

The Heart of the Matter

Mrs. Yael Leibowitz

Faculty, Stern College for Women

We are all by now well aware of the fact that Yetziat Mitzrayim entailed much more than the simple liberation of a People from the bonds of slavery. The makkot themselves, the order in which they struck, their varying degrees of magnitude and the media through which they were executed, were all part of a carefully calculated process. Yetziat Mitzrayim was, as Hashem made clear to Moshe at its inception, a platform on which the uniqueness of Hashem's omnipotence would be demonstrated to the entire world.⁸⁴ The impact of the process and the fact that it achieved its educational goal is attested to, not only in the responses of Bnei Yisrael and the Egyptians, but by those well beyond the borders of Egypt as well.⁸⁵ One of the elements of this process, which has raised its share of theological conundrums, is the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, a means by which Hashem delayed the Exodus, engendering time in which to amplify the above mentioned objectives.⁸⁶ The issues of free will and Divine determinism have been addressed by the greatest minds of our mesorah⁸⁷, and so rather than broach those topics, let us instead focus on the specific language employed by the Torah to describe the act of hardening.

Milieu for you

While it goes without saying that Tanach and all that is incorporated in it bear eternal significance, as 21st century readers, we often overlook, or don't have the tools by which to appreciate the significance of certain idioms and symbols that, in their cultural contexts would have resonated very powerfully with those who heard them.

By way of example, we know that in his first confrontation with Pharaoh, Moshe transformed Aharon's staff into a snake as proof of the powers of Hashem.⁸⁸ In Ancient Egypt during the period of the New Kingdom⁸⁹ the serpent or "uraeus" was a symbol of the king's authority. The

⁸⁴ E.g. Shmot 7:5,17; 8:6,18; 9:14, 29; 10:2; 11:7; 14:4,18

⁸⁵ Cf. Shmot 18:1; Yehoshua 2:9-11

⁸⁶ E.g. Shmot 7:3

⁸⁷ Cf. Midrah Rabbah Exodus 13:3; Ramban Shmot 7:3; Sforno Shmot 4:21; Rambam Mishna Torah Hilchot Tshuva ch 5; Rav Saadia Gaon Sefer Emunot V'deot 4:6; Rav Yitzchak Arama Akedat Yitzchak ch 36; Rav Yosef Albo Sefer Ha'ikarim 4:25 among others.

⁸⁸ Shmot 4:1-5; 7:3-12

⁸⁹ The Period of the New Kingdom dates to approximately 1550-1070 BCE. A rough date for the Exodus is 13th century BCE

famous hooded cobra that adorned the headdress of Pharaoh represented his kingship and, according to Egyptian thought, his implied dominion over the world.⁹⁰ As such, the first performance of Moshe did not merely display the superiority of Hashem's "magical" powers; it publicly and emphatically called into question the very symbol of Pharaoh's authority.

The constituents of Dor Hamidbar, the third generation of Bnei Yisrael to have spent their entire lives in Egypt, were aware of, if not assimilated into, the culture of their native country.⁹¹ They, along with the Egyptians would have immediately recognized the import of any references made to dominant Egyptian cultural and mythological beliefs. In keeping with one of the central themes of the Haggadah, *בכל דור ודור חייב אדם לראות את עצמו כאילו הוא יצא ממצרים*, in every generation one is required to see oneself as if he had gone out of Egypt, let us attempt to appreciate what the hardening of Pharaoh's heart might have meant to our forefathers in Mitzrayim so many generations ago.

During the theophany of the burning bush, Hashem informed Moshe that He would harden Pharaoh's heart,⁹² and this notion recurs no less than nineteen times, culminating in the final "hardening" that induced Pharaoh to pursue Bnei Yisrael after their Exodus and lose his entire fleet of chariots to the miracle of Yam Suf.⁹³ While this concept of divine hardening of a heart is by no means unique to Pharaoh,⁹⁴ its predominance in the account absolutely is. A closer look at the context in which the hardening took place may help shed light on its critical role.

The Egyptian Heart

In Ancient Egypt the heart, *ib*, believed to represent the essence of a person, was considered the most important part of the human body.⁹⁵ Thought of as the locus of the spiritual, volitional and intellectual components of man, the heart was regarded as an almost autonomous feature.⁹⁶ It functioned as an instrument through which god communicated with man, and at times it was even said that "the heart of a man [is] his god himself."⁹⁷ During the period of the New Kingdom, in fact, the heart became a symbol of god.⁹⁸ Because kings in Egypt were regarded as the embodiments of god on earth, the will of god was believed to exist within their hearts. The ability of the king to maintain *maat*, cosmic order, spoke to the divine powers that lay in his heart.⁹⁹

⁹⁰ J. Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament*, (Michigan, 1997) 83-95

⁹¹ E.g. cf. Shmot Rabbah 16:2

⁹² Shmot 4:2

⁹³ Ibid. 14:8

⁹⁴ Cf. Devarim 2:30; Yehoshua 11:20; Yishayahu 63:17

⁹⁵ J. Currid, "Why Did God Harden Pharaoh's Heart?" *Bible Review* Dec 1993

⁹⁶ To appreciate the way that the heart is used and understood in Tanach, see for example: Bamidbar 32:7; Devarim 29:3; 1Melachim 3:9, 12, 8:66; Yishayahu 35:4, 46:12, 61:1; Yirmiyahu 5:23, 9:25; Yechezkel 2:4; Hoshea 4:11; Mishlei 17:20, 19:8; Iyov 8:10.

