

Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

Parashat Va'era, Exodus, Chapters 6-9 | January 13, 2024

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

Pharaoh's Tell-Tale Heart

It is one of the most famous short stories of American literature: Edgar Allan Poe describes a man who plans and commits a murder and then buries the body beneath the planks of the floor. “It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain,” the narrator explains, “but once conceived, it haunted me day and night.” The crime is brilliantly planned and executed, with nary a shred of evidence implicating the guilty party. And yet, as the murderer is interrogated by the police, he is ultimately undone by a sound that is very real to him, and which, he insists, is not emerging from his head:

The ringing became more distinct—It continued and became more distinct: I talked more freely to get rid of the feeling: but it continued and gained definiteness—until, at length, I found that the noise was not within my ears.

And yet, as he continues, the noise is heard by him alone, driving him to distraction:

I paced the floor to and fro with heavy strides, as if excited to fury by the observations of the men—but the noise steadily increased. Oh God! what *could* I do? I foamed—I raved—I swore! I swung the chair upon which I had been sitting, and grated it upon the boards, but the noise arose over all and continually increased. It grew louder—louder—louder! And still the men chatted pleasantly, and smiled. Was it possible they heard not? Almighty God!—no, no! They heard!—they suspected!—they knew!—they were making a mockery of my horror!—this I thought, and this I think. But anything was better than this agony! Anything was more tolerable than this derision! I could bear those hypocritical smiles no longer! I felt that I must scream or die! and now—again!—hark! louder! louder! louder! louder!

At this point, he identifies the sound with a part of the body, assuming that it comes from the man whom he had killed; in agony, the murderer confesses the crime:

“Villains!” I shrieked, “dissemble no more! I admit the deed!—tear up the planks! here, here!—It is the beating of his hideous heart!”

What are we to make of this story? The point, many suggest, is that actually the beating noise comes not from

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the victim, but rather from within the murderer himself: it is *his own heart* that is torturing him. Poe is making a distinction between head and heart, between utility and emotion, craftiness and conscience. The crime was planned by the murderer's mind and brilliantly so, from the moment it "entered my brain." But the heart, the seat of his conscience, bothers him; the ringing, which the murderer rightly reflects did not come from "within my ears," came instead from his heart. It is, in other words, the murderer's own heart which is beating in guilt, so powerfully reflecting that some aspect of his conscience remains. Hence the title given to this story: "The Tell-Tale Heart."

This title could equally serve as the name of our reading this week. It is easy to study our *parashah* and to fix our attention on the plagues that the Almighty brings upon Egypt. But what is perhaps even more important is the way in which Pharaoh responds to these plagues; for throughout the reading there is constant reference to one aspect of his anatomy, a heart that for us is truly tell-tale, not only in what it tells us about the king of Egypt, but also about the vision that the Torah proclaims to the world.

Let us briefly summarize the opening of the *parashah*. Moses, sent again to proclaim to Israel the imminence of the redemption, is ignored by the exhausted slaves. In despair, he asks the Almighty how he could possibly succeed in his mission to the royal court:

Behold, the children of Israel will not listen to me; how then will Pharaoh heed me, and I am with uncircumcised lips! (Exodus 6:12)

This need not mean that Moses has a speech impediment; rather, as Ibn Ezra explains, Moses sees himself as unskilled in the art of political persuasion. God, in turn, offers no answer; the implication is that the ultimate exodus of Israel will not occur because Pharaoh will be convinced that releasing the slaves is in his political interests. Soon after, the Almighty emphasizes that in fact Pharaoh will stubbornly refuse to free Israel, and God, in His description, singles out one aspect of the pharaonic anatomy:

And the Lord said unto Moses, See, I have made you as a god to Pharaoh: and Aaron your brother will be your prophet. You shall speak all that I command to you: and Aaron your brother will speak unto Pharaoh, that he must send the children of Israel out of his land. And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and increase my signs and my wonders in the land of Egypt. (Exodus 7:1-3)

It is not initially clear what the Almighty means when He speaks of hardening Pharaoh's heart; but this signals that the nature of Pharaoh's heart will be central to the story.

As Moses is sent to the royal court he is informed by the Almighty that Aaron will perform a wonder with his staff: the creation of a creature called in Hebrew a *tannin*. Pharaoh's magicians, in turn, create such a being as well, but Aaron's miraculous creature swallows theirs. We shall return to this famous, but often misunderstood, story; for now, let us note the way the saga of the plagues begins:

And the Lord said unto Moses, Pharaoh's heart is **heavy**; he refuses to let the people go. (Exodus 7:14)

With this, the plague of blood begins. Note that whereas originally the Almighty spoke of Pharaoh's heart



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being hardened, here a different Hebrew word is used: *kaved*, denoting its weight. Recently, many writers on Exodus have noted how an understanding of Egyptology allows us to detect the larger message here, and it is to Egyptology that we must turn.

