

Dear Chavraya,

I find myself wondering this week of just how much damage one person can do. There are surely the eternal standards of evil against which all else is measured. To wait until reaching the threshold of tyranny and hate fully formed insures that we will get there. Seeking to act, the first challenge is to recognize the steps along the way, the expressions of hate, words and deeds that divide people against each other, incremental brutality expressed through laws and the removal of protections, laws that allow the vulnerable to be hunted and hounded, harshness of language and hardness of heart, the eclipse of compassion.

Touching us with amazement, life as it happens is so often reflected in the Torah portion of each week's reading, and the Torah portion is reflected in life, each a reflection of the other. Joining Torah and life, we are the living bridge. In this week's portion, *Parashat Va'era*, the enslavement of our ancestors grinds on, the people barely able to cry out as their only act of resistance. The plagues begin as God's effort to move Pharaoh. At first, whatever Moses does with the raising of his staff, the magicians of Egypt are able to do the same. In a veritable arms race, no thought is given to the intensified suffering of the people. It is the people, our own and the Egyptians who suffer most.

The plagues represent a moral problem as most often approached. And yet they reflect a process that is as much at work today as in the pages of Torah. Evil debases the oppressor and brings suffering to the oppressor's own people. Even as the Egyptians suffered so do we as Americans as we watch a leader who debases himself and all of us in the eyes of the world. As they plagues unfold, we watch, feeling pain even for the suffering of the oppressor. We are meant to feel such pain, reminded of a human bond that waits to be renewed. All along the way we wonder what we are called to do, how are we called to act. For the oppressed there is barely strength to breathe as they labor beneath the lash, wishing only to survive to greet another day in the hope it shall bring surcease. And Pharaoh continues to debase himself, his own arrogance bringing on each new calamity, new suffering for the oppressed and the continuing descent of his own people.

With a careful reading of the Hebrew, Pharaoh hardens his own heart through the sixth plague, and by then a dynamic is set in motion. There is a gradual shift, a passive form used through the early plagues: *va'ye'chezak lev paroland Pharaoh's heart remained stubborn*. There is a verbal change after the fourth plague, *va'yach'bed paro et liboland Pharaoh made his heart stubborn*. It is only after the sixth plague that the dynamic begins to shift. With the eighth plague, Pharaoh has locked into the way of destruction, hardening the reality all around as a reflection and consequence of his unbending and obdurate hate. With the eighth plague it is no long a passive process, no longer a hardening from within. Reality has now caught up with one person's arrogant cruelty. Reflecting a process all too real in human terms, only now does God harden Pharaoh's heart, an active verb telling of dynamics set in motion beyond Pharaoh, *va'y'chazek ha'shem et lev paroland God strengthened Pharaoh's heart*.

The heart of the leader has hardened now in the way that has been set, and we are left to ask of our own place in the drama, of what to do as we witness the violence unfolding over time. The rabbis in the Talmud (Kiddushin 20a) wrestle with this dynamic, suggesting that when a person engages in wrongdoing long enough, the wrong comes to seem as though *permissible to them/eleh na'aset lo k'heter*. For those affected by another's wrongdoing, the question is of when and how to respond. When the wrongdoer has the power to wreak devastation on the lives of other people and on the world all around, the question is all the more pointed. In approaching the Ten Plagues, the Slonimer Rebbe reminds us not think that this is *merely a story of the past/rak sippur ha'avar*. It is not about them and then, but about us and now.

As we seek the way of resistance and change, often finding our footing as we go, horrified each day anew, we are at times as our ancestors, barely able to cry out for shock and pain. In crying out, though, we remember our humanity, crying out for our own pain and for the pain of all who suffer most directly from the Pharaoh's edicts, for all who are maligned and marginalized. It is for us to stop the cruel cycle and the hurt that comes of a hardened heart. We are called to be *rachmanim b'nei rachmanim/compassionate children of compassionate ancestors*. To remember our calling is the first step. As the plagues of our time also flow from hardness of heart, then as the first act of resistance may we soften our own hearts. In a time of compassion's eclipse, may we act with compassion until goodness shines with all the brightness of a new day's sun.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor