

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter XIV: Va'era (Ex. 6:2–9:35)

Essay 7. The defective hearts of the Egyptians

פסוק "כבד לב פרעה", וכן "פייאני הכבדתי את לבו". קשה למה תלה הכתוב הקושי לב של פרעה בלשון "כבד". ולמה בכל פעם הזכיר מלת "לב", "ונחזק לב פרעה", "וניחזק ה' את לב פרעה". ועוד למה הסיר ממנו הבחירה במכפות האחרונות? יש כאן פתרון פה למינים לומר לא היה ממנו שייעשה תשובה.

There is a verse: “And the L-rd said to Moses, ‘**The heart of Pharaoh is heavy**; he refuses to let the people go.’”¹ Also, “**Then the L-rd said to Moses, ‘Go to Pharaoh, for I have made heavy his heart** and the hearts of his servants, in order that I may display these My signs within his midst.’”²

Question 1: **A question is why did Scripture establish the hardness of the heart of Pharaoh with the language “heavy.”**

Question 2: **Also, why is it that every time the Torah discusses Pharaoh’s stubborn nature, it mentions the word “heart,” e.g., “and He strengthened Pharaoh’s heart,”³ or, “and the L-rd strengthened Pharaoh’s heart.”⁴**

Question 3: **Also, why did [G-d] remove from [Pharaoh] the choice for the final plagues? There is an opening there for heretics to say that because of this, there was no way for him to repent.**

ויש לומר שהקב"ה מדד לו מדה כנגד מדה ולא הסיר ממנו הבחירה, שכתב הפרי חדש (יורה דעה סימן מ' סעיף קטן ה') וז"ל, כתב בספר בית חדש קבלתי שמעשה היה שנמצא עצם בתוך הלב והקשירו חכמי הדור לפי שפך נמצא בלב הצבי שמתקשה הדם ונעשה עצם ואפשר שיהא נמצא כף לפעמים בבהמה ע"כ. והאמת אם קבלתו קבלה אין ללמוד ממנו לשאר מינים דזה דוקא בצבי וכו'. אבל מצאתי בספר שער השמים שכתב וז"ל, וכל מיני הבעלי חיים אין להם עצם בלבבותם מלבד מין הסוס ובמין אחד מן השורים שיש בהם עצם לרוב גודל גופם וצריך חוזק הלב. ומעתה בהמה שנמצא בלב שלה עצם אין בנו פח להחירה עד שגדע שהוא ממין השנורים שהזכיר התקם הנ"ל עכ"ל.

It can be said that the Holy One, Blessed be He, treated him measure-for-measure, and did not take away from him the choice. As the author of the *Pri Chadash* (Yoreh De'ah, siman 40, se'if katan 5)⁵ wrote:

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¹ Ex. 7:14.

² Ex. 10:1.

³ Ex. 7:13; Ex. 7:22; Ex. 8:15; Ex. 9:35.

⁴ Ex. 9:12; Ex. 10:20; Ex. 10:27; Ex. 14:8.

⁵ Hezekiah da Silva (1659–1698), author of *Pri Chadash* (Amsterdam 1691).

It's written in the book *Bayit Chadash*, "I received [a rabbinic tradition] of an incident that occurred, that a bone was found inside the heart [of an animal that had been ritually slaughtered], and the wise men of the generation held that it was kosher, because this is found in the heart of a deer, that the blood hardens and becomes a bone, and it's possible that sometimes this would be found in cattle."⁶

And the truth is, if what he received is a correct reception of rabbinic tradition, we shouldn't learn from it for other types of animals, and it's only particularly for the deer. But I found in the book *Sha'ar haShamayim* who wrote: "For all types of animals, they have no bone in their hearts, apart from the horse [which is not kosher], and one species of the ox [which is kosher], that each have a bone in them because of their great body size and their need for a strengthened heart."⁷ Thus, for cattle which is found to have a bone in its heart, we have no power to permit it [as kosher], until we know that it is the type of ox mentioned by the aforementioned sage.

