

**Parshat Va-Era
Friday Jan. 3, 2003**

Beth Chayim Chadashim, Los Angeles

Drash by Avram Chill

In this week's Torah portion, Va-era, we have one of the most theologically difficult problems in all of Torah. In Chapter 7, verse 3 it reads, "And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and multiply My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt. "Ve-ani ahkshe et-lev Paroh, v' hirbayti et- ototai v'et-moftai b'erets Metsrayim." If G-d is responsible for Pharaoh's stubbornness, why should he be punished? If G-d is not responsible, how did Pharaoh's heart become hardened? In a much more general sense, if G-d controls everything, why should humans suffer? And if not, is G-d really G-d?

We meet Pharaoh as if he were a blank slate, as if we knew nothing about him. But that isn't true. We actually met him last week "and there arose a new king over Egypt who knew not Joseph." So Pharaoh starts out with ingratitude, progressed through racism, theft, and slavery until he ended with the murder of infants. Pharaoh thought that he had the right to absolute power over all other people. And he misused this power. When a king orders the murder of infants, his heart is already pretty hard.

Contrast Pharaoh with our teacher, Moses. Many of you must know this Midrash. The Holy One tested Moses by means of the flock, as our masters explained: When Moses our teacher was tending Jethro's flock in the wilderness, a lamb scampered off, and Moses followed it, until it approached a shelter under a rock. As the lamb reached the shelter, it came upon a pool of water and stopped to drink. When Moses caught up with it, he said "I did not know that you ran away because you were thirsty. Now you must be tired." So he hoisted the lamb on his shoulder and started walking back with it. The Holy One then said: Because you showed such compassion in tending the flock of a mortal, as you live, you shall become shepherd of Israel, the flock that is mine. (Ex R 2:2)

But as to Pharaoh, when Moses and Aaron came before him he asked, "Who are you?" They: "Thus says the Adonai, the G-d of Israel: 'Let My people go.'" At this, Pharaoh became angry saying, " 'Who is Adonai, that I should harken unto His voice to let Israel go.' Has He not enough sense to send me a crown and gifts, and you come to me with mere words? 'I know not Adonai; moreover I will not let Israel go.'" Then he added, "But wait, I shall search my records." Then he went into his archives and brought out a list of divinities, but couldn't find the name of Adonai. Pharaoh then replied, "From the very outset you have spoken lies. I am lord of the universe. I created myself as well as the Nile and all of Egypt. Your G-d - I have no idea who He is. 'Who is the Lord, that I should hearken to His voice.'" (ExR 5:14, Tan Va-era 5, Yalkut, Shemot #172)

We also find that before the first five plagues, Pharaoh had warning and could have stopped them, but choose, in his pride not to. Before G-d hardened Pharaoh's heart, he did it himself five times In the Midrash, Shemot Rabbah 13,3, R. Shimon ben Lakish tells us that G-d gives the scoffer three warnings before his heart becomes hardened and

unresponsive and then the door is shut. In Pharaoh's case there were five warnings, and R. Yishayahu Horowitz, who lived at the beginning of the 17th century, points out that in the traditional Haggadah shel Pesach, where R. Akiva is quoted as saying that each of the ten plagues consisted in reality of five plagues each, he was alluding to the five opportunities G-d had given Pharaoh to display true remorse.

So much for Rabbinic hermeneutics, what does all this mean to us? The older we get, the more times our own hearts are scarred and not healed. Angers unresolved, actions regretted, loved ones who hurt us or even leave us, work situations where we are passed over and our merits not recognized, our own insensitivity and the insensitivity of others, sins of omission and sins of commission, deaths from which we never recover. Even when we volunteer, too often we get hurt.

There is a very real danger that our hearts will remain one mass of hardened scar tissue, unable to feel the pain or the joys of others. Just as we must exercise and take care of our physical heart and muscles, so must we work to keep our spiritual hearts soft and flexible. Otherwise we risk ending up like Pharaoh, oblivious to the feelings of those around us, and just as blind to the myriad of miracles which fill our world.

We do not need G-d, to harden our hearts, we do not need G-d to harden our hearts.