

Yashar koach Rafa and Zach, on these powerful divrei Torah that you have given today. Your messages could not be more relevant and more important on this morning.

Zach, you taught us about the tension in our tradition between fate and free will, noting that at times, Pharaoh seems to be making his own decisions and at times, it all seems out of his hands. And you found that accepting our free will and being accountable for our own choices is, in fact, the only thing that allows us to change and to grow.

And Rafa, you also explored Pharaoh's decisions and his willingness to change, teaching that real growth is only possible if we are willing to pause and reflect honestly, with some courage and humility, on what we are doing, why we are doing it, who we are, and who we want to be.

It's interesting that you both chose to focus on the part of our story that talks about the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. It is the same part of our parsha that commanded my attention this week, too. For we are seeing hardened hearts across the country right now, regular old hearts become impermeable, impenetrable, to the suffering of others. And surely, we are wondering - given the damage that a hardened heart can do, is doing, what can we learn from the teachings of our b'nei mitzvah and from this story in Torah about what we can do, how we can soften a hardened heart?

As we read this morning, we are in the part of our story in which God has remembered the people and hears our cries to be free from the slavery of Mitzrayim, Ancient Egypt. Called by God, Moses and Aaron go to Pharaoh and demand the freedom of the enslaved Israelites. In the face of Pharaoh's stubbornness, God sends terrible plagues. With each plague, Pharaoh panics and so tells Moses and Aaron, fine fine - if you stop this plague, I will let the people go free. And every single time, once the danger has passed for him, Pharaoh immediately changes his mind. The text tells us *v'hachbed et leebo*. His heart is hardened. Hardened to the people's suffering. Hardened to their pain. Hardened to their fear. For the first five plagues, the text describes Pharaoh hardening his own heart and for the last five, God hardens Pharaoh's heart so he does not change his ways.

The rabbis, the commentators, are clearly shaken by the idea of a hardened and unfeeling heart and wonder also what it means when it's Pharaoh's choice and when it's God's choice.

Some commentators teach that God hardens Pharaoh's heart in the last five plagues as punishment for his cruelty, seeing as this is already his habit, but a text from 1798 called Kedushat Levi sees something different happening that may be instructive for us.

In the wake of the first five plagues, the Kedushat Levi imagines a Pharaoh that is eager to soften, but can't seem to get there. So God, this interpretation goes, hardens Pharaoh's heart and instructs Moses not "*lech el par'oh* - go to Pharaoh," as has happened repeatedly, but rather "*bo el par'oh* - come to Pharaoh." In this gentle language shift, The Kedushat Levi suggests that Moses is to "come to Pharaoh, not confrontationally, but as giving him a chance to turn over a new leaf and to redeem himself." The text imagines a Pharaoh that would say to

Moses: how can I repair this, I've already done so much damage," and so God instructs Moses to explain to Pharaoh that "God has made the first move in bringing Pharaoh's heart closer to (God)."

According to this text, by interacting with Pharaoh's heart at all, by disrupting it, even in hardening it, God isn't trying to close off his heart; God is trying to get at his heart. *L'hafoch levav*, to bring about a complete change of heart from a posture of persecution, toward an inclination to deal kindly instead. Such that, the commentator Sforno adds, Pharaoh would not soften his heart out of fear or duress. But instead, from having reflected honestly, Rafe, on who he really is and wants to be. And by having made a decision of his own free will, Zach, and not because he was forced to by God.

This, the Kedushat Levi, insists is worthy of great reward. To make a proactive decision to soften a hardened heart.

In a way that I imagine few of us have ever seen, this week has revealed a sea of hardened hearts in the ICE agents scattered across the country who have turned their weapons, their bodies, and their rage on their neighbors. On January 7, our country was gripped by the footage of Renee Good, a mom and a wife, being brutally and fatally shot by an ICE agent. Of course, this hardness of heart has been playing out for awhile now in court rooms and business raids and detention centers. Targeting immigrants of all statuses, now also Black, Brown, and Asian citizens, and turning itself on protestors of all races who have shown up out of love for their neighbors. And this week, it seems we have reached a fever pitch.