As I noted in Bible 365, the king of Egypt was seen as the intermediary between the people and Ma'at, the goddess of order and justice. In this role, the Pharaoh preserves the orderly rhythm of Egyptian economic and social life, and this theology is the heart of the country's tyranny. The Koren Hertog *Tanakh of the Land of Israel* edition of Exodus explains:

Ma'at was a powerful social and political instrument through which the ancient Egyptian king governed. As an all-encompassing, deified concept, Ma'at secured the king's position as the one and only sovereign of Egypt, and Ma'at enabled the upper classes to maintain their social status, and in some respect forced the various parties of Egyptian society to obey and accept their respective places within the society.

The plagues, in other words, are meant to challenge Pharaoh's role as the guarantor of order. But the role of Ma'at looms large not only in Pharaoh's position, but also in the Egyptian understanding of the judgment of every individual in the afterlife. According to Egyptian belief, it was Ma'at who determined whether one deserved to enter the next world, which is overseen by the god Osiris. This determination took place in the presence of Osiris himself immediately after one's death. As the Egyptologist Toby Wilkinson tells us:

Vindication before the divine tribunal required more, however, than a mere denial of wrongdoing. It involved a fundamental assessment of a person's true worth, a weighing of their good and bad deeds in order to arrive at a balanced judgment of their character. Only those who passed this calculation of differences were deemed fit to join Osiris and live forever.

This determination as to moral worth was depicted through one of the best-known Egyptian images. The hieroglyph denoting the goddess Ma'at was a feather:



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Thus the deceased was believed to be judged by having his or her heart—the embodiment of the soul and of human character—weighed against the “feather of Ma’at.” Wilkinson further comments:

In a society as obsessed with bureaucracy and accountancy as ancient Egypt was, it is perhaps not surprising that theologians imagined the weighing of a person’s worth taking place on a giant set of goldsmith’s scales. The accuracy of the balance perfectly expressed the unerring judgment of the divine tribunal. A spell from the Coffin Texts describes the scales as “that balance of Ra on which Ma’at is lifted up,” indicating that the judgment is authorized by Ra himself, god of the sun and of creation, and that the deeds of the deceased are to be weighed against Ma’at, the goddess of truth.

This image is found today elaborately sketched on papyri, remnants of copies of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*:



The heart of one who has died is weighed against the “feather of Ma’at,” with the afterlife assured only if the heart itself is not too heavy. Wilkinson again:

In time the heart itself came to stand for the deceased and his deeds, and the pictorial representation of the weighing of the heart against the feather of truth became an essential image on funerary papyri, an encapsulation of the final judgment. It remains one of the most instantly recognizable, characteristic, and evocative scenes from the entire repertoire of ancient Egyptian art.

Thus, as many note, for God in Exodus to speak of the heaviness of Pharaoh’s heart is for Him to use an image that is, at first blush, incomprehensible to us today, but which would be relatively easy to understand in ancient Egypt. To say that “Pharaoh’s heart is heavy” is to express Pharaoh’s moral guilt.

There is, however, much more to say here. The point, I think, is not—as some modern commentators suggest—that God is emphasizing that Pharaoh will be denied paradise in the afterlife. Something important is being said about the here and now; and further delving into Egyptology allows us deeper insight.



Let us begin by studying the references to the king's heart. The plague of blood is followed by frogs; and when that infestation ceases, we are told:

When Pharaoh saw that there was relief, he made his heart heavy, and did not listen to them . . .
(Exodus 8:11)

Here again, Pharaoh's heart is described in terms of "heaviness," a word that, as we have seen, denotes his guilt. But then, after the plague of lice, a new verb appears:

And Pharaoh's heart **was made strong**. (Exodus 8:15)

Heaviness, as we have seen, is linked to the myth of Ma'at. But what does it mean for Pharaoh's heart to be "strengthened"? This verb appears again soon after: while Pharaoh's heart is described once more as "heavy" after an attack by wild animals and a plague that kills the livestock, suddenly, after boils afflict the Egyptians, we are told:

And the Lord **strengthened** Pharaoh's heart, and he did not hearken to them. (Exodus 9:12)

At this point the verse states explicitly that not only is Pharaoh's heart being made "strong," but also that it is God Who is doing the strengthening. The same phrase appears in the very last verse of the *parashah*, following the divinely directed hailstorm that destroys the Egyptians' crops:

The larger meaning of this image—the strengthening of a heart—can only . . . be truly understood in the context of, and as a response to, Egyptian belief.

And Pharaoh's heart was **strengthened**, and he did not send out the children of Israel. (Exodus 9:35)

The larger meaning of this image—the strengthening of a heart—can only, I think, be truly understood in the context of, and as a response to, Egyptian belief. Wilkinson tells us that Egyptians were certain in their ability to prevent the heart from being "tell-tale" on the day of judgment and revealing the guilt of the deceased.

To counter this awful risk, powerful magic was required. Somehow, the heart had to be prevented from blurting out untruths (or hidden truths) that might seal its owner's fate. The ingenious solution was a new type of amulet, first introduced into burials in the late Middle Kingdom. It took the familiar shape of a scarab beetle, a potent symbol of rebirth (because young beetles hatch from a ball of dung, emblematic of death and decay). But unlike other scarab amulets, this one had a human head and was engraved with a protective spell, addressed to the heart. After the body had undergone mummification, the heart scarab was placed over the heart, with clear instructions as to how the organ should behave at the moment of truth:



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Do not stand up against me.

