

Short Comments on Bo
Rabbi Eliot Malomet January 28, 2023 6 Shvat 5783

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה
 בֹּא אֶל-פַּרְעֹה
 כִּי-אֲנִי הִקְבַּדְתִּי
 אֶת-לִבּוֹ
וְאֶת-לֵב עֲבָדָיו
 לְמַעַן שְׂתִי
 אֶתֵּן אֵלַי בְּקִרְבוֹ:
 שְׁמוֹת י:א

*God said to Moshe:
 Come to Pharaoh!
 For I have hardened
 his heart
 and the heart of his servants
 in order that I may put
 these my signs among them
 Exod. 10:1*

Pharaoh's Servants: Why does God **harden the heart of Pharaoh's servants**? In order to examine this question we have to backtrack a little to last week's parasha. The Torah notes the presence of Pharaoh's servants at the plagues of *Blood, Frogs, Wild Animals, and Hail*, during which they are witnesses and victims. But prior to the plague of *Hail*, we notice that some of them begin to waver. At Moses' warning,

some of them, that is, *those who had awe of God's word* took heed, herding their animals and hiding their own personal

הִירָא
 אֶת-דְּבַר ה'
מֵעֲבָדֵי פַרְעֹה
 הָיִים אֶת-עֲבָדָיו
 וְאֶת-מִקְהָלוֹ
 אֶל-הַבָּתִּים: (ט:כ)

*Whoever had
 awe for the word of God
 among Pharaoh's servants
 had his servants
 and his livestock
 flee into the houses (9:20)*

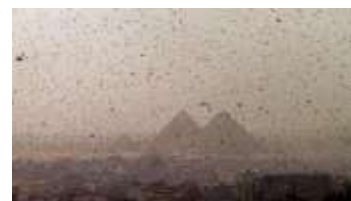
slaves. Thus, we see cracks begin to form in the inner circle around Pharaoh. This is crucial to the politics of the story. To restore their solidarity, and to enable Pharaoh to sustain his self-delusion of power, God **hardens the heart of Pharaoh and the heart of his servants.**

וּלְמַעַן תִּסְפָּר
 בְּאָזְנֵי בְנֶךָ
 וּבְזֵן בְּנֶךָ
 אֵת אֲשֶׁר הִתְעַלְלֵתִי בְּמִצְרַיִם
 וְאֶת-אֹתֹתַי אֲשֶׁר-שָׂמֵתִי בָּם
 וַיֵּדַעְתֶּם כִּי-אֲנִי ה': יב

*and in order that you may recount
 in the hearing of your child
 and of your child's child
 how I have been capricious with Egypt,
 and my signs, which I have placed upon them—
 that you may know that I am God. (10:2)*

Telling the Story: The first time the Torah emphasizes storytelling regarding the Exodus is prior to the plague of *Locusts*. What sounds like a personal obligation for Moses to tell the account of

locusts to
his
 children



and grandchildren, applies to everyone. The desire to convey an intense, extraordinary experience to future generations, so that they will remember it forever exists in everyone. There are three more instances of the storytelling theme in this parasha:

וְהָיָה
 כִּי-יִיאָמְרוּ אֵלֵיכֶם
 בְּנֵיכֶם
 מָה הָעֲבֹדָה הַזֹּאת
 לָכֶם:
וְאָמַרְתֶּם
 זָבַח-פֶּסַח
 הוּא לָהִי
 יב:כו-כז

*And it will be,
 when your children say
 to you:
 What does this service
 [mean] to you?
 then say:
 It is the sacrificial-
 meal of Passover
 to God... 12:26-27*

וְהַגַּדְתָּ
 לְבְנֶךָ
 בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא
 לֵאמֹר בְּעִבּוֹר זֶה
 עָשָׂה ה'
 לִי
 בְּצֵאתִי
 מִמִּצְרַיִם:
 יג:ח

*And you are to tell
 your child
 on that day, saying:
 It is because
 of what God did
 for me,
 when I went out
 of Egypt.
 13:8*

וְהָיָה
 כִּי-יִשְׁאַלְךָ בְּנֶךָ
 מָחָר לֵאמֹר
 מַה-זֹּאת
וְאָמַרְתָּ אֵלָיו
 בְּחֹזֶק יָד
 הוֹצִיאָנוּ ה'
 מִמִּצְרַיִם
 מִבֵּית עֲבָדָיִם: יג:יד

