

The Full Heart of Joseph or the Hardened Heart of Pharaoh? The Choice is Ours

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In my life, I have attended only one high school reunion. It was my 20th, and I have not been to one since. A bit of background is in order. In high school I was a football player first and a student second. Happy-go-lucky would be a generous description of my approach to life. When I thought about college, football played a role, but my decision was based on my desire to go to a school where no one knew me, and I would be free to rethink who I was and discover who I could be. So, shortly after arriving at Hiram College, I stopped playing football and applied myself to my studies in earnest. In time, I moved to Columbia and the Jewish Theological Seminary and found my way to Rabbinical School.

20 years later, I went to the reunion. I spent much of the night having people approach me and say things like, “You, a Rabbi? Come on!” Then having the same person bring someone else over and say to me, “Hey, Sieg, *tell him what you do for a living.*” I did so. He then turned to the other person and said, “See, I told you that you were not going to believe it.” It is not all that much of a surprise that I never attended another reunion.

Now, I really should not be that hard on my old classmates as the transformation was obviously significant. To give an idea of how radical this transformation from football player to Rabbi was for those who knew me in Cleveland, I offer this example.

While in Rabbinical school, I was home on Winter break and went to the local mall. There I saw one of my old Hebrew School teachers. Truth be told, I was quite a discipline problem, spending more time in the Rabbi’s office than in class. Well, I went up to my old teacher and said, “Mrs. Rothenberg, do you remember me?” She replied, or shall I say she sneered, “Of course, I remember you, Siegel!” Undaunted, I continued, “Well, Mrs. Rothenberg, you will be surprised to know that I am in Rabbinical School now!” To which she said, “Siegel, you were not funny then, and you are not funny now!” And with that, she walked away.

These are two cases when people hardened their hearts. They were unwilling to see the person I had become and focused their attention on the person that I was.

There are many people here tonight who have their own stories to tell. When others were all too willing to ignore the person standing directly before them and see the way they are living their lives in the present. Instead, they choose to harden their hearts and anchor you to an old, now unrecognizable version of yourself. I also suspect that many of us, maybe all of us, are guilty of doing this to someone else. In marriages, people evolve over time and change in different ways. Rather than seeking to know who the person has become, a spouse will sometimes say, “You know, you used to be more fun or spontaneous or romantic or idealistic,” or exclaim, “Here I thought I married a Democrat!” We know that friendships go through versions of this as well, with one friend saying to the other, “Well, haven’t **we** changed,” or, “what’s gotten into you?” Parents often fall into this trap, continuing to see their children as, well, children, and not independent adults who are making their own choices. Keeping someone in an old box without taking the time to find out who they are in the present will always impact relationships negatively.

Tonight, on this holiest of nights, when God examines our hearts, let us perform our own heart checkup and consider the choices that are before us. Let us also look anew, with open minds, at the people around us, acknowledge their changes, and learn to accept them as they are today, not as they were yesterday.

There are two figures in the Torah whose choices had a significant impact on the makeup of their hearts: one was Joseph and the other Pharaoh. One had every reason to harden his heart and chose to soften it, and the other had every reason to soften his heart and made the decision to harden it.

To say that Joseph had a difficult relationship with his brothers would be an understatement. Jealous of the favored son, enraged at Joseph's dreams that portrayed them bowing down to him, the brothers threw him in a pit and sold him to slave traders. In the wondrous tale of Joseph, he went from a slave to a prisoner in Pharaoh's jail, to the Grand Vizier of Egypt and the hero who saved Egypt from a famine. When his brothers appeared before him in need of food for the family, Joseph could have had his revenge for what they had done to him years ago. Instead, he chose to discover who his brothers had become in the 20 years since he last saw them, and not simply assume that they were the same people who treated him so badly. Joseph created a test to see if they would abandon Benjamin, the youngest of Jacob's sons. When Joseph saw that his brothers had not simply passed the test, but made Teshuvah for their past wrongs, the toughening that was developing around his heart gave way. Joseph broke into tears and revealed himself as their brother, and the family was united. The descendants of Jacob were now poised for redemption, and all of this was made possible because Joseph chose to not allow his heart to harden and remained open to the possibility that his brothers were not who he remembered them to be.

What a different path the Pharaoh of the Exodus chose in the time of Moses. Here, the most powerful man in Egypt was confronted by Moses and challenged by the creator of the Heavens and the Earth to let the Israelites go. Given the odds against him, Pharaoh would have been wise to accede to God's demand. But he made a different choice. In the face of the plagues that were decimating Egypt and its people, *Vayihazek Lev*, Pharaoh hardened his heart. It was only after Pharaoh showed himself to be completely irredeemable that God continued the process to ensure Pharaoh receive the maximum punishment. But the Torah is clear: it was Pharaoh who chose to turn his heart to stone and embrace the past over the possibilities of a new present. He refused to see the Israelites as anything more than slaves, rather than a people yearning to be free. A person who showed at every juncture that he had no intention of ever softening his position or his heart.

