

BO

PARSHA GUIDE

Welcome to the Aleph Beta Study Guide on Parshat Bo!

There's a good chance that your mind is still reeling from the tale of the first seven plagues in Parshat Va'era, where we learned that contrary to popular belief, God never actually hardens Pharaoh's heart, never actually takes away his free will during this whole ordeal of the plagues. It all comes down to a fascinating wordplay between two verbs -- וַיַּכְבֵּד (vayachbed) and וַיַּחֲזֶק (vayechazek). Only וַיַּכְבֵּד (vayachbed) means to "harden," to make someone stubborn -- and never once do we find in Parshat Va'era that God does that to Pharaoh. That's something that Pharaoh does to himself. Whenever God does get involved, the verb is וַיַּחֲזֶק (vayechazek) - which means that God is actually strengthening Pharaoh's heart, giving him courage at a moment of weakness to help him stick to his vision.



LOOK INSIDE

But the whole argument seems to fall apart with the opening verses of this week's parsha, Bo. Take a look at the first two verses (Exodus 10:1-2) and see if you can find the problem.

Exodus 10:1-2

1 And the LORD said unto Moses: 'Go in to Pharaoh; for I have hardened his heart, and the heart of his servants, in order that I might show these signs of Mine in their midst; 2 and in order that you will tell your son, and your son's son, how I have played with Egypt, and My signs which I have done among them; that you all may know that I am the Lord.'

שמות י:א-ב

א וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה, בֹּא אֶל-פַּרְעֹה: כִּי-אֲנִי הִכְבַּדְתִּי אֶת-
לְבוֹ, וְאֶת-לֵב עֲבָדָיו, לְמַעַן שְׁתִּי אֶתְנִי אֱלֹהִים, בְּקִרְבּוֹ. ב וְלִמְעַן
תִּסְפָּר בְּאָזְנֵי בְנֶךָ וּבְנֵי-בְנֶךָ, אֵת אֲשֶׁר הִתְעַלְלֹתִי בְּמִצְרַיִם, וְאֶת-
אֶתְנִי, אֲשֶׁר-שָׁמַתִּי בָם; וַיִּדְעַתֶּם, כִּי-אֲנִי יְהוָה



INSTRUCTIONS

There are a lot of divrei Torah on the parsha. How is this different?

At Aleph Beta, we believe that the Torah is a guidebook that answers life's biggest questions, offering profound insights about how we should live our lives. Moreover, we believe that Jewish tradition has always recognized the right of all readers, in every generation, to look at the text themselves and try to decide what they think it means. That means you. That's why you are the most important author of this quest through the sources. We think that this guide offers a fun, stimulating and relevant path through the sources, but if you get wrapped up in a stimulating discussion and never make it past page 2, we'll consider that a success!

Is this guide for self-study or should I study it with others?

Either works! You can gather a small group of friends to explore it together, share it with a chevruta (learning partner), or go through it by yourself.

Do I need to prepare anything or can I just jump in?

Just jump in! Even if you're planning to use this for a group discussion, just open up to page 1 and get going. (If you read it in advance, it will spoil the fun!) The only thing you should do in advance is print out copies of the "Source Sheet" for the other participants, so everyone can follow along and engage with the sources.

About the Author

Most of the material within – although not the particular language contained in this guide - was first developed and taught by Rabbi David Fohrman, founder and CEO of Aleph Beta, and is presented in his video, "Parshat Bo: Did God Really Need Ten Plagues?" (available for viewing at www.alephbeta.org). This guide was written by Beth Lesch, Writer at Aleph Beta, and edited by Immanuel Shalev, Rivky Stern, and Ami Silver, and arranged by Charles Treece.

Did you see it in verse 1?

Exodus 10:1

כִּי-אֲנִי הִכְבַּדְתִּי אֶת-לִבּוֹ

For I have hardened his heart

Not once in all of Parshat Va'era did we see this. But from the looks of verse 1, in Parshat Bo, God is in the hardening heart business after all.

If God is actually hardening Pharaoh's heart, actually taking away his free will, that would raise a whole bunch of troubling questions. We were able to evade those questions in Parshat Va'era, but now it seems there's no getting away from them. For one thing, there's the whole theological problem. I thought that God never deprived people of free will. And doesn't it seem pretty unfair for God to take away someone's choice and then punish him for his actions? What kind of a God would do that?

Let's put the theological questions aside from the time being. If it were really true that God were taking away Pharaoh's free will, right here before the eighth plague, how would you expect the remaining story to play out? I don't know about you, but I'd expect it to go something like this: God brings a terrible plague, Pharaoh refuses to let the slaves go (after all, he has no free will), so God brings another terrible plague, Pharaoh still refuses to let the slaves go, so God brings another plague...and so on. But that's not what happens. Instead, we find all of this seemingly extraneous and highly strange detail.



LOOK INSIDE

Start by taking a look at the next two verses, Exodus 10:3-4, which describe an encounter between Moses, Aaron and Pharaoh that precedes the plague of locusts. Assume that God really is taking away Pharaoh's free will. If that's the case, which details strike you as odd or extraneous?

