



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Beshalach 5772

By Sigal Samuel
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In the lead-up to *Parshat Beshalach*, ten plagues hit the Egyptians, destroying their land and decimating their population. And yet, Pharaoh stubbornly blinds himself to the suffering of his own people: the more their situation worsens, the more he hardens his heart, refusing to liberate the Israelite slaves. His frustrated advisors cannot understand his behavior, which victimizes the Egyptians at every turn. Finally, they plead: “Let the people go, so that they may serve the Lord their God! Do you not yet realize that Egypt is ruined?”¹

In *Parshat Beshalach*, Pharaoh’s callousness toward his people hits its climax. He decides to chase the fleeing Israelites into the sea, and as the chase scene gets underway, the biblical text repeatedly emphasizes the toughened nature of Pharaoh’s heart.² Even though he has personally witnessed the power of the Israelites’ God to wreak havoc on the Egyptians, he closes his eyes to all that they have already endured and, with hardened heart, leads them to their watery deaths.

At first glance, Pharaoh’s refusal to acknowledge his people’s suffering may seem as baffling to us as it did to his advisors. In truth, however, the Egyptian ruler’s behavior reflects an important fact about human psychology: namely, that constant exposure to a series of tragedies—especially tragedies for which we feel partly or wholly responsible—can cause us to close our hearts toward the suffering of others.³ This is the same defense mechanism exhibited by fictional characters like Macbeth, and it is the same mechanism I unwittingly employed at age 15 when, besieged by tragic media images of the developing world, I found empathy too painful a stance to maintain.

Every day, it seemed, fresh tragedies appeared in the news, and the unending series of misfortunes—war, poverty, famine, disease—was simply too much to bear. Even during the commercials, I felt I was not safe: charity ads, with their images of sick and starving children wasting away in developing countries, lurked around every bend. As a teenager, I was so disturbed by these depictions of global suffering that, after watching a particularly gut-wrenching news report one evening, I actually vomited. The noise of the world was too loud, too hopeless, too overwhelming—and so I decided from then on to shut it out completely.

Though my decision to stop watching the news and Pharaoh’s enabling of the annihilation of his own people are far apart on the spectrum of ethical behavior, reactions like mine have more in common with the hard-hearted leader than we like to admit. While shutting out news of the developing world may make a tide of tragedies easier to withstand, simply ignoring an unjust reality, as many of us do, does not free us from responsibility for it. In fact, as the biblical narrative illustrates, adopting such a stance actually paves the way for inflicting harm on others. Whether we have done so because we feel too little or too much, turning away enables injustice to continue unchecked.

¹ Exodus 10:7.

² See Exodus 14:4, 14:8 and 14:17. Previously, Pharaoh hardened his own heart; that God now hardens it is a matter that the rabbinic commentators discuss at length.

³ For more information, see Nando Pelusi, “Don’t Harden Your Heart,” *Psychology Today*, 1 November 2003.

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200402/dont-harden-your-heart>

How, then, can we prepare ourselves to act with compassion; to avoid becoming inured to suffering, sliding from empathy into apathy? How can we keep from hardening our hearts? The Torah provides an answer to this question in Deuteronomy, where the image of a hardened heart makes a striking reappearance:

“If there be among you a needy man...you shall not harden your heart, nor shut your hand...for the poor shall never cease out of the land; therefore I command you, saying: you shall surely open your hand to your poor and needy brother.”⁴

In his commentary on these verses, Rashi points out that the word “poor,” *aniyecha*, is spelled with one *yud*, not two. Spelled in this way, the word implies the singular—one poor person—as opposed to the expected plural.⁵ While this may seem like an off-hand orthographic observation, Rashi’s comment actually offers us deep insight: it is by giving to specific cases of suffering that we can cultivate empathy for vast populations in need. Precisely because “the poor shall never cease out of the land”—precisely because the problem seems so huge and so overwhelming—we are instructed to form highly personalized attachments. The way to the universal, Rashi hints, is through the particular.

We see that this phenomenon even touched Pharaoh’s heart of stone, which softened briefly when he lost his own child in the plague of the first born—just enough for him to let Israelites go before he had a change of heart and chased after them into the sea.⁶

In the context of contemporary international development, there are many ways for us to let the particular touch our hearts. We can travel to developing countries, forging relationships with local communities through service programs, artistic collaborations and other joint ventures. We can read novels, memoirs, websites and blogs by writers who live in, or come from, the developing world. We can support local grassroots organizations whose work addresses a cause in which we feel personally invested. By regularly exercising our hearts in these small, focused ways, we can prevent them from becoming hardened, atrophied muscles, and increase their capacity for wide-ranging empathy and hope.



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⁴ Deuteronomy 15:7-11.

⁵ See Rashi on Deuteronomy 15:11.

⁶ Exodus 12:29-32.

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