



# COVENANT & CONVERSATION

## Family Edition

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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וארא תש"ף  
Vaera 5780

## The Weighing of the Heart

### \*\* KEY IDEA OF THE WEEK \*\*

**The Exodus story is not just for Jews.  
It is the world's greatest story of hope.**



### PARSHAT VAERA IN A NUTSHELL

Pharaoh was bathing in the River Nile when Moses and Aaron delivered their message and warning from God. Pharaoh refused to listen and so the Ten Plagues began.

First the Nile turned to blood, then millions of frogs appeared, and then all the Egyptians were affected by lice. But still Pharaoh refused to listen. So the plagues continued.

Wild animals roamed the streets, pets and farm animals died from disease, and the people suffered with boils. Each time Pharaoh became more stubborn and denied the Israelites

their freedom. Vaera tells of seven terrible plagues, ending with large hailstones (containing fire inside) and each time, Pharaoh refused to let Moses lead his people to freedom. But soon he would. The Exodus story had finally begun.

#### QUESTION TO PONDER:

Why do you think God needed to send so many plagues to take the Israelites out of Egypt?



### THE CORE IDEA

In this week's *parsha*, before even the first plague has struck Egypt, God tells Moses: "I will harden Pharaoh's heart and multiply My miraculous signs and wonders in Egypt." (Shemot 7:3)

The hardening of Pharaoh's heart is mentioned twenty times during the story of the Exodus. Sometimes it is Pharaoh who is said to harden his own heart. At other times, God is said to have done so. The Torah uses three different verbs in this context: *ch-z-k*, to strengthen, *k-sh-h*, to harden, and *k-b-d*, to make heavy.

Throughout the ages, our Rabbis have pondered over the following question: If God hardened Pharaoh's heart, how could he have been criticised for not letting the Israelites go? He had no choice in the matter, because it was God's doing, not his. So why was he punished?

Look carefully in Vaera, and you will see that Pharaoh was the one hardening his heart for the first five plagues. So for quite a while, his stubbornness and refusals are all his choice.

Then, starting with the sixth plague, God hardened Pharaoh's heart. Noting this, our commentators made several points.

Rashi says that the hardening of Pharaoh's heart in the last five plagues was a *punishment for the first five*, when it was Pharaoh's own obstinacy that led him to refuse to let the people go.

Rambam says that his heart was hardened so he could not repent. The freedom to turn away from his wickedness was not allowed to him."

Albo and Sforno offer the opposite interpretation. God hardened Pharaoh's heart precisely *to restore his free will*. After the series of plagues that had devastated the land, Pharaoh was under overwhelming pressure to let the Israelites go. Had he done so, it would not have been out of free choice, because who could resist the power of direct miracles from God?! God therefore *strengthened* Pharaoh's

heart so that even after the first five plagues he was genuinely free to say Yes or No.

It may be that all three answers are right, and each one responds to a different verb. *K-sh-h*, “hardening,” supports Rashi’s reading. Pharaoh was hard on the Israelites, so God was hard on him. *K-b-d*, “making heavy,” supports Rambam. Pharaoh lacked the energy, the strength, to repent. *Ch-z-k*, “to strengthen,” supports Albo and Sforno. What is important to note here is that God did not find a quick,

rushed solution. He was interested in the process more than the result. The world was watching and God was sending out a message.

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why do the commentators need to justify the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart?
2. Which of the three interpretations do you like the most?



### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

*The Reverend Dr Martin Luther King Jr. (MLK) was the leader of the American Civil Rights Movement from 1955 until 1968. He believed in advancing the civil rights and equality of African Americans through non-violent means, such as peaceful marches and civil disobedience.*

*On 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1968, at a church in Memphis, Tennessee, MLK delivered a speech commonly known as the "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech. This was his final speech. On the following day he was killed.*

*In this speech, MLK called for unity and nonviolent protest, and challenged the United States to live up to its ideals. He portrayed the civil rights struggle for equality as a modern-day Exodus. He also discussed time periods in history that he would have liked to personally see. "I would watch God's children in their magnificent trek from the dark dungeons of Egypt through, or rather across the Red Sea, through the wilderness on toward the promised land" he said. His speech reminded his followers that the Israelites suffered before gaining their freedom from*

*Pharaoh, in much the same way his own listeners were suffering at that time.*

*The Exodus story helped MLK and his followers understand the past, present, and future of their own journey and struggle. They felt connected to the Exodus story. It was the original journey from oppression to freedom. It gave them hope.*

*He concluded his speech with these words: "I've been to the mountaintop ... And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land."*

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why do you think MLK spoke about the Exodus to his followers?
2. What did he mean when he said, "I've been to the mountaintop and seen the Promised Land"?