Exodus 10:3-4

3 And Moses and Aaron went in to Pharaoh, and said to him: 'Thus said the Lord, the God of the Hebrews: For how much longer are you going to refuse to be subjugated before Me? Let My people go, so they can serve Me. **4** For if you refuse to let My people go, behold, tomorrow I will bring locusts into your border;

שמות יג-ד

ג וַיָּבֹא מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן, אֶל-פַּרְעֹה, וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו כֹּה-אָמַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי הָעִבְרִים, עַד-מַתִּי מֵאַנְתָּ לַעֲנֹת מִפְּנֵי; שְׁלַח עַמִּי, וַיַּעֲבֹדֵנִי. ד כִּי אִם-מֵאֵן אַתָּה, לְשַׁלַּח אֶת-עַמִּי--הֲנִי מְבִיא מִן-חַר אַרְבֶּה, בְּבִגְדֶיךָ.

Moses and Aaron waltz into Pharaoh's palace with a self-righteous swagger and pose this question to the King of Egypt:

Exodus 10:3

עַד-מַתִּי מֵאַנְתָּ לַעֲנֹת מִפְּנֵי

For how much longer are you going to refuse to be subjugated before Me?

There's something strange about this question: Moses and Aaron have never spoken to Pharaoh so rudely and abruptly. After all, it takes an awful lot of chutzpah to talk like that to the king of Egypt, the most powerful sovereign in the world. Do you think Pharaoh is going to give in when you talk like that? As a matter of strategy, it seems like they'd be better off taking a more diplomatic tack.

There's something else odd about this question. What do Moses and Aaron mean when they ask, "For how much longer?" I mean, God is taking away Pharaoh's free will, making it such that Pharaoh can't help but refuse to free the slaves. For how much longer will Pharaoh refuse to be subjugated before God? For as long as God hardens his heart! Of all people, Moses and Aaron should know the answer to this question, so why are they even asking? It seems pointless, and sort of unfair to Pharaoh. After all, he has no choice in the matter, so it's not really his fault. They should take up their grievance with God. "Hey God, how long are you going to withhold Pharaoh's free will?"





LOOK INSIDE

Let's consider the next set of verses, Exodus 10:7-9, and keep playing the same game. Assuming that God really is taking away Pharaoh's free will, what sticks out as odd or extraneous?

Exodus 10:7-9

7 And Pharaoh's servants said to him: 'How long shall this man be a snare unto us? let the men go, that they may serve the Lord their God; Don't you know yet that Egypt is destroyed?' 8 And Moses and Aaron were returned to Pharaoh; and he said to them: 'Go, serve the Lord your God; but who is it that will go?' 9 And Moses said: 'We will go with our young and with our old, with our sons and with our daughters, with our flocks and with our herds we will go; for we must hold a feast unto the Lord.'

שמות י:ז-ט

ז ויאמרו עבדי פרעה אליו, עד-מתי יהיה זה לנו למוקש-- שלח את-האנשים, ויעבדו את-יהוה אלהיהם; הטרם תדע, כי אבדה מצרים. ח וישב את-משה ואת-אהרן, אל-פרעה, ויאמר אלהם, לכו עבדו את-יהוה אלהיכם; מי ומי, ההלכים. ט ויאמר משה, בנערינו ובזקנינו גלד; בבנינו ובבנותנו בצאננו ובבקרנו, גלד--כי חגי-יהוה, לנו.

For starters, the tangent about Pharaoh's servants in verse 7 seems surprising. What prompts Pharaoh's servants to get in on the act? And why does the Torah feel the need to tell me about all of this drama, the different characters in Pharaoh's court and the conversations between them? What am I supposed to learn from all of this? If the whole point here is that God is taking away Pharaoh's free will, then it should be a much simpler story. I shouldn't need all of this extraneous detail.

And, let's zoom in on what Pharaoh says in verse 8. At first, it seems like Pharaoh is actually agreeing to let the slaves go. But wait, I thought that God had hardened his heart! For someone who was made stubborn by an act of God, he seems to be giving in pretty easily. And then he poses this bizarre question to Moses and Aaron:

Exodus 10:8

מי ומי, ההלכים?

Who is it that will go?

Is this a genuine question? Why is Pharaoh asking this? Doesn't he know who he's letting free? If you were Moses, you might be thinking, "Er, the slaves are going to go.... You know, the Hebrew slaves, the ones who are out there making bricks right now, the ones that you've enslaved and oppressed with a mighty fist?" Yet that's not what Moses says. He responds as follows:

Exodus 10:9

בנערינו ובזקנינו גלד; בבנינו ובבנותנו בצאננו ובבקרנו, גלד--כי חגי-יהוה, לנו

We will go with our young and with our old, with our sons and with our daughters, with our flocks and with our herds we will go; for we must hold a feast unto the Lord.

Who's going?

- ✓ Young
- ✓ Old
- ✓ Sons
- ✓ Daughters
- ✓ Flocks
- ✓ Herds

Moses rattles off this list of every conceivable kind of slave: *There's the young and the old, the sons and the daughters -- oh, and don't forget the flocks and the herds too, since we're not leaving without our cattle.* What's with the speech? It sounds like Moses is trying hard to make a point, to demonstrate to Pharaoh that he means business. But if God has taken away Pharaoh's free will, what's the point of trying to persuade him of anything at all? Just as Pharaoh's question rings strange to us, so does Moses' answer.

The cattle conversation gets even stranger in verse 24. Pharaoh calls Moses back in for a chat and makes him the following offer:

Exodus 10:8

לכו עבדו את-יהוה--רק צאנכם ובקרכם, יצגו: גם-טפכם, ילך עמכם

Go you, serve the Lord; only let your flocks and your herds stay behind; let your little ones also go with you.