- *Pri Chadash*, Yoreh De'ah, siman 40, se'if katan 5

ועל פי זה יש לומר שמעקרא נתקשה דמו על ישראל כל כך בפעם שנגזר הדם בלבו בלב הציב, וזה פירוש הפסוק "כבד לב פרעה" ועל כן "מאן לשלח העם". וכאשר ראה הקב"ה שפרשעו ובכעסו נצרר הדם בלבו התזיק יותר את לבו והוסיף בו עצם לרוב חזקת לבו.

According to this, it can be said that initially, [Pharaoh's] blood hardened due to Israel so much—because of his anger—that the blood became sluggish in his heart, like the heart of a deer, and this is the explanation of the verse, "The heart of Pharaoh is heavy," and therefore, "he refuses to let the people go." This is the answer to question 1: the Torah uses the language of "heavy" because the blood became sluggish in Pharaoh's heart.

When the Holy One, Blessed be He, saw that by [Pharaoh's] wickedness and anger, the blood became sluggish in his heart, He strengthened his heart and added a bone because of the great strength of his heart. This is the answer to question 2, why Scripture focuses on the word "heart" in discussing Pharaoh's stubbornness. It also answers question 3: It's not that G-d took away Pharaoh's free choice, but He saw that Pharaoh's heart was hardened through his own wickedness and anger, and through a measure-for-measure punishment, He hardened it even more.

Incidentally, medical science discusses the cardiac skeleton, a high-density homogeneous structure of connective tissue that forms and anchors the valves of the heart. In some animals, this tissue can undergo mineralization as the animals age, and can become an *os cordis*, a heart bone. This appears, as the rabbinic literature indicates, in deer and oxen. It also appears occasionally in goats and otters. In 2020, it was discovered to also occur in chimpanzees, especially ones afflicted

⁶ Joel Sirkis (1561-1640), known as "the Bach," an abbreviation for his book, *Bayit Chadash*. The quotation appears in *Bayit Chadash*, Yoreh De'ah 39:48.

⁷ Gershon ben Shlomo (13th century), *Sha'ar haShamayim* (Venice 1547), article 4.

with myocardial fibrosis, a disease that also affects humans. It has been speculated that a heart bone could appear in rare cases in humans.⁸

וְנָהוּ שְׁאֵמֵר הַפֶּתוּב "כִּי בַפְעַם הַזֹּאת אֲנִי שֹׁלַח אֶת־כָּל־מַגַּפְתֵי אֶל־לִבָּךְ". וּפְרַשׁ רַש"י, לְמַדְנֵנו שְׁמֵכַת בְּכוֹרוֹת שְׁקוּלָה כְּנִגְדַּת כָּל הַמַּכּוֹת, וְהַעוֹלָם מִקְשִׁים מָה עֲנִין מֵכַת בְּכוֹרוֹת לְכָאן, וְעוֹד שְׁהַמַּכּוֹת לֹא הָיוּ תוֹךְ לְבוֹ. וְלִפִּי דְרַבְנֵנוּ מְדוּיָיק שְׁפִיר "אֶל־לִבָּךְ" שְׁהַעֲמִיד לוֹ עֲצָם תוֹךְ לְבוֹ וּבְזֶה נִטְרָף כְּדַעַת הַפָּרִי חֲדָשׁ, מֵה שְׁלֹא הָיָה כֵּן מִתְחַלָּה שְׁלֹא הָיָה רַק נִצָּרַר הַדָּם. וְהַטְרִיפָה אַף בְּאֲדָם אֵינָה חֲזָה י"ב חֲדָשׁ כְּמוֹ שְׁפִסְק הַפָּרִי חֲדָשׁ הַנ"ל (בְּיֹרֵה דְעָה סִימָן ל"א סְעִיף קָטָן ז'), וְהוֹאִיל שְׁנִטְרָף הוּא בְּסַפְנָה לְמוֹת, וְכִיּוֹן שְׁהַפֶּתוּב כְּתִב בְּמִכָּה זֹ "אֶת־כָּל־מַגַּפְתֵי" דְּמִשְׁמַע שְׁהִיא שְׁקוּלָה כְּנִגְדַּת כָּל הַמַּכּוֹת, וְהִינּוּ לִפִּי שְׁעֵתָה נִטְרָף וְהָיָה בְּסַפְנָת מִיתָה, מְכַל שְׁפֵן מֵכַת בְּכוֹרוֹת שְׁהִיָּתָה שְׁעֵת מִיתָה מִמָּשׁ שְׁבֹנְדָאֵי הִיא שְׁקוּלָה כְּנִגְדַּת כָּל הַמַּכּוֹת.

