואני אקשה את־לב פרעה והרביתי את־אתמי ואת־מופתי בארץ מצרים:

"I will harden Pharaoh's heart and multiply My miraculous signs and wonders in Egypt." (Rabbi Sacks)

2. Rashi – Shemot 7:3

ואני אקשה. מאחר שהרשיע והתריס כנגדי, וגלוי לפני שאין נחת רוח באמות לתת לב שלם לשוב, טוב שיתקשה לבו, למען הרבות בו אותותי, ותפירו אתם את גבורתי. וכן מדתו של הקב"ה, מביא פרענות על האמות כדי שישמעו ישראל וייראו, שגא' "הכרתי גוים נשמו פנותם... אמרתי אך תיראי אותי תקחי מוסר" (צפניה ג; (ואעפ"כ בהמש מכות הראשונות לא נאמר ניחוק ה' את לב פרעה, אלא ניחוק לב פרעה (תנחומא): (ואני אקשה

AND I WILL ALLOW [PHARAOH'S HEART] TO 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" (Midrash Tanchuma, Vaera 3).

3. Rambam Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuva 6:3

ואפשר שיחטא אדם חטא גדול או חטאים רבים עד שיתן הדין לפני דין האמת שיהא הפרעון מזה החוטא על חטאים אלו שעשה ברצונו ומדעתו שמונעין ממנו התשובה ואין מניחין לו רשות לשוב מרשעו כדי שימות ויאבד בחטאו שעשה. הוא שהקדוש ברוך הוא אמר על ידי ישעיהו (ישעיה ו י) "השמן לב העם הזה וגו'. וכן הוא אומר (דה"ב לו טז) "ניהיו מלעבים במלאכי האלהים ובזוים דבריו ומתעצמים בנבאיו עד עלות חמת ה' בעמו עד לאין מרפא". כלומר חטאו ברצונו והרבו לפשע עד שנתחייבו למנוע מהן התשובה שהיא המרפא. לפיכך כתוב בתורה (שמות ד כא) "ואני (אחזק) [אקשה] את לב פרעה". לפי שחטא מעצמו תחלה והרע לישראל הגרים בארצו שנאמר (שמות א י) "הבה נתחכמה לו". נתן הדין למנוע התשובה ממנו עד שנפרע ממנו. לפיכך חזק הקדוש ברוך הוא את לבו. ולמה היה שולח לו ביד משה ואמר שלח נעשה תשובה וכבר אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא אין אתה משלח שנאמר (שמות ט ל) "ואתה נעבדיך ידעתי" וגו' (שמות ט טז) "ואולם בעבור זאת העצמתיד". כדי להודיע לבאי העולם שבזמן שמונע הקדוש ברוך הוא התשובה לחוטא אינו יכול לשוב אלא ימות ברשעו שעשה בתחלה ברצונו

And, it is possible that a man should commit either one grievous iniquity or a multitude of sins so that the Judge of Truth will decree against him that, whereas this sinner committed those sins of his own free will and consciously, repentance should be withheld from him altogether, and grant him no leave to repent, so that he might die and perish in the iniquity he committed. Even this is what the Holy One, blessed is He! said through Isaiah: "Make the heart of this people fat, and make their eyes heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they, seeing with their eyes, and hearing with their ears, and understanding with their heart will return and be healed" (Is. 6.10). It is, moreover, said: "But they mocked the messengers of God, and despised His words and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against His people till there was no remedy". (II Chro. 36.16)—as if saying: "They sinned of their own free will and they have multiplied iniquities, until their guilt carried the punishment to withhold repentance from them, which is the remedy". It is, therefore, written in the Torah; "And I will harden Pharaoh's heart" (Ex. 14.4), because at the beginning he sinned of his own free will, and meted out evil to Israel

