

## Parashat Va'era

“And Paro’s Heart was Steeled;”  
 “And God Steeled Paro’s Heart;”  
 “And I shall Harden Paro’s Heart;”  
 “Paro’s Heart has been Toughened.”

“Rabbi Yohanan said: ‘Here we find an opening for the heretics to say: ‘There was nothing left of him to do *teshuvah*.’ [God gave him no opportunity to repent.] Resh Lakish said: ‘Close the mouths of the heretics...He warns him once, twice, three times, and he does not repent, so He locks the door of *teshuvah* to him, in order to pay him back for his sin.’ So with the wicked Paro: After the Holy One sent His message to him five times, and he ignored His words, the Holy One said to him: ‘You stiffened the yoke of your neck, and toughened your heart. You will see now how I add more impurity to your already existing impurity.’” Ramban: “And He informs him further, that after He has shown many wonders [meaning direct Divine revelation, in which the One on high takes all the initiative:*giluy panim* out of *itaruta dili’aila* ] the wicked Paro will add sin upon sin, and will not want [out of his own free will] to listen to your mission any longer when I send you to him...and God informs Moshe that by his doing so, he will have reached his limit [Paro himself will have used up his last free choice] and then God will immediately lay His hand on him, meaning the slaying of the first-born...that is, that plague God will do really with His own Hand – so to speak – as our Sages state: ‘I alone and no angel, I alone and no seraph, I alone and no messenger, but rather the Holy One Himself in all His glory.’ [God Himself then intervenes in Paro’s free choice.] (Ohr HaHaim)

This proves that the plagues were brought upon Paro for the purpose of assisting Paro’s own uniquely original free choice, to enable him to learn, and to draw the relevant conclusions, and to discover the real Ruler of the creation. Only after Paro failed to awaken his own inner truth through the stimuli of the plagues did God harden and toughen his heart through much harder and tougher plagues that expressed *hitaruta dili’aila*, a direct intervention from on high, and even this was for the purpose of making it easier for him to recognize the Sovereign of the universe. Even here, the rule of clarifying the truth by way of suffering applies, or to use our terms: Imposing creativity’s control over self-preservation (suffering) which then turns into creativity. “From fierce, sweet comes forth.” This is why Moshe repeats his warning before every plague, in order to give him the opportunity, in spite of everything, to open his eyes, if not his heart.

## The Plagues' Three Purposes

“And Paro will not listen to you, and I will lay My Hand upon Egypt, and I will bring forth My people.” Aside from the educational goal for Paro, there was an additional goal: Punishment for his wickedness. A third purpose: The revelation of Godly Presence in the creation: “So that Egypt will know that I am God.” This purpose was intended also for b’nei Yisrael.

*Kal VaHomer*, The Logic of A` Fortiori:

If so in the lighter case, how much more so in the heavier case.

“If b’nei Yisrael will not listen to me, how will Paro listen to me, when I am clumsy of speech.’ This is one of the ten *kal vahomers* in the Torah.” Yet further on (verse 30): “Here I am clumsy of speech, and how will Paro listen to me?” It is the same statement said above in verse 12. (Rashi) Yet in the second version, one side is missing from the equation.

*Kal VaHomer* works by creating a connection between two situations, based on the assumption that one can derive the second situation from the first situation. In the second version, the connection between b’nei Yisrael and Paro is missing, and what is left is only the equation connecting Moshe’s situation to Paro’s attitude. We must point out that between these two versions, there suddenly appears a listing, describing the details of b’nei Yisrael’s genealogy. This list seems to appear out of nowhere and to be unconnected to the story itself. It would seem that the connection lies in disclosing the value of this genealogy, of the qualitative roots of this nation, thanks to which they were able to overcome their difficulties and open themselves up to belief in Moshe and in the message he bore: It was thanks to their own quality rather than any persuasive powers of Moshe’s, for he was clumsy of speech. Moshe’s objections relate to this: He now realizes Yisrael’s qualitative value. However, that value-less Paro will be completely dependent on Moshe’s persuasive power, and this power is disabled.

A Four-Fold Phrasing of Redemption: “I shall bring forth...” “I shall save...” “I shall redeem...” “I shall take...” These mean to convey: I am God, I and no angel, I alone, through an intervention from on high, with no conditions attached, independent of any initiative from below, from b’nei Yisrael. I will do it all. This seems to be what is meant by the Torah’s phrasing of the promise of redemption four times in four different ways. Meaning that all of these four stages of redemption will be accomplished through God’s initiative alone.

This teaches us that the rules that apply to a public group that has consolidated into a nation are not the same as the rules that apply to a private individual, who is obligated to initiate, and to cry for help, and the assistance in response from on high is conditional upon his level and his merit below. A public, which is a collection of individuals, has a higher and different quality than the sum total of its individuals, and its right to be granted heavenly plenitude does not

depend on the sum total of their merit. (However, this is not the case as regards the laws of purchase and finance. For this application, the individual members of a group fall into the legal category of partners, whose partnership is based on a reciprocal agreement to yield their claim, in which each of the inhabitants of the city, who are all acquainted with one another, have agreed to a division of property among themselves based on yielding and consensus. This is different from the new category under discussion: nationhood.) A nation is a larger public, who are not yet all acquainted with one another, and require an authority in order to legislate and determine rules of behavior that apply to all. This is what is meant by “and they did not heed Moshe, due to shortness of breath and hard labor.” They did not yet know one another, and were in need of a Godly initiative that would force His Presence upon them, and change their situation without requiring their cooperation.

The educational goal of the punishment creates a connection of *kal vahomer*, as in Paro’s dream, where the scrawny-fleshed cows devoured the fat ones, “yet one could not discern that they had absorbed them.” The absurdity of cause and effect inherent in Godly existence sustains and expresses Godly presence by confusing natural and logical causality, which is built on the principle that the strong rule the weak and that reciprocity is impossible.