⁹⁷ G.K. Beale "An Exegetical and Theological Consideration of the Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart in Exodus 4-14 and Romans 9" *TJ 5 NS* (1984)

⁹⁸ N. Shupak, "Hzq, Kbd, qsh Leb, The Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart in Exodus 4-15:21: Seen Negatively in the Bible but Favorably in Egyptian Sources" Penn State University, 2001

⁹⁹ D.G. Coover Cox, "The Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart In Its Literary And Cultural Contexts" *Bibliotheca Sacra* July-September 2006

The hardening of Pharaoh's heart was more than simply an issue of divinely wrought obstinacy; it was, in and of itself a testament to Hashem's supremacy, and Pharaoh's powerlessness. As Pharaoh grew more stubborn, the cumulative effect of the makkot on the land and the Egyptians intensified. With each successive wave of destruction, the polemical nature of the makkot gathered momentum. The king's prior claim to being the all-controlling factor in nature and history no longer held. His heart, once believed to be the seat of his divine powers, had ironically been the cause of ecological, atmospheric and biological havoc; it was no longer sovereign and so by definition, the god-Pharaoh had been defeated.

The Weightiness of Weight

Perhaps even more fascinating is the distinctive phraseology used to describe the manipulation of his heart. Three terms describing the state of Pharaoh's heart appear in a variety of grammatical forms to connote his stubbornness: *hazaq*¹⁰⁰, *qasha*¹⁰¹, and *kaved*¹⁰². All of these words appear frequently throughout Tanach. At times they may appear alone, and at times in conjunction with organs of the body, metaphorically describing a state of mind, being, or functioning. What is particularly striking is the fact that the collocation *kvd lev* is strictly limited to the episode of Pharaoh in Egypt.¹⁰³ A series of ancient Egyptian texts from the time of Yetziat Mitzrayim¹⁰⁴ may provide us with a clue as to the phrase's specific application to Pharaoh and its consequent poignancy.

The *Book of the Dead* is a series of funerary texts that contained hymns, spells and magical texts. Ancient Egyptians were preoccupied with the afterlife, and the texts spoke to the belief that their actions and the moral quality of their lives in this world would be judged in the next. Accompanied by illustrations known as vignettes, the texts were often buried with the deceased or inscribed on the walls of tombs and coffins, as they were believed to assist with entry and passage into the afterlife.¹⁰⁵ The *Papyrus of Ani*,¹⁰⁶ one of the finest illustrated examples of these texts, depicts a scene in which the deceased stands with his wife in front of a large pair of scales. A feather, the Egyptian sign of truth and righteousness, is placed in the right pan, and the symbol of the dead man's heart is placed in the pan on the left. The hieroglyphic text bordering the figure of the deceased contained a plea from the dead man to his heart asking it not to bear witness against him on his day of judgment.

At post-mortem judgments such as those depicted, the secrets of the heart would be revealed. The heart, it was believed, functioned as an independent witness to the nature of man's deeds. A heavy heart laden with sins and misconduct doomed a person to annihilation. The heart of a

¹⁰⁰ Shmot 4:21; 7:13,22; 8:15; 9:12,35; 10:20, 27; 11:10; 14:4,18, 17

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 7:3; 13:15

¹⁰² Ibid. 7:14; 8:11,28; 9:34; 10:1

¹⁰³ 1Shmuel 6:6 makes use of the phrase, but in that case the Philistine priests are referring to Pharaoh.

¹⁰⁴ The texts date to the 18th and 19th Dynasties (ca. 1580-1200 BCE)

¹⁰⁵ The *Scarabeus sacer*, a scarab that contained inscribed spells from the Book of the Dead, was one of the most popular amulets in Ancient Egypt. Believed to protect the heart, thousands have been unearthed.

¹⁰⁶ Today, the papyrus is being preserved in the British Museum

person whose life was filled with truth and righteousness, a heart not weighed down with iniquity, weighed no more than a feather; such a heart granted a person eternal life.¹⁰⁷ Salvation on the one hand, or condemnation to the terrors of death on the other, was determined by the relative weight of a person's heart.¹⁰⁸ By proclaiming Pharaoh's heart "heavy," Hashem both indicted Pharaoh and served as his ultimate judge.

Conclusion

With Ancient Egypt as the backdrop, we now understand that the hardening of Pharaoh's heart was part and parcel of the polemic against him. His perfection was discredited, his powers overwhelmed and his claim of divinity eradicated. The man whose godliness and perfection were once extolled had been reduced to nothing. As Hashem had foretold, His omnipotence and glory were definitively established. Our commemoration of Pesach this year, as every year, celebrates both the experience of our forefathers in Mitzrayim as well as the legacy of their Exodus. A more nuanced understanding of that experience can enhance our appreciation of the words of the Torah and make our Yom Tov that much more meaningful.

¹⁰⁷ Shmot 9:34 links "sin" and "heaviness"

¹⁰⁸ S.G.F Brandon, "A Problem of the Osirian Judgment of the Dead", Lecture given to the Manchester University Egyptian and Oriental Society