who sojourned in his land, even as it is said: "Come, let us deal wisely with them" (Ibid. 1.10). Thereat justice demanded to withhold repentance from him, so that due punishment might be visited upon him. Wherefor, the Holy One, blessed is He! hardened his heart. If it be so, then why did He delegate Moses to him, charging him to let Israel go forth and turn to repentance seeing that the Holy One, blessed is He! long since told him thou wilt not let them go forth, saying: "But as for thee and thy servants, I know that ye will not yet fear the Lord God" (Ibid. 9.30), and again saying: "But in very deed for this cause have I made thee to stand, to show thee My power, and that My name be declared throughout all the earth"(Ibid. -16)? To demonstrate to the future generations whenever the Holy One, blessed is He! withholds repentance from a sinner he can not repent, but must die in the original evil which he perpetrated of his own free will.

4. Rabbi Yitzvhak Albo, Sefer HaIkkarim, 4:25;

ועל זה הדרך יתפרש מה שנמצא בכתוב שהשם יתברך מחזק לב הרשעים או מקשה ערפם ומונע מהם דרכי התשובה, וזה שהרשע בבא עליו המכה הוא מתחסד ושב אל השם מיראת עונש המוטל עליו, כמו שאמר פרעה חטאתי הפעם ה' הצדיק וגו', ובעבור שזה הפעל דומה לאונס ואינו בחיירי, הנה השם יתברך מחזק את לבו כשנותן לו צד או צדדין לתלות בהן המכה ולומר שבאה במקרה ולא על צד ההשגחה הא-להית, וזה כדי שיסור מלבו המורך שקנה מחמת המכה וישאר על טבעו ובחירתו מבלי מכריה, ואז יבחן אם היתה תשובתו בחיירית, ומאשר בחירת פרעה כשסר מעליו עול המכה היתה לרע, אמר השם יתברך **אני הכבדתי את לבו**, כלומר כשהסירותי מלבו המורך שקנה מחמת המכה, וישאר על טבעו ובחירתו, והוא לרוע בחירתו בקש עלות ותואנות לתלות בהן ענין המכות ולומר שהיו במקרה .

In this way we must explain the statements in the Bible that God hardens the heart of the wicked, or makes them stiff-necked, and prevents them from repenting. The wicked man, when misfortune comes upon him, pretends to become pious, and returns to God from the fear of the punishment which is upon him, as Pharaoh said: "I have sinned this time; the Lord is righteous." Now, since this act is like one that is forced and not free, God hardens his heart, by suggesting to him other causes to which he can attribute the misfortune, accident, for example, rather than divine providence. This is done in order to remove from his heart the softening effect which came from the misfortune, so that he may return to his natural state, and act freely without compulsion. Then it may be found out whether his repentance was free or not. Now since, when the yoke of the plague was removed from Pharaoh, his choice was evil, God said: "I hardened his heart," i. e. I removed from his heart the softening effect which came from the plague and restored him to the natural state of freedom; while he, owing to his wicked attitude, when in a state of freedom, sought for various causes and excuses to which he might ascribe the plagues so that they might seem accidental.

5. Sforno to Shemot 7:3.

ואני אקשה הנה בהיות האל חפץ בתשובת רשעים ולא במיתתם, כאמרו חי אני נאם ה', אם אחפוץ במות הרשע, כי אם בשוב הרשע מדרכו וחייה, אמר שירבה את אותותיו ואת מופתיו, וזה להשיב את המצרים בתשובה, בהודיע להם גדלו וחסדו באותות ובמופתים, כאמרו בעבור זאת העמדתיך, בעבור הראותך את כחי ועם זה היתה הכונה שישראל יראו וייראו, כאמרו למען שיתי אותותי אלה בקרבן, ולמען תספר, ואין ספק שלולא הכבדת הלב היה פרעה משלח את ישראל בלי ספק, לא על צד תשובה והכנעה לאל יתברך, שיתנחם מהיות מורד, אף על פי שהכיר גדלו וטובו, אלא על צד היותו בלתי יכול לסבול עוד את צרת המכות, כמו שהגידו עבדיו באמרם הטרם תדע כי אבדה מצרים וזאת לא היתה תשובה כלל. אבל אם היה פרעה חפץ להכנע לאל יתברך, ולשוב אליו בתשובה שלמה, לא היה לו מזה שום מונע. והנה אמר האל יתברך ואני אקשה את לב פרעה, שיתאמץ לסבול המכות ולא ישלח מיראת המכות את ישראל, למען שיתי אותותי אלה בקרבן, שמהם יכירו גדלי וטובי וישובו המצרים באיזו תשובה אמיתית. ולמען תספר אתה ישראל הרואה בצרתם, באזני בנך להודיע שכל אלה יפעל אל עם גכר להשיבו אליו, וזה כשיפשפו במעשיהם בבוא עליהם איזה פורענות :