Put yourself in Moses' shoes. For eight plagues so far, you've been trying to persuade Pharaoh to free your people. He's been anything but accommodating. And now he comes to you with this proposal: "Hey Moses, you can go free but how about if you leave behind your animals?" If you're Moses, how do you respond?

Four hundred years of slavery can come to an end right now! All you have to do is say, "Okay, sure, we'll leave the cattle. You got yourself a deal." But that's not what Moses says. He remains stubborn, oddly oblivious to the stakes at hand, and goes even further:



Methodology Alert



Put yourself in their shoes:

Sometimes, the most insight we can glean from the text is when we consider things from the perspective of the characters. What were they going through? What were they thinking and feeling? What does their perspective tell us about their choices or struggles?

Exodus 10:26

גם-אתה תתן בידנו זבחים ועלית; ועשינו, ליהוה אלהינו. וגם-מקננו ילך עמנו, לא תשאיר פרסה

You also need to give us sacrifices and burnt-offerings, so we can sacrifice to the Lord our God.
Our cattle will also go with us; there will not be a hoof left behind

"I'm so glad you mentioned cattle," Moses tells Pharaoh. "Actually, you guys need to give us cattle, because we're going to sacrifice to God in the desert and who knows what we might need. We're not leaving a single animal behind." What is Moses thinking? Pharaoh is about to let all of the slaves go, save for a few animals, and Moses turns it down. It seems like a crazy thing to do. And why does the Torah keep harping on about the negotiation over the cattle?

Here's the bottom line: If God has actually hardened Pharaoh's heart, then so many of these details seem either unnecessary or inscrutable. Moses and Aaron's chutzpah, the clash with the servants, Pharaoh's giving in and his odd

question about a head count, more chutzpah from Moses, this prolonged negotiation over cattle – if the story is really as simple as God taking away Pharaoh’s free will, I shouldn’t be hearing about all of this. It really seems like there’s a dimension to this story that we’re just not seeing.

But what if God isn’t actually changing Pharaoh’s mind? I know, it seems explicit in the text in verse 1 that God is taking away Pharaoh’s free will – but what if He isn’t? What if there’s something else happening here?

In order to see it, we’ll need to take a step back and get inside Pharaoh’s mind, to understand what he is thinking and feeling at this point in the drama. Let’s remind ourselves of what has been going on for Pharaoh. The last time we checked in with him, at the end of chapter 9, his view of the universe had fundamentally shifted. It happened after the seventh plague, the plague of hail. For the first time, Pharaoh saw that God is not just powerful but righteous. Pharaoh finally admitted that this god of the Hebrews is actually יהוה, the all-powerful and just Creator God, and that he and his people are morally bound to obey God’s word. He says in Exodus 9:27:



Exodus 9:27

חָטָאתִי הַפְּעָם: יְהוָה, הַצַּדִּיק, וְאֲנִי וְעַמִּי הַרְשָׁעִים

I have sinned this time; the LORD is righteous, and I and my people are wicked

Finally, he understands that his defiance of God, of his creator, is a sin.

But we also learned last week that a mere seven verses after his big revelation, Pharaoh seems to do an about-face. Once the hail stops, Pharaoh hardens his heart once again and refuses to free the slaves:

Exodus 9:34

וַיֵּרָא פַרְעֹה, כִּי-חָדַל הַמָּטֶר וְהַבָּרָד וְהַקֶּלֶת--וַיִּסָּף לַחֲטֹא; וַיִּכְבַּד לִבּוֹ, הוּא וְעַבְדָּיו

And when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunders were ceased, he sinned yet more, and hardened his heart, he and his servants.

Pharaoh has gone back on his word before, but this time is different. He had just acknowledged that God is just and that that he, Pharaoh, is morally obligated to obey Him. Now, when Pharaoh reneges, he’s turning his back on the truth. He knows that God is his Creator and yet still he openly defies him. That’s why we find this wordplay of the word לחטא, “to sin,” which is an echo of Pharaoh’s original realization:

Exodus 9:27

חָטָאתִי הַפְּעָם

I have sinned this time

Once thing is clear: even though Pharaoh seemed to have learned his lesson, it’s not affecting his behavior.



CONSIDER THIS

Why would someone who now knows the truth of God and who has paid a terrible price continue to choose to defy Him?

Let's try to understand Pharaoh's mind so we can truly see why he acted so seemingly irrationally. At the end of the last parsha, Pharaoh finally admitted that God was the ultimate Creator and he, Pharaoh, was just a simple creature, who needed to follow the dictates of his Creator. This is in stark contrast to the Egyptian view, in which Pharaoh was a deity within the pantheon of gods.

For someone who had thought himself a deity to realize that he is just a creature in service of his Creator, not superior to any other man, must have been a real step down. And therefore, though Pharaoh realized it, he couldn't internalize it, couldn't hold onto it. He admitted defeat -- but then goes back on his word a mere seven verses later. He simply cannot act on what his mind knows to be true - Pharaoh's inflated sense of self blocked him from internalizing the truth he saw.

