

Pharaoh — Villain or Victim?

A D'var Torah on *Parashat Va-eira* (Ex. 6:2 – 9:35)

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“Va-eira el-Avraham el-Yitschak v’el-Ya’akov b’Eil Shadai ush’mi Adonai lo nodati lahem.”
“I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as Eil Shadai, but I did not
make Myself known to them by My name Adonai.”

Today, I want to attempt something unusual. I want to look at the Pharaoh as a sympathetic figure. He has been a villain, a foil of God, and even God’s ironic victim.

Why a villain? That’s obvious. He attempted a genocidal solution for the Israelite question. When the Israelites miraculously escaped the murder of their first born males, the Pharaoh punished the people with horrendous forced labor.

Why was Pharaoh a foil of God? God voluntarily stiffened or hardened Pharaoh’s heart (the ancients believed the heart is the seat of intellect) after each of the plagues was hurled against Pharaoh and Egypt so that Pharaoh, Egypt, and the entire known world would realize that the former were no match for the superior God of the Israelites. Mercy was not to be the fate of the Pharaoh; he was to anticipate Job’s fate in which wave after wave of pain and degradation were to wash over him, in the end a hapless mortal. It is true that Job was “blameless” and that the Pharaoh may have been arrogant, but we’ll look at Pharaoh’s culpability later.

Finally, why was Pharaoh an ironic victim? The Pharaoh attempted the destruction of Israel’s first-born sons, and the final plague, the plague that led to the capitulation of Pharaoh, caused the death of Egypt’s first born, including the first born of the Pharaoh himself. No mother or father, Egyptian or not, royal or not, can even consider the death of child without exquisite anguish. Yes, the slaughter of even the Pharaoh’s child makes us pity him.

At first glance, the Pharaoh gets what he deserved. Or, does he?

You can never know another person until you walk in that person’s shoes. You should therefore never criticize another person unless you walk in his or her shoes. When we walk in someone’s shoes, we accept their goals, responsibilities, desires, limitations and pain as our own.

Who was pharaoh? He was king of Egypt, and it was his responsibility to safeguard his people and his land from external invaders and internal

insurrections. He may not have wanted this responsibility, but it was his. He may have felt overwhelmed by the responsibility, but it was his.

He was told by his parents, the priests of Egypt and even the people of Egypt that he was a God, perhaps the most powerful of Gods. Yet, he knew that he was only a mortal who almost daily suffered the pains and limitations of other mortal men, so how then could he be a god? How then could he be so self-assured that he could protect his people? How then could he know who he was?

In the end, he was even unable to save his son. In the end, he should be pitied — not vilified, not condemned, not hated, but pitied!

It is so easy for us to hate the pharaoh. We have been carefully conditioned by our teachers through the millennia to hate him. But then, we have not dared to walk in his shoes. And yet, without awareness, have not all of us walked in those shoes?

All of us have readily believed what others tell us about who we are, where we should go, how we should get there? All of us have believed or want to believe the xenophobic and grandiose stories about why we are superior to another person or another people. All of us have believed that our stories grant us special privilege, including the privilege of not walking in another person's shoes. It is so easy and so safe to adopt this mindset.

So if we are suddenly see that we have been given the responsibility to take care of threatened people and that we have only limited knowledge and power to protect them, do we not at times rely on coercive power to accomplish these horrendous tasks? Of course we do! We who are or have been parents behave or have behaved in this manner all the time. How many of us, when threatened with the possible pain and suffering of our children, have not resorted to what our children will label as arrogant and coercive behavior. They can't go to the party because "I say so, and that's the end of it!" "I'm through talking about it; just do it." "You have to go to your room and don't come out until you're less arrogant." "How dare you talk to me that way?" "You don't understand what's for your own good." "I don't want you hanging around that kid; he's bad business." "You're damned right I won't give you the car; you drive too fast, and sometimes you drink beer." We act this way because we are scared to death something might happen to our children, and we have only limited and imperfect information (and power) to protect them. So, we draw a line in the sand and raise our voices a notch.

God created man who could harden his own heart or stick to his own guns or stick out his own upper lip in the face of threat. God created the hardening process to help man survive. Otherwise we would not be blessed

(?) with this instinctual psychological defense mechanism. God did single out Pharaoh to harden his heart as in a morality play. God hardened pharaoh's heart because he was a mortal man.

Yet, we pharaohs are always taught a Divine lesson. Sooner or later, our children must defy us. They eventually follow another one of God's Laws that we, as parents know but try to ignore. It is the Divine Law that requires all children to acquire their own experience and to perhaps acquire the knowledge that their loving but somewhat limited and apprehensive parents did not have the opportunity to learn. It is the Divine Law, sometimes known as the Law of individuation and maturation, that commands us parents to fight our children with tooth and nail, so that our children must and can succeed us, and in doing so, they prove they are strong and perhaps obtain a greater safety through their own efforts. It is the Divine Law that states that growth requires the destruction of that which is false or no longer effective.

So who was pharaoh? Just some guy, like the rest of us, who learned the hard way that there is a higher power, God (or Evolution or Nature), who demands through His Laws that we grow up. Growing up requires that we face the painful conclusion that we never have enough answers and power to perfectly protect even those people whom we most love, that we listen to other voices through God and His Laws that might better help us and those who follow us, and that just as this awareness is humiliating or humility producing, there is eventually a joy in the process of knowing and discovering God's Truths.