seeing that G'd 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"), G'd 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 recognise all this. At the same time, G'd 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 recognise both G'd'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 G’d 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 G’d 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 G’d could punish Pharaoh after he Himself had interfered with his decision-making process by “stiffening his heart,” I will stiffen the heart of Pharaoh, etc.” 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 G’d would indeed materialise, the Jewish people also would tell of G’d’s greatness. They would tell their children and children’s children the lesson they had learned that G’d’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 vis-à-vis G’d and our fellow man. (Translation by Eliyahu Munk)

Shemot 7:8

(ד) וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה פַּרְעֹה לֵב פְּרָעָה מָצֵן לְשַׁלַּח הָעָם:

And the LORD said to Moses, “Pharaoh is stubborn; he refuses to let the people go.

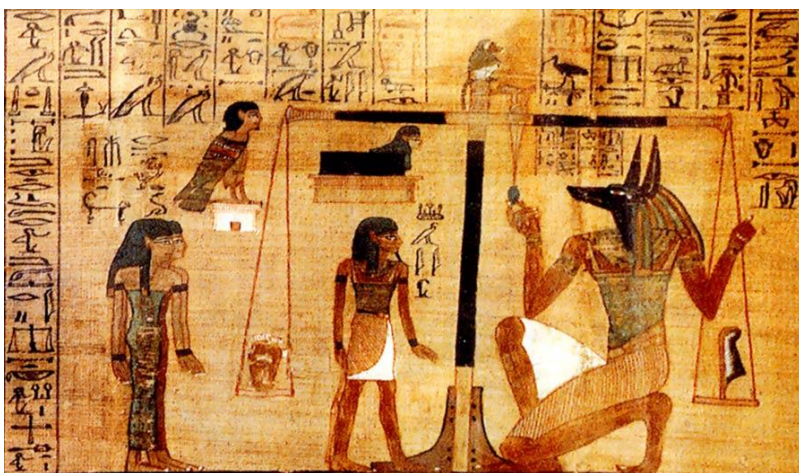
(יב) וַיִּשְׁלִיכוּ אִישׁ מִטֵּהוּ וַיִּהְיוּ לְתַנִּינִים וַיִּבְלַע מִטֵּה-אַהֲרֹן אֶת-מִטֵּהָם: (יג) וַיַּחֲזֹק לֵב פְּרָעָה וְלֹא שָׁמַע אֲלֵהֶם כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְהוָה:

7:12-12 each cast down his rod, and they turned into serpents. But Aaron’s rod swallowed their rods. **Yet Pharaoh’s heart stiffened** and he did not heed them, as the LORD had said.

ח (יא) וַיֵּרָא פְּרָעָה כִּי הִיטִהּ הַרְוָהָ וַהֲכַבֵּד אֶת-לִבּוֹ וְלֹא שָׁמַע אֲלֵהֶם כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְהוָה:

8:11 But when Pharaoh saw that there was relief, he became stubborn and would not heed them, as the LORD had spoken.