The path of Joseph or that of Pharaoh? Which path are you following in your life?

One of the most painful aspects of serving a community has been to witness families disassemble, apologies that go unheard, gestures of reconciliation that are ignored, and as a result, relationships that are severed. Sometimes, the issues do not even end with the grave, as families conduct separate *shivvas* because the issues in one generation have been passed down to the next. The hardened heart leaves human wreckage in its wake, from the time of Pharaoh all the way to the present age.

Nearly 1,000 years ago, Maimonides responded to these issues in his seminal work, the Mishnah Torah. In this law code, Rambam teaches how someone should respond to another person's apology, or act of contrition:

אָסוּר לְאָדָם לִהְיוֹת אַכְזָרִי וְלֹא יִתְפַּיֵס, אֲלֵא יְהֵא נוֹחַ לְרִצּוֹת וְקִשָּׁה לְכַעַס וּבִשְׂעָה שְׂמִיבְקֵשׁ מִמֶּנּוּ הַחוּטָא לְמַחֵל מִזְחֵל בְּלֵב שָׁלֵם וּבִנְפֶשׁ תַּפְצָּה. וְאַפְלוּ הֵצֵר לוֹ וְחִטָּא לוֹ הִרְבֵּה לֹא יִקָּם וְלֹא יִטָּר. וְזֶהוּ דְרָכָם שֶׁל זָרַע יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלִבָּם הַנִּכּוֹן

It is forbidden for a person to be cruel and refuse to be appeased. Rather, he should be easily pacified, but hard to anger. When the person who wronged him asks for forgiveness, he should forgive him with a complete heart and a willing spirit. Even if he aggravated and wronged him severely, he should not seek revenge or bear a grudge. This is the path of the seed of Israel and their upright hearts.

Maimonides bases his entire approach to Teshuva, the reconciliation that comes with apology and forgiveness, on the example of Joseph. When he uses the term *B'Lev Shalem*, with a full or complete heart and a willing spirit, he is thinking of Joseph's heart. It is worthy of note that the curators of our Mahzor use Lev Shalem, with a full heart, as the name of their edition.

Now, you might wonder, as I have, if Joseph is a special case, the exception and not the rule. How it is that Rambam would advise people to be so forgiving, even when the other has caused them pain?

There is no question that Maimonides understood that the alternative to softening your heart and forgiving is stiffening your heart, choosing not to hear the apology nor appreciate the change, and holding on to your pain and anger. He understood that there is nothing in between the two hearts, no middle ground: a passive heart is a hardened heart in the making. Maimonides fully appreciated the destructive nature of that choice. Rambam also understood the larger societal implications. That hardening our hearts to those closest to us will make it easier to do the same to those we do not know. There is a domino effect that goes far beyond any one relationship. This explains why Rambam ends with those words: וְזֶהוּ דְרָכָם שֶׁל זָרַע יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלִבָּם הַנִּכּוֹן *This is the path of the seed of Israel and their upright hearts.* The path that he is talking about, the *Derech*, is the way of Joseph, and it is the way of all Israel.

This was a lesson that was taught to me on a street in Jerusalem. A time in which the heart that was hardened was my own.

I am directionally challenged. Just ask my wife, Janet. And like most men, I do not readily admit when I am lost. In my Rabbinical School year in Israel, I was invited to Shabbat dinner in the French Hill area of Jerusalem. I took a bus to the stop that the family suggested. But, of course, I got lost walking to the apartment and found myself coming back to the same bus stop. The sun was setting, and I was getting frantic as the Sabbath was getting closer. Suddenly, there was an older man standing before me with his hand out asking for Zedakah. I was so beside myself that I simply said to him, "*Ayn li zeman acshav*. I don't have time right now," and turned away to wait for the light to change. Suddenly I felt a not so gentle tap on my shoulder. Turning around, there was the older man, and his face was beet red. He then delivered a tirade in Hebrew about the way that I acted toward him. "You dare wear a Kippah and treat an old man this way." He could have

just as easily been quoting Rambam, “*Zeh Lo Haderech*, this is not the way of our people!” But he did offer a passage from the Torah:

כִּי־יִהְיֶה֩ בְּךָ֨ אֲבִיּוֹן֙ מֵאַחַד֙ אֶחָיֶךָ֙ בְּאַחַד֙ שְׁעָרֶיךָ֙ בְּאַרְצֶךָ֙ אֲשֶׁר־יְהַנְיָה֙ אֱלֹהֶיךָ֙ נָתַן֙ לְךָ֙ לֹא־תִאֲמַץ֙ אֶת־לִבְּךָ֙ וְלֹא־תִקְפֹּץ֙ אֶת־גִּדְּךָ֙ מֵאַחֶיךָ֙ הָאֲבִיּוֹן׃

If, however, there is a needy person among you, one of your kin in any of your settlements in the land that your God יהוה is giving you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kin.

