

## **The Pharaoh Who Lives Within Us All**

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*Abstract: "So here we are in late January, in the midst of winter and a cold chill. Yet the annual cycle of Torah readings at this time of year always focuses our attention on spring, on the coming of Passover, both of which seem so very far away. Why does the Torah teach us about springtime in the dead of winter?"*

Tonight's teaching is entitled: The Pharaoh who lives within us all. So here we are in late January, in the midst of winter and a bitter cold chill. Yet the annual cycle of Torah readings at this time of year always focuses our attention on spring, on the coming of Passover, both of which seem so very far away. Why does the Torah teach us about springtime in the dead of winter? In a few moments, I will endeavor to provide an answer.

In the Torah portion for this Shabbat, *Vaera*, God reiterates the intention to liberate the Hebrews as part of God's covenantal obligation to the Jewish people. Let's read Exodus, Chapter 6, verses 5-8.

Incidentally, what Passover custom is associated with these verses? It is the custom of drinking four cups. We drink one cup for each promise that God fulfilled:

The first cup is for "I will free you." The second is for "I will redeem you." The third cup is for "I will take you to be my people." And the fourth cup is for "I will be your God."

But hold on a second. Isn't there a fifth promise? Yes, there is. "I will bring you into the land." Why doesn't the Passover Haggadah include a fifth cup? At the time when the Haggadah was written, Jews did not rule Palestine. The Romans did. Indeed, the Romans had forcibly expelled many Jews from their homeland.

Why is it becoming an increasingly popular custom to drink a fifth cup now? Because, in our day, God's promise has come true.

In parashat *Vaera*, we find the second mention of the famous phrase that "God hardened Pharaoh's heart" (7:3). However, we need to understand that in antiquity the heart was not the symbolic seat of emotions as it is for us today. What was it then? The heart was actually a metaphor for the intellect, the mind. Thus, to say that God hardened Pharaoh's heart is to say that Pharaoh became unresponsive to reason and common sense.

But how could God take away Pharaoh's freedom and then still punish him for it? I have yet to hear a satisfactory answer to this philosophical question. But that may be because we are asking the wrong question. Pharaoh is much more than a historical figure. He symbolizes everything that is negative in human nature. The Pharaoh represents a state of mind -- all those ways in

which we bring ten plagues upon ourselves by becoming inflexible, and stubborn, and arrogant, and fearful, and hardening our hearts. So what the Torah wants to convey is that there lurks a potential Pharaoh within each and every one of us and we must be vigilant not to let that happen.

And so, it's precisely in the depths of winter, when winter has the potential to make us cold not only on the outside but on the inside as well, that the Torah asks: Have you hardened your heart with regard to the giving of charity? Or volunteerism? Or the good deed? Or forgiving someone in or out of your family?

Have you become so rigid and inflexible in your thinking that you have made yourself incapable of making a new and free will choice for your life? Are you so consumed by an unwarranted fear that you have become cruel? Are you so obsessed with control that you constantly renege on your word? So in the depths of winter, the Torah reminds us about springtime, and Passover, and the state of mind called "Pharaoh," to be on the look out not to harden our hearts. While we may be cold on the outside, we will never permit ourselves to turn cold on the inside.