Book of the Dead, The Papyrus of Ani, Spell 125



Video Depictions of Weighing of the Heart Ceremony (Sesame Street “Don’t eat the Pictures” minute 47)

<https://youtu.be/MUtkBzj7nvU?t=2820>

List of 42 Negative Confessions, World History

- | | | |
|---|--|---|
| 1. Hail, Usekh-nemmt, who comest forth from Anu , I have not committed sin. | 18. Hail, Tenemiu, who comest forth from Bast, I have not slandered anyone. | 27. Hail, Kenemti, who comest forth from Kenmet, I have not blasphemed. |
| 4. Hail, Am-khaibit, who comest forth from Qernet, I have not slain men and women . | 19. Hail, Sertiu, who comest forth from Anu, I have not been angry without just cause. | 28. Hail, An-hetep-f, who comest forth from Sau, I am not a man of violence. |
| 8. Hail, Neba, who comest and goest, I have not uttered lies. | 22. Hail, Maa-antuf, who comest forth from Per-Menu, I have not polluted myself. | 29. Hail, Sera-kheru, who comest forth from Unaset, I have not been a stirrer up of strife. |
| 10. Hail, Utu-nesert, who comest forth from Het-ka-Ptah, I have not uttered curses. | 23. Hail, Her-uru, who comest forth from Nehatu, I have terrorized none. | 30. Hail, Neb-heru, who comest forth from Netchfet, I have not acted with undue haste. |
| 12. Hail, Hraf-haf, who comest forth from thy cavern, I have made none to weep. | 24. Hail, Khemiu, who comest forth from Kau, I have not transgressed the law . | 33. Hail, Nefer-Tem, who comest forth from Het-ka-Ptah, I have wronged none, I have done no evil. |
| 14. Hail, Ta-retiu, who comest forth from the night, I have not attacked any man. | 25. Hail, Shet-kheru, who comest forth from Urit, I have not been angry. | 37. Hail, Uatch-rekhit, who comest forth from Sau, I have not cursed God. |
| 15. Hail, Unem-snef, who comest forth from the execution chamber, I am not a man of deceit. | 26. Hail, Nekhenu, who comest forth from Heqat, I have not shut my ears to the words of truth. | 38. Hail, Neheb-ka, who comest forth from thy cavern, I have not acted with arrogance. |

Rabbi Sacks

However, there is one specific aspect of Egyptian belief that opens up an entirely new perspective on the references to Pharaoh’s heart. According to Egyptian myth, the deceased underwent a trial to establish their worthiness or otherwise to enjoy life after death in Aaru, the Field of Reeds, where souls live on in pleasure for eternity. They believed that the soul resides in the heart, and the trial consisted of the ceremony of *The Weighing of the Heart*. Other organs were removed after death, but the heart was left because it was needed for the trial.

On one side of the scales was a feather. On the other, was placed the heart. If the heart was as light as the feather, the dead could continue to Aaru, but if it was heavier, it was devoured by the goddess Ammit (a combination of lion, hippopotamus and crocodile), and its owner was condemned to live in Duat, the underworld. An illustration, on papyrus, in *The Book of the Dead* shows the ceremony, undertaken in the Hall of Two Truths, overseen by Anubis, the Egyptian God of the dead.

It follows that the root *k-v-d*, “to make heavy,” would have had a highly specific meaning for the Egyptians of that time. It would imply that Pharaoh’s heart had become heavier than a feather. He would fail the heart weighing ceremony and therefore be denied what was most important to him – the prospect of joining the gods in the afterlife.

No one would have been in any doubt as to why this was so. The feather represented *Ma’at*, the central Egyptian value that included the concepts of truth, balance, order, harmony, justice, morality, and law. Not only was this fundamental to Egyptian culture. It was the task of the Pharaoh to ensure that it prevailed. This had been an Egyptian principle since a thousand years before the Exodus, found in Pyramid texts dating from the third millennium BCE. *Ma’at* meant cosmic order. Its absence invited chaos. A Pharaoh whose heart had become heavier than the *Ma’at* feather was not only endangering his own afterlife, but threatening the entire people over whom he ruled with turmoil and disarray.

One of the things the deceased were supposed to do as part of the trial was to make a series of negative confessions, 42 in all, declaring themselves innocent of the kind of sin that would exclude them from paradise. ...

