

# The Heart: A Passover Midrash

## By Rabbi Sholomo Ben Levy

Why did God command Moses to go to Pharaoh and then prevent the king of Egypt from responding in any way other than with hatred and obstinacy? God told Moses that his efforts to persuade Pharaoh would be futile because “*I will harden his heart that he shall not let the people go.*” (Ex 4:21) So, Pharaoh was not allowed to change, evolve, or alter the course that led to his destruction. The first question I had was why did God, in effect, make it impossible for Pharaoh to find the compassion in his heart needed to free the Children of Israel from Egyptian captivity? The second question was, what does it mean to “harden” a person’s heart? I researched this further and found references of God “hardening” Pharaoh’s heart fifteen separate places in Torah and once in the writings of the Prophets.<sup>1</sup> This midrash (lesson) is an inquiry into the process by which a person’s heart is hardened to the point that it can not see wisdom, feel mercy, or hear the word of God. It attempts to teach us how to recognize a person whose heart is hardened and how to avoid being a victim of this punishment ourselves.

The Torah uses three terms to describe the spiritual hardening of a heart—which means that the humanity and divinity that resides in the soul are restricted within that individual and are not allowed to fully express itself. Thus it is called hard. The most common word for this is קָזַק (Kazak). Many of you may recognize this as the word that appears at the conclusion of every book of the Torah. In that context it simply means strong and is placed there to remind us that the more we study Torah the stronger we become. Yet, in Exodus it is used in its negative sense to mean hard, inflexible, or stubborn. This is clearly how it is used in the seventh chapter of Exodus where it says, “He hardened Pharaoh’s heart, that he harkened not unto them; as the Lord had said” and also, “Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, neither did he hearken unto them; as the Lord had said.” The statements are phrased to show the fulfilling of prophecy; in other words, God said he was going to harden Pharaoh’s heart and he did.

The second word, used less frequently in connection with the heart, is קָשָׁה (Kasheh). It usually refers to hard or solid objects but in Ex. 6:9 it is translated as “cruel” to describe the slavery itself. In Deut. 10:16 and other places, it is translated very appropriately as “stiff-necked;” as in stiff-necked people. But, this word is also used in Ex. 7:3 to describe what God did to Pharaoh’s heart. It states, “I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and multiply my signs and my wonders in the land of Egypt.”

The final and least used word is יָדָה (Amats). In Deut. 15:7 and I Sam 6:6, it is described as something we should **not** do: “thou shalt not harden thine heart” and we are warned, “wherefore then do you harden your hearts, as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts?” However, like קָזַק (Kazak), it can have a positive connotation and is used repeatedly in Deut 31 to mean courageous as when a person hardens themselves against evil rather than against God. Thus it is this word used in the familiar expression “Be strong and of a good courage,” which is how I conclude most of my correspondence.

Now that we understand the various words used to describe the hardening of a person’s heart and have looked at a few examples of it, we can now focus on why this occurs, how we can identify it, avoid it, and cure it if we suffer from it. God tells us that He has “no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?” (Ezek 33:11) Yet, it appears that there are times when God must make an example of someone who has hardened his own heart. If God allowed that person to have a “change of heart” once the Creator began to inflict pain upon him, then, it would seem that God is punishing him unjustly. Thus we see that after a number of plagues the pain had reached the point that Pharaoh agreed to let the Children of Israel go free, but this was only a temporary change of heart because God had hardened Pharaoh’s heart so that it could not change sincerely or permanently. In this way, we were able to see through Pharaoh what happens to a person who bears hate and animus in his heart and refuses to give it up.

Today, we see people around us whose hearts have been hardened by their own actions or beliefs. How can you tell who these people are? And, more importantly, how can you tell if your heart has been hardened? Typically, a hard-hearted person is someone who refuses to empathize with the suffering of other people; they are not sensitive to the feelings and concerns of those around them; they thrive most when they are insulting or attacking another person or group; they believe that they or their group is superior to other people or groups. A hard-hearted person can not reach out, he/she has no desire to feel or create the love of which I speak. Such a person always believes that it is the *other man* who needs his heart softened. These are the classic symptoms of sclerosis of the spiritual heart. We would be fools, in deed, if we believed that our history makes us immune from this common affliction, which in our society, is reaching epidemic proportions.



