

"A prayer for the people of Haiti"

By Bradley Burston

<http://haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1142408.html>

(On hearing the words of the Reverend Pat Robertson)

A prayer for the people of Haiti,
who, on a good day,
must take heroic measures just to wake the next,
And who must now find a way
to live through the end of the world:

Lord who speaks in earthquakes
Speak now in miracles.

I thank you, that first prayer begins. Modeh Ani. The words spoken for the marvel of having
woken up alive.

Lord whose relief work is beyond our capabilities
Breathe life today into those buried alive

I lie grateful before You, this King who lives and endures, for having brought me back this soul
inside me, and with compassion.

Lord who speaks in childbirth, hear Your children now.

Hear those who have yet to be saved,
Hear those who have been saved but whose limbs and lives are crushed, Hear those who pray
for those who can no longer pray for themselves.

Lord who invented the language of love
Teach those who, in Your name, who, calling themselves men of God, can find it in their hearts to
speak only blasphemy and cruelty and scorn.

Lord who speaks in apocalypse
Armor the souls of those who call out now in rescue
Lord who has taught us by example the language of loss
Send strength to those who, with their last strength
Now seek nothing more than finding loved ones

Teach Your children by example, to comprehend the last line of that first prayer:

Your faith is immense.

Help for Haiti

If you would like to support the efforts in the US to aid victims of the terrible earthquake in
Haiti, United Synagogue has a Disaster Relief Fund. The URL for on-line donations is:
www.uscj.org/donate/relief.

In addition, to help with relief efforts, text "[HAITI](#)" to "90999" and \$10 will be given automatically to
the Red Cross, charged to your cell phone bill.

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**January Shabbat Service Schedule**

January 9th Parashat Shemot

January 23<sup>rd</sup> Parashat Bo

**LAST CHANCE TO ORDER!**

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When you write your check, please consider adding an additional donation to CSH of \$36 (or other multiple of chai).

The books will be shipped in May, 2010, and will be available for pickup in the Hamptons as soon as they arrive.

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Upcoming at East 55th Street

TU B'SHEVAT SEDER AND SHABBAT DINNER

Friday, January 29th

following Shabbat services at 6:00 pm

led by Rabbi Jan Uhrbach and Cantor Marcos Askenazi

Reservation form can be downloaded at

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February 6

Back by Popular Demand!

LIVE in concert -- Cantor Marcos Askenazi

Friday January 15, 2010 Candle Lighting 4:29 pm

Shabbat / Rosh Chodesh Sh'vat

This week's Torah reading: Vaera

Annual (Ex. 6:2-9:35): Etz Hayim p. 351

Triennial (Ex. 8:16-9:35): Etz Hayim p. 362

Maftir (Num. 28:9-15): Etz Hayim p. 930

Haftarah (Isaiah 66:1-24): Etz Hayim p. 1220

Musings on Vaera -- "I will harden Pharaoh's heart." (Exodus 7:3)

One aspect of the Exodus story I puzzle over every time I read it is wondering why God is supposed to have hardened the heart of the Pharaoh against letting the Jews leave. Because God hardens the Pharaoh's heart, at least the Biblical writers believe the God of the Jews has power over Pharaoh. So why doesn't God just appear to Pharaoh and tell him to let the Jews go? It would have been simpler don't you think? Saved all those plagues of locusts, cattle disease, boils, frogs, locusts and whatnot. Not only does God do this once, but ten times with disastrous results for the Egyptian people culminating in the slaughter of their first born. How do we grasp the meaning of this part of the story?

The Pharaoh is a study in the nature of the oppressor. Few, if any, oppressors voluntarily give up their power over others. Pharaoh dismisses Moses displays of power turning his staff into a serpent by summoning his own magicians who can do the same thing. Kind of reminds me of General Electric dismissing the PCB shoreline study that came out this week with their own hand waving by their experts. Moses mounting displays of power are each countered until they become so overwhelming that they cannot be denied.

This is how power really works. Oppression does not end because the oppressors see the error in their ways and decide to become nice guys. If Moses had asked for a soup kitchen and a homeless shelter for his people, Pharaoh might have been glad to do it because it didn't change his power relationship. He was still in charge and would remain in charge. The only thing that eventually stopped Pharaoh was the destruction of his army in the Red Sea.

The psychiatrist Dr. Erich Fromm, known for his analysis of the psychology of modern totalitarianism, provides a masterful analysis of this story and a prophetic warning as well. For him, this story portrays "one of the most fundamental laws of human behavior. Every evil act tends to harden man's heart, that is, to deaden it. Every good act tends to soften it, to make it more alive. The more man's heart hardens, the less freedom he has to change; the more is he determined already by a previous action. But there comes a point of no return, when man's heart has become so hardened and so deadened that he has lost the possibility of freedom, when he is forced to go on and until the unavoidable end which is, in the last analysis, his own physical or spiritual destruction."(1)

<http://www.trumbore.org/sam/sermons/sb42.htm>

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This argument is at the heart of this week's portion. God brought ten plagues upon Egypt. (Actually, this week's portion deals with the first seven of those plagues.) Each time, God hardened Pharaoh's heart, and then brought another plague. On the surface, God seems to act unjustly. Pharaoh had no control, he was simply acting as God had pre-programmed him to act. Why was Pharaoh, and the rest of Egypt, being punished?