*It shall be
 when your child asks you
 on the morrow, saying:
 What is this?
 you are to say to him:
 By strength of hand God
 brought us out
 of Egypt,
 out of a house of slaves. 13:14*

וַיֹּאמְרוּ עֲבָדָיו פַּרְעֹה אֵלָיו
 עַד-מָתַי יִהְיֶה זֶה
 לָנוּ לְמוֹקֵשׁ
 שְׁלַח אֶת-הָאֲנָשִׁים
 וַיַּעֲבְדוּ אֶת-ה' אֱלֹהֵיהֶם
 הַיּוֹם תִּדַּע
 כִּי אֲבָדָה מִצְרַיִם: יז

*Pharaoh's servants said to him:
 Until when will this one
 be a snare to us?
 Send the men free,
 that they may serve God their God!
 Do you not yet know
 that Egypt is lost? (10:7)*

The Servants (2): How fascinating is it that, despite God's **hardening of their heart**, above, the servants are terrified by Moses' warning of locusts. Even though they function as a 'privy council' to Pharaoh and are totally subservient to him, and even though God is exerting power over them by restricting their emotions, their freedom to feel what they feel actually breaks through. And by expressing their opposition to Pharaoh they are declaring their independence. With his inner circle turning against him, this moment portends his ultimate downfall.

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה
 נְטֹה יָדְךָ עַל-הַשָּׁמַיִם
 וַיְהִי חֹשֶׁךְ
 עַל-אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם
 וַיִּגַּשׁ חֹשֶׁךְ: יכ:א

*God said to Moshe:
 Stretch out your hand toward the heavens,
 and let there be darkness
 over the land of Egypt,
 so that they will feel darkness! (10:21)*

Darkness: What is a **darkness that you can feel**? Robert Alter: *The force of this hyperbole...beautifully conveys the claustrophobic palpability of absolute darkness.* Nice. But what does that mean? It's a way of describing the darkest darkness. Some say it was a sandstorm, others say it was national depression.

But consider the Bunker Experiment: 15 people who spent 40 days in a cave beneath the Pyrenees. They didn't have natural light to regulate their circadian rhythms. They had no cues for telling time. Here's how one participant described the experience: *The first nights were really disturbing. You'd wake up suddenly, but you wouldn't*

be able to tell if it was the middle of the night. Usually when you wake up, the first thing you do is check to see what time it is. But we didn't have any phones, clocks or any way to see the Sun. It was impossible to know how long you'd slept. So, you'd just have to accept that there's no point trying to understand time. This is a

plausible way of conveying a **darkness that you can feel.** It is a darkness that is so completely disorienting to you that you have absolutely no concept of time and space. All the things that structure life and society are gone. You feel lethargic, and completely helpless. An analogy: a power outage. Remember Hurricane Sandy?

Hello Darkness: A Rabbinic Debate About Divine Attributes - Power vs. Justice

R. Yehuda and R. Nehemia lived at the end of the 2nd century. They debated one another very often. They differ here on the way they interpret the plague of darkness. Because the text is

so enigmatic, they explore the Tanakh for clues. Where else do we find descriptions of darkness? R. Yehuda finds one in the book of Psalms that refers to, what we would call the darkness of deep space. And R. Nehemia finds a reference to darkness in the book of Job, in a context that seems to be describing, well, what we would call, hell. For R. Yehuda the darkness of the plagues was somehow connected to heavenly dark-

<p>מתיכן הנה אותו החשך? רבי יהודה ורבי נחמיה. רבי יהודה אומר: מחשך של מעלה, שנאמר: ישת חשך סתרו סביבותיו סתו (תהלים יח:12). רבי נחמיה אומר: מחשך גיהנום, שנאמר: ארץ עמנה כמו אפל עלמנת ולא סדרים ותפע כמו אפל. (איוב י:22) תנחומא</p>	<p>Where did that darkness come from? R. Yehuda and R. Nehemia debated this. R. Yehuda said: From the darkness of Heaven. <i>As it is written:</i> He made darkness His hiding-place, His pavilion round about Him; (Psalm 18:12) R. Nehemiah said: From the darkness of Hell. <i>As it is written:</i> A land gloom, as darkness itself; A land of the shadow of death, without any order, And where the light is as darkness. (Job 10:22) Tanhuma</p>
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ness where divine power resides. The plague of darkness is like the blackness of a **black hole** which is so powerful in its gravitational pull, that even light cannot escape it. The plague, therefore, is an expression of divine power. For R. Nehemia, this is a darkness that is taken from **the valley of the shadow Why Didn't Pharaoh Just Assassinate Moses?**