<sup>1</sup> Exodus 4:21, 7:3, 7:13, 7:22, 8:19, 8:32, 9:12, 9:35, 10:20, 10:27, 11:10, 13:15, 14:4, 14:8; I Samuel 6:6.

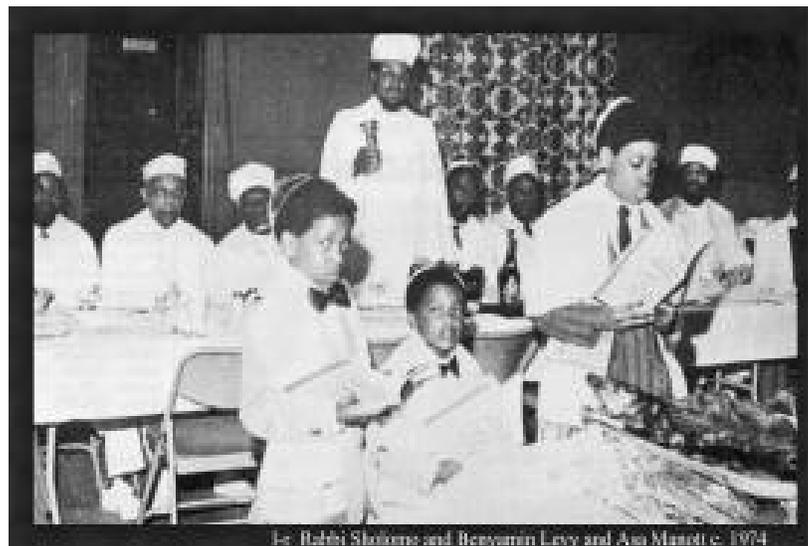
It is important that we remember and understand that Pharaoh loved himself, he loved his family, and he loved his fellow Egyptian citizens. But this love obviously did not extend to people like us, who did not share his nationality, culture, or beliefs. Hard-hearted people often think they love those closest to them, but the quality and expressions of those bonds tend to be stifled and even corrupted by the hate they feel for others. Often that hate backfires and is turned on those nearest to them. Those they love must often suffer and bear the brunt of their rage. Evidence of this self-destructive behavior has even attacked the hearts of our youth. It is growing and is even encouraged by some parents and leaders who fail to recognize that hate is a cancer that feeds on those who carry it around in their hearts and minds.

What cure is there for a hard heart? Well, assuming that God has not made it your fate, there is much that we can do. I say we, because the harsh realities of life are such that we all find ourselves being harder than we want at times. God told Ezekiel that I will *“put a new spirit within you; and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them a heart of flesh.”* (Ezekiel 11:19) We must want this. By asking God to give us a new heart of flesh we implicitly acknowledge that we presently have hearts of stone—otherwise why would we be requesting a transplant. Yet, in a spiritual sense this is exactly what we want. We are saying that our present heart has clogged arteries that block the flow of life-giving Torah. We are saying that we have an irregular heart beat--sometimes loving but sometimes cold. In other words, our pace makers are not fast enough to keep pace with the things that anger us. Realizing that we have a dangerous heart condition is the first

step, asking Hashem to soften or replace this heart of stone is the second, and carefully watching what is happening to our hearts is the third. We must be aware how negative thoughts affect us. Negativity in all its forms is like spiritual cholesterol, sodium, stress, and saturated fat upon our hearts. In short, our spiritual health requires that we watch our social and political diets. The results of not doing so can be a spiritual heart attack. I didn't say it; it was written in stone at Sinai.

This year try something different when you get to that part in the Hagaddah that talks about the contrary son who says “you” instead of “we” at the seder. The traditional answer is to tell that person that he would have been destroyed. Though true, that response strikes me as being hard. The questions shows not only a lack of knowledge but also perhaps a lack of love, which breeds feelings of alienation and estrangement. This year lets try to open our hearts to everyone and make a special effort to bring those who are contrary and self-absorbed in their individual problems into the unity of our oneness. Let us find new ways to turn the person into a brother or sister and bring those dangling on the margins close to the center of our hearts.

Finally, if you know people whose hearts have stopped feeling, you must perform spiritual CPR on them. Use your lips to speak comforting words, perform frequent acts of kindness, be as resilient as you are persistent.. Remember, we are all passing over things that must be left behind as we travel life journey through the wilderness on our way to a greater promised land. ♦



Le: Rabbi Shalom and Benjamin Levy and Asa Marot c. 1974