This understanding that G-d created a bone in Pharaoh's heart is the intent of what Scripture said, referring to the plague of hail: "For this time, I will send all My plagues upon your heart, and your servants, and your people, in order that you may know that there is none like Me in all the world."⁹ Rashi explained this verse by saying, "We learned that the plague on the firstborn was equal [in magnitude] to all the [previous] plagues [combined]."

Question 4: **Everyone asks about this Rashi: How is the tenth plague of the firstborn related to this verse, which relates to the seventh plague, hail?**

Question 5: **Also, that while the verse said, "upon your heart," the plagues were not known to be within [Pharaoh's] heart.**

The answer to question 5, is that **according to our way of understanding, "upon your heart" is perfectly accurate, for He established for him a bone within his heart. By this he became "treif," according to the opinion of the Pri Chadash, something that was not the case initially, when he only had sluggishness of the blood. Treif means "torn," and refers to an animal that has suffered an injury or defect that would cause it to die within one year. Such an animal cannot be kosher, even if ritually slaughtered. Treif even for a human means he only lives up to 12 months, as the Pri Chadash ruled above, in Yoreh De'ah, siman 31, se'if katan 7.**

The answer for question 4 is that **since [Pharaoh] had become treif, through G-d's creating a bone within his heart as a measure-for-measure punishment, he was in danger to die. Since Scripture wrote for this plague of hail, "For this time, I will send all My plagues upon your heart," that has the meaning that it has the same weight as all the plagues, because now he is treif and in danger of death. This is especially true since the plague of the firstborn, which was at the very hour of death, certainly has the same weight as all the plagues.**

⁸ Carly Cassella, *A Mysterious Bone Discovered in The Hearts of Some Chimpanzees Raises Big Questions*, Science Alert, June 10, 2020, <https://www.sciencealert.com/some-chimps-have-a-little-bone-in-their-heart-and-it-might-be-killing-them> (Retrieved Jan. 13, 2024).

⁹ Ex. 9:14.

ואף שלכאורה הוא דבר פשוט ואין שייך לימוד על זה דפשיטא שאין דבר קשה מהמנות, מכל מקום הוצרך רש"י לומר למדנו שמכת בכורות שקולה וכו', משום דאיכא סברא נמי להפך כדאשכחן בפרק ז' דמציעא אי מקטל קטלו להווא גברא, לא מגלינא, אי נגודי מנגדו ליה, מגלינא וכו'.

This is apparently a simple matter, and there is no teaching relevant to this, for it is simple that there is nothing more difficult than death. Nevertheless, Rashi was forced to say, “We learned that the plague on the firstborn was equal [in magnitude] to all the [previous] plagues [combined].” He had to say this, because there was also an opinion to the opposite, that there is something more difficult than death. As we find in the seventh chapter of tractate Bava Metzia (page 86a), “[Even] if they will kill that man, [i.e., me,] I will not disclose [your location]. But if they will beat him, [i.e., me,] I will disclose [your location, as I could not bear being tortured].” That is why Rashi felt compelled to make his comment.

וזהו "ויקבד לבו הוא ועבדיו" ויחזק לב פרעה, שונצרך דמם בקרבם מחמת השנאה והפעס, וכן "פי-אני הכבדתי את- לבו ואת-לב עבדיו למען שתי אתמי אלה בקרבו" דוקא. ועוד אתי שפיר שאמר "אשר התעללתי במצרים" דהיגו המכות, חזר ואמר "ואת-אתמי אשר-שמתי בם", ולכן בעת המכת בכורות אמר פרעה "ויברכתם גם-אתי", התפללו עלי שארפא ממכת לבבי, דומיא דאברהם שיתפלל על אבימלך.