### THINKING MORE DEEPLY

There is a fourth approach we can take to the question discussed in *The Core Idea*. The Egyptians – especially their rulers – were preoccupied by death. Their funereal practices were astonishingly elaborate, intended to prepare the person for life after death. The tombs of the Pharaohs were among their most lavish creations. Tutankhamun’s, discovered in 1922, is a dazzling example.

The Torah notes the attention the Egyptians gave to death. At the end of Bereishit, we read of how the Egyptians accompanied Joseph and his family in the funeral procession to bury Jacob. The Canaanites noted, “The Egyptians are holding a solemn ceremony of mourning.” (Bereishit 50:11). Then we read of how Joseph himself was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt. In the Torah, only Joseph, and Jacob at Joseph’s request, are embalmed. So we have already been forewarned about the significance of death to the Egyptian mind.

However, there is one specific aspect of Egyptian belief that we should also consider. According to Egyptian myth, the deceased underwent a trial to establish their worthiness to enjoy life after death in Aaru, the Field of Reeds, where souls

live on in pleasure for eternity. They believed that the soul resides in the heart, and the trial consisted of the ceremony of *The Weighing of the Heart*. Other organs were removed by Egyptians after death, but the heart was left because it was needed for the trial.

On one side of the scales was a feather. On the other, the heart was placed. If the heart was as light as the feather, the dead could continue to Aaru, but if it was heavier, its owner was condemned to live in Duat, the underworld.

It follows that the root *k-v-d*, “to make heavy,” would have had a highly specific meaning for the Egyptians of that time. It would imply that Pharaoh’s heart had become heavier than a feather. He would fail the heart weighing ceremony and therefore be denied what was most important to him – the prospect of joining the gods in the afterlife.

No one would have been in any doubt as to why this was so. The feather represented *Ma’at*, the central Egyptian value that included the concepts of truth, balance, order, harmony, justice, morality, and law. Not only was this fundamental to Egyptian culture. It was the task of the Pharaoh to ensure that it

prevailed. This had been a key Egyptian principle for a thousand years. *Ma'at* meant cosmic order. Its absence invited chaos. A Pharaoh whose heart had become heavier than the *Ma'at* feather was not only endangering his own afterlife, but threatening his entire people with turmoil and disarray.

If the “heavying” of Pharaoh’s heart is an allusion to the Weighing of the Heart ceremony, it allows us to read the story in a completely new way.

First, it suggests that it is directed to Egyptians as well as Israelites; to humanity as a whole. The Torah tells us three times that the purpose of the signs and wonders was “so that the Egyptians may know that I am the Lord” (Shemot 7:5; 14:4; 14:18). This is the core belief of monotheism. It is not that the Israelites have their God, and the Egyptians their pantheon, but rather that there is one sovereign power in the universe.

Our religion is not intended to be the religion of all humanity. Nowhere in the narrative does God imply that He wants the Egyptians to adopt Israelite religious practices. The point is quite different. *Religion is particular. Morality is universal.* If the story of the “heavying” of Pharaoh’s heart does allude to the Book of the Dead, then the story of the Exodus is not simply a partisan account from an Israelite point of view. It is telling us that *certain things are wrong, whoever does them and whoever they are done against.* They are wrong by Egyptian standards too. That was true of Pharaoh’s decision to kill all male Israelite children. That was an unforgivable sin against *Ma'at*.

Justice is universal. That is the point made plainly by the Torah’s three stories of Moses’ early life. He sees an Egyptian hitting an Israelite and intervenes. He sees Israelites hitting one another and intervenes. He sees Gentile shepherds behaving roughly to Jethro’s daughters and intervenes. The first was a case of non-Israelite against Israelite, the second was Israelite against Israelite, the third was non-Israelite against non-Israelite. This is the simplest way of telling us that Moses’ sense of justice was impartial and universal.

The most generous interpretation of Pharaoh’s treatment of the people is that he was trying to maintain order in the Empire. A successful minority like the Israelites could be seen as a threat to such order. If they stayed and thrived, they might take over the country as the Hyksos had done several centuries earlier. If they were allowed to leave, other enslaved groups might be tempted to do likewise. Emigration is a bad sign when the place people are trying to leave is a superpower. That is why, for many years, the Soviet Union forbade Jews to leave the country.

Pharaoh, in his repeated refusal to let the people go, must have justified his decision in each case on the grounds that he was securing *Ma'at*, order. Meanwhile however, with each plague the country was reduced to ever greater chaos. That is because oppressing people, which is what Pharaoh was doing, was a fundamental offence against *Ma'at*.

For the first five plagues, Pharaoh could tell himself that he was enduring minor inconvenience to protect a major principle. But as the plagues became more serious, reducing Egypt to chaos, Pharaoh’s room for manoeuvre grew ever less. Having five times said “No” to the Israelites, he could not now back down without making himself look ridiculous, forfeiting his authority and damaging his standing. *Pharaoh was a prisoner of his own system, held captive by his own decisions.* The Torah states that Pharaoh’s heart was heavy, to hint at a self-contradiction at the heart of the Egyptian concept of *Ma'at*.