When Pharaoh hardens his heart and defies God after the plague of hail, he reveals himself to be a man so full of himself, so absorbed in his ego, in his own self-importance, that he was incapable of changing his behavior -- even when faced with certain knowledge of his own limitation in the face of an all-powerful God. This is a critical turning point in the development of Pharaoh's character. This is the key to understanding the whole of Parshat Bo. Let's go back to the verses and we'll see how they unfold before us.

In Exodus 10:1-2, at the opening of Parshat Bo, God spells out for us why He is bringing the final three plagues:

Exodus 10:1-2

1 And the LORD said unto Moses: 'Go in to Pharaoh; for I have hardened his heart, and the heart of his servants, in order that I might show these signs of Mine in their midst; 2 and in order that you will tell your son, and your son's son, how I have played with Egypt, and My signs which I have done among them; that you all may know that I am the Lord.'

שמות י:א-ב

א וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה, בֹּא אֶל-פַּרְעֹה: כִּי-אֲנִי הִקְבַּדְתִּי אֶת-לִבּוֹ, וְאֶת-לֵב עַבְדָּיו, לְמַעַן שְׁתִּי אֶתְנִי אֱלֹהִים, בְּקִרְבּוֹ. ב וּלְמַעַן תִּסְפָּר בְּאָזְנֵי בְנֶךָ וּבֶן-בְּנֶךָ, אֵת אֲשֶׁר הִתְעַלְלֹתִי בְּמִצְרַיִם, וְאֶת-אֶתְנִי, אֲשֶׁר-שָׁמַתִּי בָם; וַיִּדְעֻתֶם, כִּי-אֲנִי יְהוָה.

The thing is, this isn't the first time that God is telling us his goal in bringing about the plagues. We first heard about it back in Exodus 7:5, at the beginning of Parshat Va'era:

Exodus 7:5

5 And the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord, when I stretch forth My hand on Egypt, and bring out the children of Israel from among them.'

שמות ז:ה

ה וַיִּדְעוּ מִצְרַיִם כִּי-אֲנִי יְהוָה, בְּנִטְוֹתִי אֶת-יָדִי עַל-מִצְרַיִם; וְהוֹצֵאתִי אֶת-בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל, מִתּוֹכָם.



CONSIDER THIS

Contrast these two sets of verses, Exodus 10:1-2 and Exodus 7:5. Can you find any echoes or repeating phrases? How has God modified His agenda for bringing about the plagues?

As we see in Exodus 7:5, God's original motivation in bringing about the plagues was not to terrorize the Egyptians, but to teach them a lesson. Pharaoh was at the center of that attempt, and through the plagues, God demonstrated to him that He was not just one god of many, but the Creator of the Universe. Pharaoh learned his lesson -- but he couldn't bring himself to internalize it.

By the time we get to Exodus 10:1-2, it sounds like God's focus has shifted. We find language which seems to consciously echo God's original motivation.

Exodus 10:2

וידעתם כי-אני יהוה.

that you all will know that I am the Lord.

Except this time, it's not Egypt who is supposed to understand this lesson, it's the Hebrews. Gone is the idea that Egypt should know. Now, God wants to demonstrate His power to His own people, to the Hebrews, so they will pass on that truth for generations.



CONSIDER THIS

The question is, why? Why does God give up on educating Egypt?

When a person is in such a state as Pharaoh - that his ego won't allow him to face the truth - education is no longer a possibility. He is blinding himself to reality. No amount of information can affect such a person. That's why the agenda shifts. The final three plagues aren't about teaching the Egyptians, because God has given up on that. Instead, God turns his focus to his own people - to the Hebrews - to teach them a lesson, so they will come to appreciate the ultimate power of their Creator.

So now we understand why God's motivation for the final three plagues changes. And it turns out that this discovery about Pharaoh's distorted sense of self helps us to answer a whole lot of other questions too, like what is really happening when God hardens Pharaoh's heart, and all of the strange drama and extraneous detail that unfolds in its wake. We're ready to return to our original puzzle - and as we go through Exodus Chapter 10, we'll find that all of our questions will melt away as the meaning of the verses unfolds before us.

Let's begin by tackling the heart hardening business head on. When you read the statement from God at the beginning of the parsha,

כי־אני הכבדתי את־לבו

For I have hardened his heart

you probably imagined that God was using supernatural powers to get inside Pharaoh's head and change his mind, against his will. But what if God isn't using supernatural powers? What if God is not using His omniscience as a kind of underhanded weapon against Pharaoh's psyche, getting into his mind and changing it? What if this process of hardening Pharaoh's heart is entirely natural?



CONSIDER THIS

If you wanted to harden someone's heart, to make him stubborn, and you didn't have any supernatural powers, how would you do it?

It turns out that what's happening is actually very easy to explain without recourse to the supernatural. Pharaoh's stubbornness is a perfectly natural response - but to what? What could he be responding to?



LOOK INSIDE

To understand what's going on here, let's look back at Exodus 10:3. How might this kind of talk make Pharaoh more stubborn?

