

Va'eira Sermon - Ilana Mulcahy

In this week's Torah Portion, Va'eira, we hear of the 10 plagues that God brought upon the Egyptians, as well as the privilege that will be afforded to the Israelites: exodus from Egypt into freedom. Plagues and privilege. Suffering that leads to success. God tells Moses that God will harden Pharaoh's heart after each plague. Why? So that God can demonstrate all of God's wonders and miracles before Pharaoh finally agrees to let the Israelites go.

Why didn't God just make it happen in one fell swoop? Why does God need Pharaoh's approval to take the Israelites out of Egypt—can't God just do anything? Why make the Israelites suffer any longer than they need to? Does God have an unhealthy ego?

As I reflect on these questions, I also reflect on the intensive course I took last week called "the Dialogue of Abrahamic Faiths," offered through the Washington Theological Consortium and hosted at the United Lutheran Seminary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. This unique opportunity gave me the chance to learn about Christianity, Islam, and Judaism alongside Christians, Muslims, and fellow Jews.

We learned together about our religions, comparing and contrasting the similarities and differences to deepen our understanding and contextualization of our own religions. We raised our hands to politely add supplemental or anecdotal comments to our professors' explanations. This, to me, was what made the learning environment so different from what we would have had if we'd studied these topics in our own seminaries. I loved when a Catholic student chimed in to give the Catholic perspective to complement our Protestant professor's responses to questions, or when we heard from an Imam who was participating because he was pursuing a Doctorate of Divinity, and was able to offer additional information as a religious authority. I did not have the opportunity to formally study other religions until now, and it does not appear to be part of the cantorial curriculum at HUC. However, it would not have been such an enriching learning experience with only Jews in the room.

This program gave me one last gift (besides a cold). We created a WhatsApp group so that we can stay in touch. One of my HUC classmates reached out the other day to gather everyone's perspectives on a particular biblical topic, as they were writing a sermon for

next weekend and wanted to include insights from different faiths. I happened to be writing about the same topic as well, so I was able to ask lots of questions, too, and gather resources from our cohort. Now—what was this topic? God hardening Pharaoh's heart! So, rather than beginning with Jewish sources, I started by considering the Christian and Muslim perspectives that my classmates provided.

A Catholic perspective provided by my classmate Jeanatan was that God didn't exactly harden Pharaoh's heart, as God doesn't interfere with free will. Also, God is made up of only good things, like love and mercy, so God wouldn't do something so malicious. Rather, God is like the sun. If the sun is beating down on wax, something soft and malleable, it will melt the wax. But if the sun beats down on clay, it will harden. If we are in an open disposition, receiving God willingly, we will melt in God's presence and have warm, molten hearts. If we are wicked and willful, we will become hardened to God's goodness. In God's foreshadowing to Moses, God simply explains what God knows will happen. Since God is the source of everything, God hardens Pharaoh's heart through Pharaoh's inevitable willfulness.

A Muslim perspective presented by Shakil was that God stiffened Pharaoh's heart in the sense that Pharaoh became more and more arrogant when he pleaded with Moses to remove each plague—then took credit for the removal.

These perspectives seem to align with a Jewish perspective I heard from Rabbi Micah Streiffer, who has a great podcast called Seven Minute Torah—my husband Ryan recommended it to me. Rabbi Streiffer presented the idea that God doesn't mess with free will, but rather constructs a reality that will predict behaviors. In this case, God didn't actively harden Pharaoh's heart, but set up traps for Pharaoh's predictable reactions, thus foreshadowing what would happen. This doesn't exactly answer my question of why God would do this—why didn't God just create a big plague off the bat that would change Pharaoh's mind on the first try?