I learned an important lesson that day. I can still feel the shame of that moment.

The way of Joseph or that of Pharaoh: the choice is ours.

It is so easy to harden your own heart. There is always a reason. There is always an excuse to turn away, to walk by, to close our eyes. But consider for a moment what the impenetrable heart leaves in its wake: mistrust, misunderstanding, destroyed relationships, families in disarray, as well as the resonance on the larger world: the lost opportunities to create a just, caring society, or to choose to not help a country like Ukraine protect itself from an Evil Empire. Moral ambiguity and confusion are what you can rightfully expect when you choose the hardened heart.

I worry about the hardened hearts of Jews in Israel that go beyond the protests and the issues surrounding the judicial overhaul. Many are concerned the unity of our people is at stake in this moment.

I worry about the hardening of the hearts of American Jews, especially younger children who increasingly see Israel as a country that is less and less open to them, and a place that does not represent the Jewish values that they have been taught. A hardened heart makes it easier to just walk away, to ignore the call of family, the power of history.

Long ago the Prophet Ezekiel look at a divided Israel and offered this prophesy:

וְנָתַתִּי לָכֶם לֵב חָדָשׁ וְרוּחַ חַדְשָׁה אֶתֶן בְּקִרְבְּכֶם וְהִסְרֹתִי אֶת־לֵב הָאֲבָן מִבְּשָׁרְכֶם וְנָתַתִּי לָכֶם לֵב בָּשָׂר׃
And I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit into you: I will remove the heart of stone from your body and give you a heart of flesh.

May we see those words come to fruition in our time.

It is Yom Kippur, and we are called upon to make a choice of hearts: the *Imutz Halev of Pharaoh* or the *Lev Shalem*, that heart of Joseph. I pray that we will choose the heart of Joseph in the year to come and open the possibility of change and reconciliation:

- A heart that is open and not closed to the person standing before you today, trying to find a new path forward, and not the one you remember committing the wrong or changing along the way.
- A heart that will allow you to focus on the love you feel for the person in your life now, and less on the person you remember.

- A heart that will allow you to hear the cries of those in need, and respond because it is morally right.
- A heart that continues to love and appreciate the wonder and the importance of Israel, as well as the covenant of destiny that all Jews share.

Joanna Macy put it beautifully:

When we open our eyes to what is happening, even when it breaks our hearts, we discover our true size; for our heart, when it breaks open, can hold the whole universe.

Such is the heart of Joseph.

In a moment we will rise for the Vidui, followed by the great confessional prayer Al Het. Listen to how the Al Het begins *V'Al Het She'hatanu Lifanecha B'Imutz Halev*: and for the sin we have sinned against You in the hardness of the heart. All of the Al Het's follow from our choice of hearts. As we say those words, the tradition calls on us to bring our fist to our chest. One school of thought teaches that the reason for this practice is to emulate lashes, the ancient punishment. One can also argue that pounding on our chests is a Jewish way of checking your heart. Which heart beats inside you? Is it the open and forgiving heart of Joseph or the hardened heart of Pharaoh? Is it the heart that seeks to understand others or the heart that closes itself off? Let there be no confusion as to which we are asked to choose.

I don't think that we should only do this heart exam once a year. If you look inside of your Mahzorim, you will find a card that looks like this. It is for you to put in your purse or wallet and to take out occasionally during the year ahead and look at the two types of hearts represented and consider which heart is beating inside of you at that moment: the *Lev Shalem* of Joseph or the *Imutz Lev* of Pharaoh. Which heart are you choosing?

In the year ahead let us strive to have a *Lev Shalem*, a full, open, and forgiving heart. Let us see each day anew and embrace all of its possibilities. When the shofar blasts tomorrow night let us determine to go forward *Lev B'Lev*, heart in heart, in our families, communities, and countries; with our brothers and sisters in Israel, and the larger world. It is the Derech, the way, of the Jewish people since the time of Joseph.

We rise for Ashamnu: 235