Power and Perversity: Thoughts on Parashat Bo

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By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Bo

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Pharaoh was incredibly stubborn. He had a hard heart. He could not be dissuaded from his misguided policies even in the face of plagues and calamities. He was not interested in what his advisers said. Pharaoh knew best. Pharaoh was a demigod.

While the Torah states that God hardened Pharaoh's heart, it also states that Pharaoh hardened his own heart (Shemoth 8:28). Maimonidean interpretation has it that the Torah tends to refer things back to God i.e. Pharaoh hardened his own heart but the Torah also ascribes this to God's hardening his heart. The Torah wants to make clear the depth of Pharaoh's callousness.

After a number of plagues, Pharaoh showed a few cracks in his otherwise hardhearted attitude. After the plague of hail, Pharaoh cried out: "I have sinned this time; the Lord is righteous and I and my people are wicked" (Shemoth 9:27). But did he then let the Israelites go free? No, not at all. After the plague of locusts, Pharaoh again admitted his own sinfulness. "I have sinned against the Lord your God and against you" (Shemoth 10:16). Now did he let the Israelites go free? No, not at all.

Pharaoh's perversity seemed to have no limits. He was malicious, calculating, and manipulative. He professed soft words of atonement; but these words meant nothing at all to him. In his heart, he was set on oppressing the Israelites and keeping them as his slaves. His confessions of sin were mere ploys to gain a respite from the plagues that were befalling his people. In spite of his obviously failed policies and the terrible punishments plaguing Egypt, it seems that his advisers and the public at large still stood behind Pharaoh. There is no hint in the Torah of an Egyptian attempt to overthrow him. On the contrary, he seemed to remain firmly in power.

When the Israelites were finally set free, Pharaoh's hard heart could not admit defeat. He called on his troops to pursue the Israelites; they did so without hesitation…and they marched to their watery deaths. What more was needed to convince people of Pharaoh's failure as a leader? What better proof was necessary to demonstrate the folly of Pharaoh's obsessive stubbornness?

In his essay about the 18th century French novelist and dramatist, Pierre de Marivaux, Dr. Rene Girard points out how Marivaux's heroes are guilty of hypocrisy and bad faith—and yet are deemed to be popular and successful by their peers. He quotes Marivaux: "But oh! How I hate, how I detest those vain and deceitful people whose tricks are so clever, whose impostures are so well devised that almost everybody sides with them and one does not know how to cast upon them the opprobrium they deserve." (Rene Girard, Mimesis and Theory, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2008, p. 78.)

The Torah offers a vivid description of a hardhearted, deceptive and malicious Pharaoh who remains a powerful leader of the Egyptians in spite of his destructive behavior. He was an imposter posing as a demigod…and his public went right along with the deception. Instead of receiving the opprobrium he deserved, Pharaoh remained head of the most powerful nation of his time.

The story of Pharaoh and the ten plagues provides important lessons about humanity. It highlights how the arrogance and stubbornness of one person can cause so much tragedy to his own people. It underscores how hypocritical demagogues—in spite of their obvious failures—can continue to have the support of underlings even when leading them to calamity after calamity.

But the story also illustrates how God's justice ultimately prevails. The Pharaoh's of the world can fool their sheepish followers—but they cannot deceive or out-maneuver God. Even if the Egyptians did not recognize and condemn Pharaoh's flawed leadership, the Torah provides God's perspective on Pharaoh: a stubborn, obsessive, and destructive leader whose hardheartedness not only harmed his people but undermined his own humanity.

Readers of the Torah see Pharaoh in all his folly. This insight is ignored at our own peril.

Angel for Shabbat