

D'var Torah for Parshat Bo

By Mikel Garner
Heart Surgery

Parshat Bo begins with Hashem saying to Moshe.

"...בָּא אֶל-פְּרֻעָה כִּי-אַנְּיִ הַכְּבָדָתִי אֶת-לְבָוֹ וְאֶת-לְבָ עֲבָדָיו לְמַעַן שְׁתִּי אֶתְתִּי אֶלְהָ בְּקָרְבָּו..."

..."Come to Pharaoh because I hardened his heart and the heart of his slaves in order to show my signs in his midst."

G-d tells Moshe that he will harden Pharaoh's heart, allowing him to decide not to release the Hebrews, in order to punish Egypt with the 8th plague, locusts.

Already in Parshat Vaera, when G-d first tells Moshe about his mission, he informs Moshe that...

"וְאַנְּיִ אַקְשַׁה אֶת לְבָ פְּרֻעָה וְהַרְבִּיתִי אֶת אֶתְתִּי וְאֶת מַזְמָרִים בָּאָרֶץ מְצָרִים..."

"I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and I will increase My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt."

This seems very unfair. The implication is that had G-d not intervened to toughen Pharaoh's resolve, Pharaoh would have released the Jews. Why is G-d causing Pharaoh to keep the Jews only to hit him again with more plagues?

Here is Rashi's explanation:

"Since he [Pharaoh] behaved wickedly and defied Me, and I know full well that there is no delight among the nations to make a wholehearted attempt to repent, it is better for Me that his heart be hardened, so that [I can] increase My signs and My wonders in him, and you will recognize My mighty deeds."

Rashi is saying that if Pharaoh had wanted to repent, G-d would not have stopped him. But G-d knew that Pharaoh would never regret enslaving the Hebrews. He'd let them go only to avoid more plagues. So G-d strengthened Pharaoh to provide an opportunity to show the world His power (which is important for continued life on Earth).

Here is Seforno's explanation:

"G-d certainly desires the repentance of evil people rather than their death. Had G-d not strengthened Pharaoh's heart, he would certainly have let the Jews go. But his decision would have not represented repentance and humility before G-d, but just fear and an inability to tolerate another plague. G-d would never have prevented sincere repentance by Pharaoh. Indeed, by increasing Pharaoh's tolerance for the plagues, G-d was allowing him the opportunity to recognize G-d's greatness and goodness and release the Jews with true repentance."

The Seforno is saying that every time G-d hardened Pharaoh's heart, He was allowing him to choose to let the Jews go rather than be forced to do so out of fear of the plague. When Pharaoh chose to keep the Jews as slaves, G-d brought the next plague.

Rashi's and Seforno's views are very different! According to Rashi, G-d had given up on Pharaoh and merely used him as a tool. According to Seforno, G-d still wanted Pharaoh to improve and was trying to help him grow. I find Seforno's explanation much more appealing. Pharaoh failed. He let the Jews go only after his firstborn was killed by the tenth plague. And in next week's parsha, Pharaoh changes his mind and pursues the Jews. However, the idea that G-d had hope that even the evil Pharaoh could change if a very positive one. In a world filled with so much darkness, the optimism of Seforno's approach shines a bright light.