Exodus 10:3

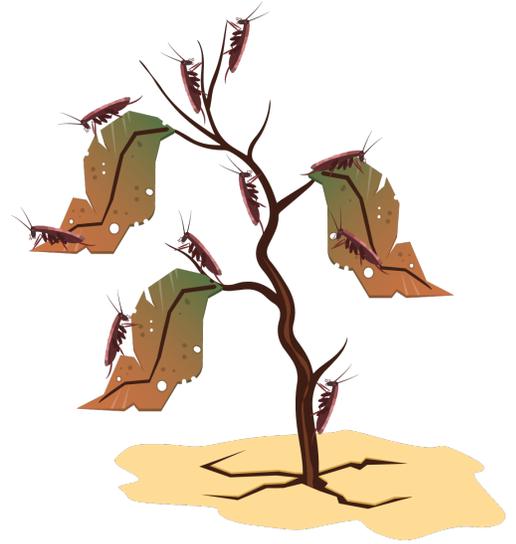
And Moses and Aaron went in to Pharaoh, and said to him: 'Thus said the LORD, the God of the Hebrews: For how much longer are you going to refuse to be subjugated before Me? Let My people go, so they can serve Me.

שמות יג:

ויבא מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן, אֶל־פַּרְעֹה, וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו כֹּה־אָמַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי
הָעִבְרִים, עַד־מָתִי מֵאַנְתָּ לַעֲנֹת מִפְּנֵי; שְׁלַח עַמִּי, וַיַּעֲבֹדְנִי

We asked before why Moses and Aaron bother asking this pointless question. We also noticed that it seems unusually audacious. Do Moses and Aaron really think that Pharaoh is going to give in when they talk like that? Nope - and that's the whole point. This is how God makes Pharaoh stubborn. God is playing off of Pharaoh's ego.

A man with an ego the size of Pharaoh's -- he won't be able to resist this kind of goading, especially when you talk to him like that in front of his servants. He'll become defensive, contrary, obstinate. And sure enough, even when Moses and Aaron threaten to bring locusts to Egypt, Pharaoh refuses to cave. Even though the locusts are going to eat up every single shred of the land, every last crop. For an agrarian society like ancient Egypt, locusts are the economic atom bomb. The significance goes even deeper than that. The Hebrew slaves have spent these past several hundred years doing one thing: building storehouses for Egypt's grain. The locusts are going to sweep in and destroy all of it. The entire enterprise of slavery is about to be undermined, in a single plague. Egypt, economically, will be leveled. But Pharaoh's ego won't let him give in, so Moses and Aaron turn and leave.



No sooner has the door shut behind them, then Pharaoh's servants turn to him in exasperation:

Exodus 10:7

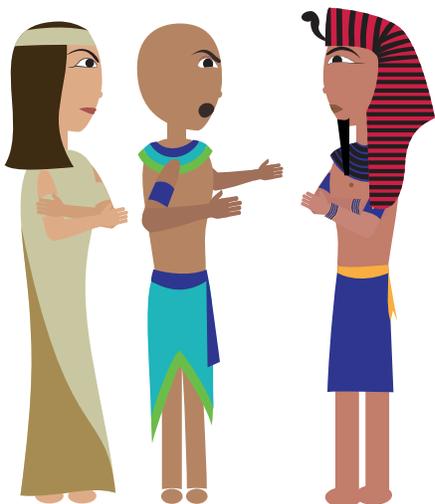
And Pharaoh's servants said to him: 'How long shall this man be a snare unto us? let the men go, that they may serve the Lord their God; Don't you know yet that Egypt is destroyed?'

שמות יז

וַיֹּאמְרוּ עַבְדֵי פַרְעֹה אֵלָיו, עַד-מַתִּי יִהְיֶה זֶה לָנוּ לְמוֹקֵשׁ--
שֶׁלַח אֶת-הָאֲנָשִׁים, וַיַּעֲבְדוּ אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיהֶם; הֲטָרָם תִּדְעֵה,
כִּי אֲבָדָה מִצְרָיִם

CONSIDER THIS

What are the servants trying to say in Ezodus 10:7? How can you explain this widening gap between the servants and Pharaoh?



Echoing Moses' words, albeit a little more politely, the servants ask Pharaoh their own "until when?" question: How long is this guy Moses going to be a thorn in our side? Can't we just let these people go? Don't you know we're lost?

We wondered earlier why the Torah records this conversation with the servants. Now it all makes sense. Pharaoh, who is stuck inside his ego, remains pigheaded - but it is crystal clear to his servants that he is acting stupidly. They see God's power and realize that they can't compete with it. They urge their leader to stop being so stubborn, to get outside of his own head. They understand that if he keeps on at this rate, they're going to meet total destruction.

In Pharaoh's palace, things are starting to unravel. His own servants are against him. Political command is slipping out of Pharaoh's grasp - all because of his outsized ego, his desperate attempt to maintain the facade of control.

Let's keep moving in the verses as the drama unfolds. Notice what happens next, in Exodus 10:8:

Exodus 10:8

And Moses and Aaron were returned to Pharaoh; and he said unto them: 'Go, serve the Lord your God; but who is it that will go?'

שמות י:ח

וַיּוֹשֶׁב אֶת-מֹשֶׁה וְאֶת-אַהֲרֹן, אֶל-פַּרְעֹה, וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם, לֵכְנָן עֲבֹדוּ אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם; מִי וּמִי הַהֹלְכִים

Notice that the verse doesn't say that Moses and Aaron returned, it says that they were returned. *Someone* returned them.



CONSIDER THIS

Who are these anonymous people who brought Moses and Aaron back, and why?

It was the servants. They see that Pharaoh has lost his grip on reality, so they start to intervene, trying to broker a deal. They see that if he continues to act this way, Egypt will be lost.