This is the meaning of Scripture saying, “and [Pharaoh] hardened his heart, he and his servants,”¹⁰ and “and He hardened Pharaoh’s heart,” that their blood grew sluggish within them [בקרבים] [*be'kirbam*] because of the hatred and anger against the Israelites. Thus, “For I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his servants, in order that I may display these My signs before him”—before him [בקרבו] [*be'kirbo*] specifically.

Also, it’s fine that after He said, “that you may recount . . . how I made a mockery of Egypt,”¹¹ that He continued and said, “and how I displayed My signs among them,”¹² which might appear redundant, if one thinks that both refer to the plagues. Instead, we can understand it as one referring to creating a bone within their hearts, and one referring to the plagues.

Therefore, at the time of the plague of the firstborn, Pharaoh said, “Take also your flocks and your herds, as you said, and begone! And may you bring a blessing upon me also,”¹³ as if to say, “Pray for me, that I will be healed from the plague of my heart.” This is similar to the incident with Abraham, who prayed for Abimelech, whom G-d had struck with illness after he took away Sarah, believing her to be Abraham’s sister. After Abimelech learned the truth and returned Sarah, Abraham prayed for him and he was healed.¹⁴

¹⁰ Ex. 9:34.

¹¹ Ex. 10:2.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Ex. 12:32.

¹⁴ Gen. 20:17.

וּבְנֵיהֶם יובן נמי הפסוק "כי אמרו בלגו מתים", דאידו יתכן שימותו כלם אם משה לא אמר להם רק הבכורות, ואם תאמר כדברי רז"ל שהיו רואים שאם אין שם בכור, גדול הבית מת, אדרבא משם ראיה שלא ימותו כלם שלא מת אלא גדול הבית. ועוד אם ראו שלא נתקיימה נבואת משה להמית רק הבכורות, הנה להם לומר שאינה זו המכה שאמר משה להביא עליהם בשביל ישראל.

With this analysis, we'll also understand the verse, "The Egyptians urged the people on, impatient to have them leave the country, for they said, 'We shall all be dead,' "15 for how is it possible that they would all die, if Moses said to them only the firstborn would die. Perhaps you'll answer according to the words of the rabbis, of blessed memory, that [the Egyptians] had seen that if there wasn't a firstborn in the house, that the chief person in the house died.16 But then, **to the contrary, we have a proof that not all would die, for only the chief person in the house would die. Also, if they say that the prophecy of Moses was not fulfilled, to kill only the firstborn, they could say that this plague was not as Moses said, to be brought upon them because of their treatment of Israel.**

אלא ודאי שהמצרים היו יודעים שהם טרפים ולא יוכלו להיות, וכשראו שמתו אף מאותם שאינם בכורות היו סבורים שהמכה שהיתה בלבם גרמה מיתתם. ולכן אמרו "בלגו מתים", וזהו שאמר ישעיה "ולבב מצרים ימס בקרבן", כדי לעשותו טרפה, "ונגף ה' את מצרים נגף ורפוא", דנגפם ואחר כך בצאת ישראל ממצרים רפאם.

Rather, certainly the Egyptians knew that they were *treif* and that they weren't able to live longer than a year, and when they saw that some of them who weren't firstborn died, they thought that the plague that was in their hearts had caused their deaths. Therefore, they said, "we shall all be dead," and this is the meaning of what Isaiah said, "and the heart of the Egyptians shall sink within them,"17 in order to make [Pharaoh] *treif*, "The L-rd will first afflict and then heal the Egyptians; when they turn back to the L-rd, He will respond to their entreaties and heal them,"18 that they were smitten and afterward upon the exit of Israel from Egypt, He healed them.

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¹⁵ Ex. 12:33.

¹⁶ Ex. 12:30: "And Pharaoh arose in the night, with all his courtiers and all the Egyptians—because there was a loud cry in Egypt; for there was no house where there was not someone dead." Rashi writes: "If there was a firstborn there, he died. If there was no firstborn there, then the chief person in the house died."

¹⁷ Isaiah 19:1.

¹⁸ Isaiah 19:22.