Carin Mrotz, a senior advisor at the Minnesota Attorney General's Office, shared a message with those outside of the city. Here are some excerpts:

She wrote: "The agents brandished their guns at us as a warning, or a threat, maybe both, ... On the southside, ICE agents surrounded a legal observer in her vehicle, broke the windows, and dragged her and her passenger out of the car and detained them. ... The pace of the operations has been relentless, manic, and the agents are acting with remarkable brutality. ... People are afraid and avoiding leaving their homes, even to get groceries. After ICE tear-gassed parents and school staff at a local high school last week, our public schools closed and have now re-opened with hybrid learning so that parents who are afraid to send their kids to school have an option."

From others, we've learned that ICE agents have sprayed tear gas into the mail slots of homes. Have kicked in doors without a judicial warrant, which is illegal, dragging people in their pajamas into the snow. We've watched the video of a woman driving to her doctor's appointment suddenly dragged from her car as she's screaming in fear, telling the agents that she is disabled. They carry her away roughly in handcuffs anyway. We've read of the agents who threw a flash bang and chemical agents at a van full of kids, the youngest a six month old baby who stopped breathing before being revived. Minnesotans are being tear gassed, thrown to the ground, and terrorized.

Covered faces. Rage. Hearts hardened to the humanity of their neighbors. We are in a crisis.

So we reach back into our story and look for the wisdom to guide us. To learn how to soften a hardened heart. And the truth is that we don't know how. We need to know, we need to learn this, but we don't know yet.

But the Kedushat Levi, and your teachings this morning, have led us in some direction for how to try to get at a heart. And so, drawing on the wisdom from an 18th century Chasidic tradition, we turn toward you, and we seek your heart:

Maybe just yesterday you were known best for being a dad. A son. A husband. And today you've looked down and found a gun in your hands. Today, you found yourself brutally throwing a person to the ground. Yesterday, you were remembering to call your mom, and today, you've looked down to find that you're wearing tactical gear with extra rounds strapped to your body. Yesterday, you were buying salt to melt what had frozen, and today, you've found your hands tearing someone out of her car. She is terrified and you punch her and choke her. And your heart is racing and you are wondering who you are. What you are doing. When did you become *this* person?

Humbly, we draw from the wisdom of Moses in this text and we say: there is no shame in walking away today. No shame in deciding this is not what you signed up for. Maybe this felt like the patriotic thing to do, but now that you're here, it's not what you thought and you're being asked to do things you are not proud of. There is no shame in remembering that you have choices and the free will to decide that this is not who you want to be. Not what you want to tell your children. We are begging you to soften your heart and break free from the haze that has you in its grips. There is no shame in now remembering that the role you are playing today is never the role called "hero" in our history books. And choosing ... choosing to soften a heart that has been hardened. It is the strongest thing a person can do, it is the thing that defines us as human.

Rafa and Zach, you have asked us to think about what it means to be both humble enough and courageous enough to reflect on who we are and to take responsibility for our actions, and I want you to know that these might be the most important questions we can ask ourselves and each other today. That they are also the questions that require us to give each other room to return in *teshuvah*, in repair and in this case, in softening.

The truth is that we do not know how to soften a heart. But we come from a tradition that says it is never too late. Moses went back to Pharaoh over and over again, until the very end. And even in the end, when it seems so clear that we escaped not because of a softened Pharaoh, but because we crossed the sea - EVEN then, our tradition does not give up on him. There's a midrash that wonders what ever happened to Pharaoh. And it posits that he didn't die in the Sea of Reeds with his army. Instead, it imagines that he escaped and ran away and became the King of Nineveh, from the story of Jonah the Prophet. The King of Nineveh who, when Jonah

was told to tell the Ninevites that they had to repent for their evil ways or God would destroy them - the king, who they imagine to be Pharaoh, does *teshuvah* and declares days of fasting and weeping in sackcloth to make amends. To soften his heart back to goodness.

One day, there will probably be arrests, and hearings, and accountability. But today, and urgently, the ability to stop this is in the hands and hearts of those whose boots are on the ground.

You have, together, woven a message for us here on this Shabbat that to change and to grow, to return to who we are - is not just possible. But it is human. And it is available to us all.

May your words find their way to those who need them most and may we find our way out of this chapter, through a softening, and across the sea toward freedom. Amen and Shabbat shalom.