If the “heavying” of Pharaoh’s heart is an allusion to the Weighing of the Heart ceremony, it allows us to read the story in a completely new way.

First, it suggests that it is directed to Egyptians as well as Israelites; to humanity as a whole. The Torah tells us three times that the purpose of the signs and wonders was “so that the *Egyptians* may know that I am the Lord” (Ex. 7:5; 14:4; 14:18). This is the core of monotheism. It is not that the Israelites have their God, and the Egyptians their pantheon, but rather that there is one sovereign power in the universe.

That is the point of at least three of the plagues: the first, directed against Hapfi, the god of the Nile; the second, frogs, directed against Heqet, the Egyptian goddess of fertility and childbirth, represented in the form of a frog; and the ninth, the plague of darkness, directed against Ra, the sun god. The message of these plagues would have been clear to the Egyptians: there is a power greater than those they have worshipped until now. The God of Israel is the God of the world and of all humanity.

The religion of Israel is not intended to be the religion of all humanity. Nowhere in the narrative does God imply that He wants the Egyptians to adopt Israelite religious practices. The point is quite different. *Religion is particular. Morality is universal.* If the story of the “heavying” of Pharaoh’s heart does allude to the Book of the Dead, then the story of the Exodus is not simply a partisan account from an Israelite point of view. It is telling us that *certain things are wrong, whoever does them and whoever they are done against.* They are wrong by Egyptian standards too. That was true of Pharaoh’s decision to kill all male Israelite children. That was an unforgivable sin against *Ma’at*.

Justice is universal. That is the point made plainly by the Torah’s three stories of Moses’ early life. He sees an Egyptian hitting an Israelite and intervenes. He sees Israelites hitting one another and intervenes. He sees Gentile shepherds behaving roughly to Jethro’s daughters and intervenes. The first was a case of non-Israelite against Israelite, the second was Israelite against Israelite, the third was non-Israelite against non-Israelite. This is the simplest way of telling us that Moses’ sense of justice was impartial and universal.

Finally, and most deeply, the Torah is hinting at a self-contradiction at the heart of the Egyptian concept of *Ma’at*. The most generous interpretation of Pharaoh’s refusal to let the people go is that he was charged with maintaining order in the Empire. A successful minority like the Israelites could be seen as a threat to such order. If they stayed and thrived, they might take over the country as the Hyksos had done several centuries earlier. If they were allowed to leave, other enslaved groups might be tempted to do likewise. Emigration is a bad sign when the place people are trying to leave is a superpower. That is why, for many years, the Soviet Union forbade Jews to leave the country.

Pharaoh, in his repeated refusal to let the people go, doubtless justified his decision in each case on the grounds that he was securing *Ma’at*, order. Meanwhile however, with each plague the country was reduced to ever greater chaos. That is because oppressing people, which is what Pharaoh was doing, was a fundamental offence against *Ma’at*.

On this reading, the whole issue of Pharaoh hardening his heart was not so much psychological as political. In his position as semi-divine head of state of an empire that practised forced labour on a massive scale, Pharaoh could not let the Israelites go free without creating the risk that other groups would also challenge the *Corvée*, the unpaid, conscripted semi-slave labour that was part of Egyptian society from the building of the pyramids and abolished only in 1882.

For the first five plagues, Pharaoh could tell himself that he was enduring minor inconvenience to protect a major principle. But as the plagues became more serious, reducing Egypt to chaos, Pharaoh’s room for manoeuvre grew ever less. Having five times said “No” to the Israelites, he could not now back down without making himself look ridiculous, forfeiting his authority and damaging his standing. Pharaoh was a prisoner of his own system, held captive by his own decisions.

Seeking to protect order, he created chaos. That is because the order he was seeking to protect was built on a foundation of injustice: the enslavement of the many for the benefit of the few. The more he tried to defend it, the heavier his heart grew.

I believe that justice is universal. The Exodus story of how the supreme Power entered history to liberate the supremely powerless, is not just for Jews. It is the world’s greatest metanarrative of hope.