So now Moses and Aaron are standing before Pharaoh, and the servants are standing tensely in the back of the room, holding their breath. They're praying that Pharaoh doesn't have their heads for having gone behind his back to get Moses and Aaron. And they're praying that their crazed leader, who seems to be leading them off the deep end, comes face to face with reality and stops being so stubborn. So everyone is watching to see what's going to happen; Pharaoh has to say something. What does he say?

8 And Moses and Aaron were returned to Pharaoh; and he said to them: 'Go, serve the Lord your God; but who is it that will go?' 9 And Moses said: 'We will go with our young and with our old, with our sons and with our daughters, with our flocks and with our herds we will go; for we must hold a feast unto the Lord.'

ח וַיּוֹשֶׁב אֶת-מֹשֶׁה וְאֶת-אַהֲרֹן, אֶל-פַּרְעֹה, וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו, לָכוּ עֲבֹדוּ אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם; מִי וּמִי הֵהָלָכִים. ט וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה, בְּנַעֲרֵינוּ וּבְזָקְנֵינוּ נֵלֵךְ; בְּבָנֵינוּ וּבְבָנוֹתֵינוּ בְּצֹאֲנֵנוּ וּבְבָקָרֵנוּ, נֵלֵךְ--כִּי חַג-יְהוָה, לָנוּ

It seems like Pharaoh's resolve is weakening, that he's actually prepared to give in. The servants are letting out sighs of relief. Egypt will be saved! But then Pharaoh asks Moses this strange question: Who is going?



CONSIDER THIS

Knowing what you do know about Pharaoh's psychology, why do you think he is asking this question: Who will go? And how can you explain Moses' seemingly tone-deaf reply?

We wondered earlier why Pharaoh asks this strange question. Given when we know about Pharaoh's desperate attempt to preserve his ego, it seems that he's looking for an olive branch. It's as if he's saying: "Come on, Moses, give me something here. I'll work with you, but I need to hold onto the appearance of control."

If only Moses would say, "Well, maybe we can leave some cattle behind," he would have himself a deal. But Moses won't allow this egomaniac to save face. There's only one seat of power in the universe, and God occupies it. Moses doesn't want to do anything which might suggest otherwise.

So Moses refuses to give him an olive branch: We're going with everyone: our young and our old, our sons and our daughters, our flocks and our herds. Of course, that's an answer that Pharaoh can't accept and still save face. So he rejects it, and he's driven out from Pharaoh's presence.

The servants' attempt to broker a deal fails. There doesn't seem to be any hope for negotiation between these parties. So Moses brings the eighth plague, locusts, the economic atom bomb. And sure enough, Egypt is leveled. The locusts devour every inch of vegetation in the whole land. Egypt, the breadbasket of the world, is emptied. There's nothing to be found to eat, not even a stray weed in the soil. Egypt is facing total famine, and Pharaoh's ego still won't allow him to give in.

So Moses brings the ninth plague - the plague of darkness. The entire country is choked by blackness. Without light, it's as if Egyptian people are suffocating; they can't leave their homes for days. They're losing their minds. Now Pharaoh is starting to get desperate. He calls back to Moses:



24 And Pharaoh called unto Moses, and said: 'Go you, serve the Lord; only let your flocks and your herds stay behind; let your little ones also go with you.' **25** And Moses said: You also need to give us sacrifices and burnt-offerings, so we can sacrifice to the Lord our God. **26** Our cattle will also go with us; there will not be a hoof left behind; for we will take it to serve the Lord our God; and we won't know with what we must serve the Lord, until we get there.'

כד ויקרא פרעה אל-משה, ויאמר לכו עבדו את-יהוה--רק צאנכם ובקרכם, יצגו: גם-טפכם, ילך עמכם. **כה** ויאמר משה, גם-אתה תתן בידנו זבחים ועלת; ועשינו, ליהוה אלהינו. **כו** וגם-מקננו ילך עמנו, לא תשא רפרסה--כי ממנו נקח, לעבד את-יהוה אלהינו; ואנחנו לא-נדע, מה-נעבד את-יהוה, עד-באנו, שמה

Pharaoh proposes a new idea. "You can go -- but how about you leave behind your cattle?" This time, he's not just implying "Who should go?", he's explicitly saying: "Can you give me something here?" He knows that he's rapidly losing ground, but he just can't give in. But the dynamic plays out just the same as before: Moses refuses to give him an olive branch. "We're not leaving a hoof behind!" Moses isn't oblivious here. He's being tone deaf on purpose. It's as if he is saying to Pharaoh: If you're going to let us go, you are going to have to confront your own ego.

When we look at the bigger picture, and the entire story of the Exodus, we understand that all of those questions that we had at the beginning of our parsha aren't questions anymore. The entire time, the problem was Pharaoh's ego, and his inability to see what was right in front of him. It's as if God is saying, Pharaoh's sense of self is leading him to deny me? Then his sense of self will be his downfall. God isn't working any magic on Pharaoh. God isn't interfering with Pharaoh's free will. What we're seeing isn't a divine trick, it's the natural - albeit dysfunctional - reaction of a narcissist to provocation. It's this response which leads Pharaoh to refuse to cave in the face of ever growing threats throughout our parsha: cataclysmic locusts, crippling darkness, and ultimately the death of every firstborn son throughout the land. The whole account makes sense, and is revealed to be a deeper and more nuanced story than we might have first thought.

