

From the Abravanel Jacob Solomon

As G-d sends Moshe on his mission to Par'o, He briefs him with:

I will harden Par'o's heart... Par'o will not listen to you. I will put My hand on Egypt and take... the Israelites out of Egypt (7:3-4).

Par'o's not allowing the Israelites to leave his territory seems to be because G-d wouldn't let him.

Rashi pays close attention to the wording. In the first five plagues "Par'o's heart hardened", on his own accord. Par'o did have the free choice of whether or not to release the Children of Israel. And Par'o said no. It was only from the sixth plague onwards that "G-d hardened Par'o's heart". From then on, it seems that he could not have released the Israelites even if he wanted to. Rashi states the resulting suffering of the Egyptians in the plagues was to teach the Israelites that G-d would punish them in a similar way should they willfully stray from the right path in the future.

The S'forno understands the words "G-d hardened Par'o's heart" differently from Rashi. Par'o did not lose his free choice. What G-d wanted was real, genuine repentance. In hardening Par'oh's heart, God gave Par'o more strength to absorb the suffering of the plagues. Were he to repent, it would only be out of sincere and true repentance and

desire to submit to G-d's will.

Abravanel agrees with the S'forno that G-d's hardening Par'o's heart did not remove his free choice, but offers another explanation. By the sixth plague, Par'o was rationalizing that he and his people would survive the plagues, despite the extreme discomfort at the time. For each plague eventually did come to an end, and then life would carry on as usual. No plague was permanent, none had yet dealt the fatal blow. By the sixth plague, Par'o reasoned that every plague was survivable. It was at that point that G-d had enabled him to arrive at such reasoning. It was through that mechanism that G-d enabled Par'o to harden his own heart. And his unharmed emergence from the sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth plagues confirmed him in his own understanding of what was happening.

But Par'o's way of looking at things ignored reading the plagues for the message they were meant to convey. Abravanel elsewhere explains that every one of the plagues was *mida k'neged mida*; measure for measure. Thus the Nile turning into blood was for their abuse of that source of water for drowning the Israelite babies. The enslaved Israelites were forced to make bricks from the earth, so the earth swarmed with lice. The Egyptians forcibly took the Israelites' cattle and crops, so they were

punished with animal-killing pestilence and crop-consuming locusts. And so on.

Par'o read into the plagues what suited his agenda: that any retribution from the G-d of the Israelites was survivable. He could carry on exploiting the slaves to his and to his people's continuing profit. He ignored reading into the plagues what did not suit his agenda: that ultimately "G-d was taking heed of the Israelites; G-d knew" (2:25). He did not wish to think of the plagues as mirrors of the treatment that he and his people were imposing on the suffering Israelites.

Perhaps this is a message to people at all ages and at all times. When things go wrong, people need to consider explanations that fit reality, not just those fitting into their own biases and agendas. 🚪