The principle that “from fierce, sweet comes forth” is the principle of Godly causality, which devours natural, brute-force causality, upon which logical method is built. A causality such as “from fierce, sweet comes forth” comes to teach us that from the blow itself, the healing shall come, and that “it is a time of trouble for Yaakov, yet from it he shall be saved.” (That is, thanks to the trouble itself.) Love’s suffering: “Let your *hesed* be with us, God, to the extent that we have yearned for You.” “And we will not be shamed nor humiliated because we have placed our confidence in Your sacred Name, we will delight and rejoice in Your saving.” That is, if you are in trouble, and do not yearn for saving, you will not merit saving, since you have not anticipated it and prayed for it, and therefore you will not be privileged to rejoice in being saved.

We see from this that the sufferings of existence on the plane of existential survival can be devoured by the suffering person. The actual suffering itself is what pressures the individual to cease to rely on the natural system and on logical causality, and to search, to break out of a system that has begun to strangle him, and to search for his deliverance in the dimension of height. Suffering thus becomes the eye-opener, directing the sufferer to direct himself to his Godly source.

Anxiety creates a vacuum, a black hole that devours the prayer of the sufferer attempting to turn to God, creating a barrier that severs and blurs the new connection that has formed between suffering and the yearning for deliverance. This is because a condition of anxiety is not created out of an objective existential difficulty but out of a subjective sensation of existence that

results from detaching self-preservation from creativity, detaching Yaakov from Esav – rather than “Yaakov’s hand grasping Esav’s heel.”

The moment Yaakov’s hand loses its grip on Esav, anxiety sets in, and with it, the connection between trouble and deliverance is lost. Anxiety is the device of the *yetser*, the evil urge attempting to sever man from God, to envelop/strangle him inside the existential system, so that he forever paddle the mud puddles rather than soaring on high.

This proves the legitimacy, and even the mitsva of requesting one’s own needs in prayer, despite the difficulty entailed in such a request, as though it implies that man knows what is best for him more than his Father in heaven. After all, one is really obligated to pray for the honor of one’s Possessor, and to ignore one’s own selfish honor. Nevertheless, awareness of the needs of one’s own existence gives one a sense of realness and tangibility, and this one exchanges for creativity, for a sense of the realness and tangibility of the Godly Presence. Thus does man exchange existential awareness for Godly Presence. Anxiety, as mentioned, is created by detaching the objective existential difficulty from its solution from the direction of height. Anxiety is nourished by imaginary difficulties that have no hold on tangible reality. It is therefore particularly dangerous for the elderly and for the unemployed, who are inactive and thus lose their sense of the tangibility of objective reality. The cure for anxiety in this case is to return them to activity, in order to create this connection: “And I will bless you in all that you do.”

We can now understand the harshness of Paro’s heart, according to this principle: He refused to see any causal connection between the plagues and the Holy One. He found it difficult – he refused – to see the plagues as a punishment for his behavior. His confrontation with the plagues was arrested, creating anxiety, as a barrier separating him from the Godly causality of reward and punishment. At an earlier stage, he had viewed the first plagues as random natural phenomena, which he believed he was capable of controlling through the acrobatics of the Egyptian sorcerers. With the second set of plagues, anxiety crept in, and it was only with the third group that he comprehended that a connection existed: “God is the righteous One, and I and my nation are the wicked ones.”

Nevertheless, anxiety entered in full force, blinding his sight. This is the meaning of “I will harden,” “Paro’s heart has been toughened:” He has been devoured by anxiety, as the scrawny-fleshed cows devoured the fat cows, in the absurd cycle of causality taught in the academies of egoistic survival, that prevent one from seeing the causality of the dimension of height even under conditions that preclude any other possible view, that have wreaked havoc with all logical causality, that have destroyed all normal workings of the forces of nature according to the strong/weak rules that prevail in the physical world.

Fear is the parent of anxiety. God used the fear factor in order to block Paro’s heart with anxiety. Fear derives from the absence of a sense of confidence that the situation is under control

– if not under human control, why then this proves that the Holy One is directly involved, and we have before us Godly Presence. Fear is the loss of recourse, a sense of helplessness, out of the weakness and confusion that lead to a severing of the lower causality from the higher causality, and to a severing of oneself from both causalities. Severing equals anxiety, which creates a vicious cycle of fear, anxiety, and loss of control over a situation, in which one despairs of any attempt to understand it within a causal system.

### **The Slaying of the First-Born**

Anxiety and fear are easily done away with in a “belonging”-oriented person, by simply severing the dependency. This is the slaying of the first-born, meaning the removal of the first-born, removal of the strong factor who has the power to defend the weaker factors who depend on him. The removal of the first-born is the height of the vicious cycle created by fear and anxiety. When the leader panics, the entire system collapses from within. As long as the inside is solid, there is no tragic end. When the system begins to collapse from within, this is a sign that self-preservation has been severed from creativity, which originates in the innermost self. At this point, the destructive self-preservation system assumes control, and its end is certain – and near.

“And ever since I came to Paro to speak in Your name, it has only gotten worse for this nation, and You have surely not saved Your nation.” (5:13) According to the commentaries, Yisrael had hoped that the Holy One’s omnipotent Hand would overwhelm Egypt within a few days. The plagues did not reflect the powerful Hand of the Godly Presence in ways that are normally expected, such as a raging fires, earthquakes, floods, decimating drought, etc. Had God used these, the educational purpose would have been lost – the lesson of the ineffectual nature of quantity. Instead, God used localized punishments attached to specific wickedness. This is God’s answer to Moshe.