Hopefully most of us don't have an ego quite as outsized as Pharaoh's. But still, the lesson is frightening. The Torah is teaching us about the danger of ego, which can make you blind to a truth which is staring you in the face - so blind that it can become your undoing. For people who put their faith in the intellect, in the idea that people always act rationally, this is devastating. Pharaoh holds onto his ego for dear life, posturing and trying to project an image of himself as strong, secure and unyielding. He thinks that it's a source of strength - but it's his greatest weakness.

It's Pharaoh's own inability to give in which leads to his loss of political power as his servants turn against him. It leads to the ruination of his kingdom with the plague of locusts, the devastation of all of Egypt's grain, the literal undoing of hundreds of years of slavery. It leads to the death of his own son. Ultimately, it will lead to his own personal destruction. That's what these final three plagues are about, and it's what God wanted the Hebrews, and the world, to see.

Love the guide?
Then **SHARE** and **SUPPORT!**

Think of friends and family who will love it as much as you did - and share it with them!

And when you do, please remember to support Aleph Beta. Nothing makes us happier than bringing eye-opening, soul-heartening, life-changing Torah directly to you – but it all costs money. Like the cost of the writing, editing, design and circulation of the guide that you're reading. So until we win the lottery, we need your support. Encourage your friends to subscribe to Aleph Beta, so they can get the guides sent directly to them! Or if you shared it with a friend and it was an awesome experience for both of you, consider making a small donation to show your love.

Thanks for understanding - we love you guys, too.

Check out these great videos by Rabbi David Fohrman



**WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO
BE CHOSEN?**



THE THREE SIGNS



Visit us at
www.alephbeta.org
for more incredible Torah.

Source Sheet

Exodus 7:5 (from Parshat Va'era)

5 And the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord, when I stretch forth My hand on Egypt, and bring out the children of Israel from among them.'

Exodus 7:27-35 (from Parshat Va'era)

27 And Pharaoh sent, and called for Moses and Aaron, and said to them: 'I have sinned this time; the Lord is righteous, and I and my people are wicked. 28 Entreat the Lord, and let there be enough of these mighty thunders and hail; and I will let you go, and you shall stay no longer.' 29 And Moses said to him: 'As soon as I am gone out of the city, I will spread forth my hands to the Lord; the thunders will cease, neither will there be any more hail; that you will know that the earth is the Lord's. 30 But as for you and your servants, I know that you will not yet fear the Lord God.'

31 And the flax and the barley were smitten; for the barley was in the ear, and the flax was in bloom. 32 But the wheat and the spelt were not smitten; for they ripen late.– 33 And Moses went out of the city from Pharaoh, and spread forth his hands to the Lord; and the thunders and hail ceased, and the rain was not poured upon the earth. 34 And when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunders were ceased, he sinned yet more, and hardened his heart, he and his servants. 35 And the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he did not let the children of Israel go; as the Lord had spoken by Moses.

Exodus 10:1-11 (from Parshat Bo)

1 And the LORD said unto Moses: 'Go in to Pharaoh; for I have hardened his heart, and the heart of his servants, in order that I might show these signs of Mine in their midst; 2 and in order that you will tell your son, and your son's son, how I have played with Egypt, and My signs which I have done among them; that you all will know that I am the Lord.' 3 And Moses and Aaron went in to Pharaoh, and said to him: 'Thus said the Lord, the God of the Hebrews: For how much longer are you going to refuse to be subjugated before Me? Let My people go, so they can serve Me. 4 For if

שמות פרק ז:

ה וידעו מצרים כי-אני יהוה, בנטתי את-ידי על-מצרים; והוצאתי את-בני-ישראל, מתוכם

שמות פרק ז:כז-לה

כז וישלח פרעה, ויקרא למשה ולאהרן, ויאמר אלהם, חטאתי הפעם: יהוה, הצדיק, ואני ועמי הרשעים. כח העתירו, אל-יהוה, ורב, מהית קלת אלהים וברד; ואשלחה אתכם, ולא תספון לעמד. כט ויאמר אליו, משה, כצאתי את-העיר, אפרש את-כפי אל-יהוה; הקלות יחדלו, והברד לא יהיה-עוד, למען תדע, כי ליהוה הארץ. ל ואתה, ועבדיך: ידעתי--כי טרם תיראון, מפני יהוה אלהים. לא והפשתה והשערה, נכתה: כי השערה אביב, והפשתה גבעל. לבוהחטה והבסמת, לא נבו: כי אפילת, הנה. לג ויצא משה מעם פרעה, את-העיר, ויפרש כפיו, אל-יהוה; ויחדלו הקלות והברד, ומטר לא-נתך ארצה. לד וירא פרעה, כי-חדל המטר והברד והקלת--ויסוף לחטא; ויכבד לבו, הוא ועבדיו. לה ויחזק לב פרעה, ולא שלח את-בני ישראל: כאשר דבר יהוה, ביד-משה