Seeking to protect order, he created chaos. That is because the order he was seeking to protect was built on a foundation of injustice: the enslavement of the many for the benefit of the few. The more he tried to defend it, the heavier his heart grew.

**I believe that this story of how the supreme Power entered history to liberate the supremely powerless, is not just for Jews. The story of Exodus is the world’s greatest metanarrative of hope.**

#### QUESTION TO PONDER:

How can the Exodus story bring hope to humanity?



#### FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

*“The Exodus is the inexhaustible source of inspiration to all those who long for freedom. It taught that right was sovereign over might; that freedom and justice must belong to all, not some; that, under God, all human beings are equal; and that over all earthly powers is the supreme power, the King of Kings, who hears the cry of the oppressed and who intervenes in history to liberate slaves.”*

**Rabbi Jonathan Sacks Haggadah, p. 65**



#### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. What does the Torah mean by God “hardened” the heart of Pharaoh? Why is this problematic?
2. According to our understanding of the Egyptian approach to death, what does it mean that Pharaoh’s heart was heavy?
3. What is the message of the Exodus narrative for the Jewish people and for the world?



## QUESTION TIME

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## EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

### IN A NUTSHELL

1. God could have decided to take the Israelites out of Egypt in one instant, using supernatural means. He did not need the Ten Plagues to wear down Pharaoh and the Egyptians. But the goal of the Exodus was to teach the world, that generation and all future generations, the message of the story: That it is unjust to enslave a people, and that God acts in history to address injustice.

### THE CORE IDEA

1. The plagues function both to punish the Egyptians and to educate them (and the rest of the world). It seems unjust to harden Pharaoh's heart and take away his freewill to relent and allow the Israelites their freedom, thereby incurring more forms of punishment for him and his people. The commentators explained to us why God would harden Pharaoh's heart until the Ten plagues were over.
2. Each commentator takes a unique approach, and which appeals more is a personal decision. There is a fourth approach taken by Rabbi Sacks (in the name of Rabbi Dr. Rafi Zarum) which can be found in the *Thinking More Deeply* section. This approach uses background on ancient Egyptian ideology, and analyses the language used to describe this process, focusing more on the educational impact of the story rather than the punitive aspect.

### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. The Exodus story resonated with African Americans during the time of the Civil Rights Movement because it was a similar story to their own - of oppression and a journey towards liberation. The story has a strong leader (Moses - they saw MLK as their own Moses), delivering them from oppression to liberty. Like the Israelites, African Americans had been forced to be slaves in America, and were on a journey for the civil rights and equality denied to them. The story of Exodus, despite being about the Israelites, gave them hope. That God ensures justice is ultimately done, and oppressed people can rise up and gain their freedom.
2. The mountaintop, referring to Mount Nebo where Moses stood to see the Promised Land in the distance, is a metaphor for MLK's sense that he has seen enough to give him faith that there would be a time in the not-too-distant future, when Black Americans would have full civil rights and equality in America. This is their Promised Land. Sadly, MLK was assassinated before his dream became a reality, which has further symmetry with Moses, who died before his people entered the Land.

### THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. Justice will ultimately prevail. God acts in history, and just as he saved the underdog in this narrative and reinstated a just world order, so He will in future generations. There is a Judge, and he does Justice. The Exodus narrative has provided inspiration for many social revolutions in history for peoples beyond the Jewish nation.

### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

These questions are all open, to encourage thought and debate. There are no wrong answers. However, here are some thoughts to consider:

1. The traditional approach to this element of the Exodus story is that God made Pharaoh's heart obstinate (hard) forcing him to continue to refuse to allow the Israelites to go free despite the relentless ill effects of the plagues that his people were suffering. This is problematic because it seems to take away his free choice in the matter, and continue the suffering presumably encountered as a punishment.
2. One of the Hebrew terms used for hardening Pharaoh's heart is *k-v-d* – God made his heart heavy. According to Egyptian myth, the deceased underwent a trial to establish their worthiness. They believed that the soul resides in the heart, and the trial consisted of the ceremony of *The Weighing of the Heart*. If the heart weighed more than a feather then the person was not worthy. The feather represented truth and order. God made sure the Egyptians knew that Pharaoh was risking their wellbeing and the order of society by building it on the injustice of the enslavement of a people.
3. The message of the Exodus is that there is one sovereign power in the universe, and although religion is particular, morality is universal. Justice is universal. The story of the Exodus is not simply a partisan account from an Israelite point of view. It is telling us that *certain things are wrong, whoever does them and whoever they are done against*. They are wrong by Egyptian standards too. Further, we are taught through this that injustices should be addressed, and freedom should be fought for. The Jewish People suffered but were freed, and prevailed, even today. Other people can also hope for freedom.