A Muslim perspective for God's reason for hardening Pharaoh's heart was offered by Yousif: Qur'an Chapter 10 verses 88-89 state that God destroyed the Egyptians' riches and hardened their hearts so that they wouldn't believe in God's omnipotence until they saw the painful punishment, the final plague: the death of the first born. Another Christian perspective provided by Krystal was that Pharaoh's hardened heart, which stiffened over

and over again, ultimately increased God's honor when God finally overcame Pharaoh's stubbornness.

These ideas seem consistent with the translation of the Hebrew text: I will harden Pharaoh's heart so that I may increase my wondrous signs and miracles in the land of Egypt. Perhaps, God just really wanted to show that, without a shadow of a doubt, God was on the side of the Israelites. God knew that it would take this much for the Egyptians to understand, and wouldn't stop until the full effect was complete. Or, perhaps, the Torah's biblical authors, divinely inspired but still human, needed to believe that God had a reason for each and every plague—it almost didn't matter what the reason was, but they needed to believe that God did it on purpose.

I finally turned to a rabbinic source for guidance. Rashi stated that God knew that Pharaoh was going to be stubborn, and so God decided that it's better that Pharaoh's heart be hardened to demonstrate to the Israelites the infiniteness of God's power. This is an interesting idea—it wasn't for the Egyptians, but for the Israelites. If we think about the upcoming revelation at Sinai, the Israelites' embarrassing Golden Calf endeavor, and God's motivation in creating a renewed covenant with the Israelites that would require them to accept and follow God's commandments, it wouldn't be far-fetched for God to really want the Israelites to believe in God's power. To this day, we thank God infinitely for taking us out of Egypt. Maybe we wouldn't still be so grateful if it had happened so quickly. We needed to witness all of these miracles in order to really "get it."

On the second-to-last day of the intensive, we discussed the Israel-Palestine conflict. I had been dreading this conversation, but I thought it was particularly important given the state of the war. I was pleasantly surprised to find that most of us were able to maintain our composure while discussing this difficult topic, and I learned a lot, as well. I had never considered how Muslims might react to how we talk about terrorism. We were asked by a student not to refer to Muslims as "radical" or "radicalized," as these are loaded terms that lead to greater Islamophobia and paint Muslims in a crazed way. I was also surprised when the same student called out our Christian professor for using her hijab as an example of a color, as the color was attributed to a negative cause—a book that was perceived as "awful." I never would have thought that using a student's garment as an example of a color would be

problematic, regardless of the association of the color, but it made the student feel uncomfortable, because it was her hijab, a religious item.

I also found that the Israel-Palestine conversation was an important opportunity to share with a group of current and future faith leaders across the United States the reasons why Israel is so important to me, as a Jew in America with no family in Israel and no ancestral ties to the land since the exile in 70 CE. People didn't quite understand the tie to the land, but the Jewish professor, my HUC classmates, and I explained that the country represents much more to us than just a country. To us, it is a place of refuge, and a place where we are free to be ourselves, without fear that we will be harassed for our Jewish practices. For me, I think of my family being persecuted during the pogroms in Eastern Europe. Due to whatever opportunity they jumped on, they ended up in the United States. If they had gone elsewhere in Europe instead, I might not exist. Israel must remain a homeland for the Jewish people, as the United States and other countries that Jewish refugees wish to move to could decide at any moment not to admit Jewish immigrants, or to set up such extensive barriers to entry that they would not be able to escape a dangerous situation quickly enough.

As I reflect on the 10 plagues, Pharaoh's begging for an end to each plague, and then immediate heart hardening, refusing to let the Israelites go, I am thinking about the current war. I think about how Hamas has asked for ceasefires over the years, only to harden their hearts, breaking each ceasefire when they were ready to continue fighting. We cannot reach lasting peace until both sides acknowledge that no one is going anywhere: we are going to have Jews in the land of Israel, and Palestinians in their native land. This will not change. If our hearts are hardened to this, both Hamas's and ours, we will not see an end to these plagues. I hope that one day very soon, hardened hearts will soften, and the war will come to an end, resulting in peace for all. Shabbat Shalom.