

The State of Mind Called “Pharoah”

January 22, 2010

By Rabbi Stuart Weinberg Gershon

Copyright © 2010 Temple Sinai, Summit, New Jersey

In my view, what makes the Pharoah truly interesting and significant is not his historical meaning but his symbolic meaning. What does Pharoah symbolize? The Pharoah symbolizes a particular state of mind. Pharoah symbolizes everything that is unhealthy and self-destructive in human nature. The symbol of Pharoah calls attention to all the ways we bring a plague on ourselves.

Let's learn Torah together. Here we are in late January, in the heart of winter. Yet the annual cycle of Torah readings in January and February always focuses our attention on spring, on the coming of Passover, both of which seem so very far away.

Why would the Torah want to teach us about springtime in the dead of winter? Winter has the potential to make us cold, not only on the outside, but also on the inside. Winter can harden our hearts as the Pharoah's heart was hardened.

Biblical historians debate which of the many Pharoahs the Book of Exodus refers to. Most scholars say it is Raamses II who lived in the 12th century (1291-1224) before the Common Era. In my view, what makes the Pharoah truly interesting and significant is not his historical meaning but his symbolic meaning.

What does Pharoah symbolize? The Pharoah symbolizes a particular state of mind. Pharoah symbolizes everything that is unhealthy and self-destructive in human nature. The symbol of Pharoah calls attention to all the ways we bring a plague upon ourselves.

What is a Pharoah state of mind? Let's inventory Pharoah's negative and unhealthy characteristics:

What are Pharoah's most obvious characteristics?

- 1) Pharoah is stubborn
- 2) Pharoah is rigid and inflexible – he is seemingly incapable of making a new and free choice
- 3) The Pharoah lies - he reneges on his word
- 4) The Pharoah is mean, cruel and heartless
- 5) The Pharoah is obsessed with control
- 6) The Pharoah is arrogant
- 7) The Pharoah is consumed by fear

What can we learn from this inventory?

Pharoah symbolizes how stubbornness, inflexibility, lying, meanness, arrogance, and fear can make us unresponsive to reason and common sense. Pharoah symbolizes all the ways we harden our hearts.

But the Torah teaches us that we must be vigilant not to let a Pharoah – a hardened heart - live within us. And so it's precisely in the depths of winter, that the Torah asks: Have you hardened your heart toward your employees at the workplace? Have you hardened your heart with regard to the giving of charity? To volunteerism? To the good deed? Have you hardened your heart in any way toward your loved ones and friends?

The Torah reminds us in the depths of winter about springtime, about Passover, about the state of mind we call "Pharoah" to make sure that while we may be cold on the outside we must never turn cold on the inside.