שמות י:א-יא

א ויאמר יהוה אל-משה, בא אל-פרעה: כי-אני הכבדתי את-לבו, ואת-לב עבדי, למען שתי אתתי אלה, בקרב. ב ולמען תספר באזני בנך ובן-בנך, את אשר התעללתי במצרים, ואת-אתתי, אשר-שמתי בם; וידעתם, כי-אני יהוה. ג ויבא משה ואהרן, אל-פרעה, ויאמרו אליו כה-אמר יהוה אלהי העברים, עד-מתי מאנת לענת מפני; שלח עמי, ויעבדני: ד כי אם-מאן אתה, לשלח את-עמי--הנני מביא מחר ארבה, בגבלך. ה וכסה את-עין הארץ, ולא יוכל לראת את-הארץ; ואכל את-יתר הפלטה, הנשארת לכם מן-הברד, ואכל את-כל-העץ, הצמח לכם מן-השדה. ו ומלאו בתיך ובתי כל-

you refuse to let My people go, behold, tomorrow I will bring locusts into your border; **5** and they shall cover the face of the earth, that one will not be able to see the earth; and they will eat the residue of that which is escaped, which remains to you from the hail, and will eat every tree which grows for you out of the field; **6** and your houses will be filled, and the houses of all your servants, and the houses of all the Egyptians; as neither your fathers nor your fathers' fathers have seen, since the day that they were upon the earth until this day.' And he turned, and went out from Pharaoh. **7** And Pharaoh's servants said to him: 'How long shall this man be a snare unto us? let the men go, that they may serve the Lord their God; Don't you know yet that Egypt is destroyed?' **8** And Moses and Aaron were returned to Pharaoh; and he said to them: 'Go, serve the Lord your God; but who is it that will go?' **9** And Moses said: 'We will go with our young and with our old, with our sons and with our daughters, with our flocks and with our herds we will go; for we must hold a feast unto the Lord.' **10** And he said to them: 'So be the Lord with you, as I will let you go, and your little ones; see you that evil is before your face. **11** Not so; go now you that are men, and serve the Lord; for that is what you desire.' And they were driven out from Pharaoh's presence.

Exodus 10:24-26

24 And Pharaoh called unto Moses, and said: 'Go you, serve the Lord; only let your flocks and your herds stay behind; let your little ones also go with you.' **25** And Moses said: You also need to give us sacrifices and burnt-offerings, so we can sacrifice to the Lord our God. **26** Our cattle will also go with us; there will not be a hoof left behind; for we will take it to serve the Lord our God; and we won't know with what we must serve the Lord, until we get there.'

עֲבָדִיָּה, וּבִתֵּי כָל-מִצְרַיִם, אֲשֶׁר לֹא-רָאוּ אֲבֹתַיִךְ וְאֲבוֹת אֲבֹתֶיךָ, מִיּוֹם הַיּוֹתֵם עַל-הָאָדָמָה עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה; וַיִּפֹּן וַיֵּצֵא, מִעִם פְּרַעֲהוֹ. ז וַיֹּאמְרוּ עֲבָדֵי פְרַעֲהוֹ אֵלָיו, עַד-מַתֵּי יִהְיֶה זֶה לָנוּ לְמוֹקֵשׁ--שְׁלַח אֶת-הָאֲנָשִׁים, וַיַּעֲבֹדוּ אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיהֶם; הִטְרַם תִּדְעֵה, כִּי אֲבָדָה מִצְרַיִם. ח וַיּוֹשֵׁב אֶת-מִשְׁהוֹ וְאֶת-אֶהֱרֹן, אֶל-פְּרַעֲהוֹ, וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם, לָכוּ עֲבָדוּ אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם; מִי וּמִי הֵהֱלֵכִים. ט וַיֹּאמְרוּ מִשְׁהוֹ, בְּנַעֲרֵינוּ וּבְזִקְנֵינוּ נִלְךְ; בְּבָנֵינוּ וּבְבָנוֹתֵנוּ בְּצֹאנֵנוּ וּבְבָקָרֵנוּ, נִלְךְ--כִּי חַג-יְהוָה, לָנוּ. י וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם, יְהִי כֹן יְהוָה עִמָּכֶם, כַּאֲשֶׁר אֲשַׁלַּח אֶתְכֶם, וְאֶת-טַפְּכֶם; רְאוּ, כִּי רָעָה נִגְדָה פְּנֵיכֶם. יא לֹא כֹן, לָכוּ-נָא הַגְּבֵרִים וַעֲבָדוּ אֶת-יְהוָה--כִּי אַתֶּה, אַתָּם מִבְּקָשִׁים; וַיַּגִּרְשׁ אֹתָם, מֵאֶת פְּנֵי פְרַעֲהוֹ

שמות י: כד-כו

כד וַיִּקְרָא פְרַעֲהוֹ אֶל-מִשְׁהוֹ, וַיֹּאמְרוּ לָכוּ עֲבָדוּ אֶת-יְהוָה--רַק צֹאנְכֶם וּבְקָרְכֶם, יֵצֵאוּ: גַם-טַפְּכֶם, יֵלְךְ עִמָּכֶם. כה וַיֹּאמְרוּ מִשְׁהוֹ, גַם-אַתָּה תִתֵּן בְּיָדֵנוּ זְבָחִים וְעֹלֹת; וְעֲשִׂינוּ, לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ. כו וְגַם-מִקְנֵנוּ יֵלְךְ עִמָּנוּ, לֹא תִשָּׂא רַסְסָה--כִּי מִמֶּנּוּ נִקַּח, לְעַבְדֹת אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ; וְאַנְחֵנוּ לֹא-נִדְעֵה, מֵה-נִעֲבֹד אֶת-יְהוָה, עַד-בֹּאֵנוּ, שָׁמָּה