However, a deeper reading reveals a profound truth about Pharaoh's behavior. For the first five plagues, the Torah teaches that "Pharaoh hardened his heart." Only after these five does the Torah begin to teach that "God hardened Pharaoh's heart." In the beginning Pharaoh was responsible for his own stubborn behavior. Eventually, his stubbornness became second nature, almost to the point where he could no longer control it.

Judaism teaches that we humans have free will, that we can act according to our good inclination (yetzer hatov) or our evil inclination (yetzer hara). In the beginning, the evil inclination is like a spider web; it is easy to step out of its grasp. After a while, it becomes like a heavy rope. The wrong choices become second nature, as if God made us that way....

Improper behavior begins as an impulse. At this point, it is relatively easy to change and get on the right track. After awhile, it becomes a habit. Soon a habit becomes part of our character. It is now part of our nature, almost as if God made us that way. At this point, it is extremely difficult to change our ways. It is much easier to play victim, say "God made me that way." However, even now we can change. Pharaoh could have given up his stubbornness, and brought less plagues on Egypt. We are all given free will. Or to put it in the words of the Rabbis, "Everything is in the hands of heaven except the fear of heaven." (Berachot 33b) <http://www.rabbi gold.com/vaera.htm>

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"And I will harden Pharaoh's heart". What a theological quagmire is unleashed by this pronouncement! God reveals to Moses that He will prevent any relenting on the part of Pharaoh until the full series of plagues can run their course, thus insuring that the redemption of the Children of Israel from Egypt will be understood as miraculous.

The implications of this statement are dire: if God is hardening Pharaoh's heart, does this not in essence mean that He is denying Pharaoh the free will by which to choose his own course? And further, what about the suffering of the Egyptian people that ensues as a result of the plagues... by hardening Pharaoh's heart is not God causing extraneous agony to an entire people? What sort of God would manipulate the human theatre in such a way?

The "hardening of the heart" has constituted a major challenge to interpreters throughout the ages. Some go down the path of claiming that this statement is essentially descriptive, rather than proscriptive. In other words, God is describing what happens when one habituates complacency and cruelty - one's heart indeed hardens. But perhaps we should confront the "hardening of the heart" literally, with all its full and brutal implications. Perhaps we should allow ourselves to stand in front of this "God of History" with His mysterious divine plan of which we are but the willing and often befuddled agents.

Perhaps, if only momentarily, we should abandon the basically Aristotelian notion of divine perfection, and allow ourselves to consider, if only fleetingly, the concept of a God who can anger, who can reconsider, who can need... a God who is capable of love, with all the vulnerable implications that follow.

There is good news lurking in such considerations. If God hardens Pharaoh's heart, then it follows that He acknowledges the possibility (which He in this case wants to obstruct) of true and radical change... surely a revolutionary concept in the context of a fated and controlled ancient world.

And perhaps taking these words at face value would also afford us the possibility of considering the stark contrast between Moses and Pharaoh. Both (especially given the wonderful interpretation of the film *The Prince of Egypt* that the two were raised as brothers) were afforded the insulation of palace life. And indeed, we witness the hardening of one's heart that results from such privilege. The first nine plagues simply don't touch Pharaoh. It is only when the tenth plague penetrates his household and smites his first born that he cries out. In contrast, Moses voluntarily "goes out" and sees the hardship of the children of Israel. Although he has led a similarly insular life, although suffering does not touch him personally, he sets the paradigm for empathy - the ability to feel for the other even when one has not experienced a comparable occurrence. Although God has hardened Pharaoh's heart, Moses has defied this 'natural' process. He has been truly touched by the suffering of others - suffering other than his own - and it is his response, even more than God's interference, that truly sets the course of history on its wondrous way. <http://www.limmud.org/publications/tasteoflimmud/5769/Vaera/>

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**Additional Reading on "I will harden Pharaoh's heart"**

**Pharaoh's Hardened Heart: Cruel and Unusual Punishment and Covenantal Ethics**

*By Shaul Magid, Jewish Theological Seminary*

<http://etext.virginia.edu/journals/ssr/issues/volume2/number2/ssr02-02-e01.html>

**Yom Huledet Sameach (belated)**

Miriam Brous

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Quote of the Week

I think it's important to ask yourself, over and over, if what you believe is true or just expedient, true or just comfortable or worse, just profitable? Truth is never finally entirely graspable, but neither is it entirely unknowable; glimpses of it come to the courageous, the curious, the diligent, the kind-hearted, the generous.

Tony Kushner

Shabbat shalom. Chodesh tov.

Stacy

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