



Shabbat Va'era
25 Tevet 5778 / January 12, 2018

Dear Shir Tikvah,

As a student in Israel, I had the opportunity to interview Conservative Rabbi Pesach Schindler (of blessed memory) about how he understands difficult Torah texts - this week's in particular. How God could have supported Pharaoh in a hardened heart, to the detriment of so many people, his own and those dwelling among them. Reb Pesach was a phenomenal teacher and role model. Our conversation was so inspiring that I transcribed the entire dialog.

When I went back to my notes to quote Reb Pesach, I realized that his words speak even more profoundly to me, and to our world today, and that I want to let his words speak directly to you. What follows are Reb Pesach's words from our conversation December 5, 2004. It is long-ish and utterly worth the read:

By way of background:

In my own personal life, I was plucked out as a child from Hitler Europe while many of my classmates were destroyed in [the fourth, in the 9th fourth, in Kavna], and they were shot, in 1942, in 1941 and 42.

And here is this tension

Following the shoah I could not go along with colleagues who felt that God's place in history is no longer there, God no longer operates in history. I have not lost faith in that. I have become more realistic about human behavior, but I have not become more cynical about God's behavior. I believe that we have been given the choice and God allows us... the opportunities for tikkun, for correcting ourselves.

This is what biblical narrative mean to me, and so if you ask me how do I see this, the answer is yes, this is the word of God. And we kind of work with one another. God encourages us to do our best, to achieve our maximum, and we hope that God is in our corner, cheering us on. More than that I can not expect that God would intervene historically, or for him to be some kind of major magician, to move us around without our will.

About our Torah portion:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה בֹּא אֶל־פַּרְעֹה כִּי־אֲנִי הִקְבַּדְתִּי אֶת־לִבּוֹ וְאֶת־לֵב עַבְדָּיו לְמַעַן שְׁתִּי אֶתְתִּי אֵלָה בְּקִרְבּוֹ:
God said to Moses, "Go to Pharaoh. For I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his servants, in order that I may display these My signs among them..."

What [God] is saying here is, I'm meeting Pharaoh where he is, on his ground. Traditional commentaries see that as a punishment. When a person is placed into a position of obstinacy, and his heart isn't open enough to see other options, that is the worst dead end that a person can get into.

" וַיִּקְבַּדְתִּי אֶת לִבּוֹ " hardened his heart" means "I'm going to do what he would have like to have done anyhow; that he was inclined to do so." We have now in modern history - when you look at the history of a person who was a brilliant, genius-like leader of his people, he was so blinded, so hardened, that - וַיִּקְבַּדְתִּי - I'm talking about Adolph Hitler you know -during WWII he wasn't fighting a military battle -he took precious trains, troop trains, that he needed, to clothe his poor soldiers on the Russian front who were dying in front of Stalingrad, in order to take poor Jews and drive them into the camps!

Here's a person who lost total sight of his own interests. Pharaoh was closed to that, you couldn't tell Hitler... one of his closest advisors could come to him and say, 'what the hell are you doing? Your army is being decimated on the Russian front - and now again with Montgomery on the North African front - and you're doing this in order to take

a slave population, that is dying to stay alive to work for you, and you're sending them in front of Gestapo people with machine guns who are shooting them down - where is your sechel [good sense]?! This is - הכבדתי את לבו - hardened his heart. That was part of Pharoah's total gestalt; God didn't have to do very much, he just didn't give him the chance to do t'shuvah, that's all.

So that's how I interpret הכבדתי את לבו [God saying "I hardened his heart"]: it was something that was already moving in that direction. And there are a lot of people who are exactly like that. You meet them in daily life; you wish them to open up.

With gratitude for all of our activists, with prayers and pleas for an end to the Pharoahs of the world, Shabbat Shalom.

Debra
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