

# DIVREI TORAH BULLETIN

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PARSHAT: Bo

4 Shevat 5772

January 28, 2012

DAF YOMI: Arachin 15

NACH YOMI: I Samuel 21

*Kaved Lev Paro- The heart of Pharaoh turned into liver (Medrash)*

This Medrash plays on the word *Kaved*, which literally means hardened, and reads it to mean liver. I would like to suggest that perhaps in some ways the heart of the King of Egypt actually turned into a liver.

The notion of *free will* is a basic premise and a fundamental component of Jewish philosophy. If, as the Torah teaches, we are Beings who have moral responsibility, we must have the ability to make choices and thus have free will. The doctrine of reward and punishment can only exist if a human can make a choice. Consequently when reading the narrative of the exodus and the way the Al-mighty manipulated and hardened Pharaoh's heart over and over again, we ask the very basic question; what happened to Pharaoh's free will and the ability given to humankind to repent?

Among Jewish thinkers several approaches exist. Maimonides notes that free will can be removed from those whose sins are grave enough. He writes in his Laws of Teshuvah that: "a person may commit a great sin or many sins causing the judgment rendered before the True Judge to be that the retribution [administered to] this transgressor for these sins which he willfully and

consciously committed is that his Teshuvah will be held back. He will not be allowed the chance to repent from his wickedness so that he will die and be wiped out because of the sin he committed. For these reasons, it is written in the Torah [Exodus 14:4], 'I will harden Pharaoh's heart.' Since he began to sin on his own initiative and caused hardships to the Israelites who dwelled in his land - as [Exodus 1:10] states: 'Come, let us deal wisely with them,' - judgment obligated that he be prevented from repenting so that he would suffer retribution. Therefore, The Holy One, blessed be He, hardened his heart."

Others, like Rav Ovadia Seforno, the great Italian commentator of the 16th century, take a different approach. Seforno explains that HaShem is actually preserving Pharaoh's free will by hardening his heart. The impact of the plagues was so devastating that if HaShem had not hardened Pharaoh's heart, Pharaoh would have been compelled to let the Jewish people go in order to stop their suffering. Pharaoh's relenting then, would not have been a sign of true submission, but rather only would have been a move to save him from the situation. Consequently, his repentance would not have been genuine, but rather would have been a pragmatic move. Therefore, HaShem gave him the ability to withstand the pain that was being

inflicted upon the Egyptians. However, if indeed Pharaoh truly had desired to do complete Teshuvah by recognizing his mistakes, nothing would have prevented him from doing so. In other words, Seforno views the hardening as a partial reduction of Pharaoh's free will and not as a complete cessation.

In general, people have the ability to make choices and do Teshuvah even if the reason behind their choice is to prevent them from future suffering. Humans can choose that which is right even if it is without contrition. Pharaoh's choice-making ability was reduced to the point where he could only choose to actually repent. The ability to let the people go, just for the sake of saving himself, was removed from him.

With the Seforno's explanation we can return to the 'heart of Pharaoh which turned into liver'. The human heart is a muscular organ at the center of the circulatory system that pumps blood to the body. A pump does not hold back elements but rather allows all to flow through it. The liver, on the hand, operates as a filter which detoxifies the body by filtering the blood. Not all that enters the liver, as part of the flow, comes out. Thus, free will can be viewed as the heart, since humans have the ability to make choices without limitation. A person can decide to stop being evil even if it is only to avoid reprisal. All decisions can pass through the system the way everything passes through the pumping heart. Limited free will, where all decision choices are not available, can metaphorically be seen as a liver. Some things pass through, others do not. As a result, we can say that Pharaoh's heart turned into liver.

Good Shabbos.

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