Do not witness against me.

Do not oppose me in the tribunal.

Do not incline against me.

Egypt, in other words, believed its brilliance in magical technology could overcome even the final judgment itself. For this purpose, Egyptians devised an amulet featuring the shape of a scarab with a human head:



It was just such an ingenious invention that was thought to trick the heart, and ensure immortality for the deceased. Intentionally or otherwise, the symbolism of the “head-amulet” bespeaks a purported triumph of head over heart, mind over morality. The amulet embodies, in other words, the Egyptian belief that the heart could be **weakened**, prevented from revealing its “hidden truths”—made mute, unable to reveal the true character of the individual in which it had resided. Egyptians believed that it could prevent the terror of a “tell-tale heart.”

All this allows us a new way of unpacking what is occurring in our reading. Even as Egypt is destroyed by the plagues, Pharaoh continues to refuse to free Israel; this, because God has “strengthened Pharaoh’s heart.” The phrase has profoundly perturbed medieval Jewish commentators, as it seems to imply that Pharaoh’s freedom of choice had been removed—which is indeed the assumption made by Maimonides. But for the Italian rabbi Obadiah Sforno, Pharaoh was not totally unfree; rather, God removed only his power of prudence, allowing whatever was in Pharaoh’s heart to dominate. At a certain point, it became obvious to all of Pharaoh’s court that, from a purely prudential perspective, Israel had to be released. But Pharaoh’s capacity for pragmatism was taken away; God, we are told, *strengthened* Pharaoh’s heart. He acted not through his practical mind, but through his essential character. Pharaoh could still have agreed to release Israel, but only if he believed in his heart that he should; in a certain sense, God was actually ensuring Pharaoh’s moral choice.

If this is the case, then the story of Pharaoh’s tell-tale heart involves an ironic reversal of the world of pagan myth. The Egyptians believed that their own magical power could *weaken* the heart, and that the essence of human character could be disguised. God, in turn, ensured that Pharaoh’s heart was **strengthened**, and **hardened**; it was made impervious to attempts to weaken it, ensuring that its true nature would be revealed.



This approach—that the entire story should be understood as a reversal of Egyptian myth—allows us to suggest something new in addressing an old question: what precisely was the creature that Aaron’s staff brought into being? Many assume that it was a serpent, but the Hebrew here is not *nabash*, the usual word for snake, but *tannin*, which in the *Tanakh* refers to a dragon-like or crocodilian creature. Thus many modern scholars, from Umberto Cassuto onward, assume that it was indeed a crocodile that emerged out of the staff of Aaron. But given the emphasis on how the miraculous animal swallowed up those produced by Pharaoh’s court, a hint that it may be a slightly different creature can be found in the very same image of the afterlife found in the *Book of the Dead*: there, poised underneath the scale, is a demonic being with the head of a crocodile but the body of other animals:



This is “Ammit the devourer,” guardian of Osiris’ realm, who yearns to devour the hearts of those found unworthy by the scales of Ma’at. For Aaron’s staff to transform into such a crocodilian devouring creature, or something akin to it, and for this beast to swallow up—to devour—those produced by Egypt’s magicians, would lend new meaning to God’s words to Moses:

See, I have made you as a god to Pharaoh: and Aaron your brother will be your prophet. (Exodus 7:1)

All the brilliance in the Egyptian head could not prevent justice from being done when the true essence of the pharaonic heart was revealed.

Pharaoh, in other words, operated in the world of Egyptian paganism, and assumed that he answers only to Osiris in the afterlife, and that his civilization’s genius would ensure his immortality. But God reveals that it is in this world that he would be first be judged; in this world his heart would be weighed; in this world

he would be found guilty by Moses, the representative of the one true God; and in this world Pharaoh’s empire would be devoured. All the brilliance in the Egyptian head could not prevent justice from being done when the true essence of the pharaonic heart was revealed. The Bible thus teaches us a lesson that is at once political and



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moral, one which would have an enormous impact on the world: that the royal ruler is not above God and His moral law; that the genius of a society, all its magic and its technology, cannot ensure its immortality; and that as practically brilliant as a ruler might be, it is the *heart*, one's character, that is the essence of leadership.

As Leon Kass has reminded us, we are meant to ponder whether our own society is so impressed with its ingenuity that our arrogance leads to the subversion of morality itself. Similarly, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, commenting on the tradition of many Jews to beat their chests during the recital of the Yom Kippur confession, wryly reflected that perhaps it is our heads that should be beaten. After all, he explained, in our hearts Jews understand that holiness, and the good, is what truly matters; but our own emphasis on utilitarian considerations all too often causes us to choose head over heart, practicality over conscience.

There are many interpretations of Poe's strange and striking story: some suggest, for example, that it was a cricket-like chirping of an insect that the criminal misinterpreted. But in the end, the simplest explanation is best: the protagonist of Poe's tale, whose evil plan entered his brain, was undone when he became, if you will, "heart of hearing." The story inspires us to study Exodus anew, and to reveal ancient lessons that are as relevant as ever.

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