Prior to the final plague, tempers flare. The country has been laid waste by hail and locusts and the people have just ex-

perienced tremendous disorientation due to darkness. Pharaoh has agreed to let the Israelites **worship God** but he won't let them take their livestock with them, which defeats the whole purpose. Moses will have none of that. Pharaoh will not dictate terms here. To Moses freedom means the entire people and all of its livestock. No hoof left behind. But with Pharaoh relenting even

<p>ויאמר לו פרעה לך מעלי השמר לך אל-תקח ראות פני כי ביום ראתך פני תמות: ויאמר משה קו דברך לא-אסף עוד ראות פניך. י-כח-כט</p>	<p>Pharaoh said to him: Go from me! Take you care: You are not to see my face again, for on the day that you see my face, you shall die! Moshe said: You have spoken well; I will not henceforth see your face again! 10:28-29</p>
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just a bit, God hardens his heart again (note that the servants are not even in the picture here; they have all but abandoned him). It is at that point that Pharaoh gives Moses an ultimatum. **On the day that you see my face, you shall die.** Let's first appreciate the irony in that statement. First of all, during the night of tenth plague, Pharaoh will indeed **see his face** again. Instead of putting him to death, Pharaoh is the midwife to Israel's birth by sending them out. Thus, **on the night that Moses sees Pharaoh's face, Moses doesn't die. But: Israel is born and comes fully alive!** The second irony of this statement is that it is an inversion of what God says later on about himself.

After the Golden Calf incident, when Moses asks God to show him his glory, God responds, **לא תוכל לראות את-פני כי לא-יראני, האדם והי: - You cannot see my face, for no human can see me and live!** In other words, God is so powerful that if a person takes so much as a glimpse of God, they

of death ie., hell. The plague of darkness is more a representation of divine punishment, justice in other words, than divine power. The substance of the debate then is this:

Are the plagues first and foremost a manifestation of divine power or divine justice? If you side with R. Yehuda, you believe that the plagues are a manifestation of divine power (**yad hazaka**) and that God is revealing his power to the world through the plagues. By extension then, the Exodus story is a story of God's power, and that is how we should "know" God. On the other hand, if you side with R. Nehemia,

you believe that the plagues are first and foremost a manifestation of divine justice and that the Exodus story ought to be told as a story of God executing his justice (**shfatim**) over Egypt. Divine power vs. Divine Justice? You decide. Do these rabbis share the same theology? Are these two world views?

will die. Whereas Pharaoh is so weak - after all, he is a mere mortal - looking at his face will have no effect whatsoever.

Nevertheless, Pharaoh could have done so many things to neutralize Moses. From when he turned his staff into a serpent, to the plague of blood, through the rest of the plagues until now, Pharaoh could have had Moses arrested and thrown into a dungeon (lots of those in Egypt) or had him executed (lots of that too!) Of course, if that had happened there

wouldn't be much of a story, and we wouldn't be here. Fair enough. But here are some other possible answers: 1. Pharaoh never took Moses' threat seriously. 2. He wanted to avoid igniting an uprising that he wouldn't have been able to suppress. 3. He had a grudging respect for him. 4. Eliminating Moses would have signaled cowardice not strength. Only weak leaders execute or incarcerate their opponents. 5. Perhaps he was afraid of a divine repercussion. After all, he does implore Moses to intercede with God on his behalf. 6. Perhaps, in some strange way, Pharaoh needed Moses. Without an opponent, Pharaoh would not be Pharaoh. Moses thus becomes central to

Pharaoh's self-understanding. 7. By keeping Moses alive, Pharaoh can continue to exhibit power over him. And that is all he wants. 8. In not exercising the ultimate power over Moses, even someone as tyrannical as Pharaoh is also redeemable. 9. They were not at war. 10. All of the above?

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