

In the book of Exodus, which describes the Israelites escape from Egypt to the land promised to them by God, there are eighteen references to God hardening the Pharaoh's heart. As you may recall the plot, God sends numerous afflictions to the Egyptians because they have kept the Israelites as slaves. They are tormented by such disasters as rains of blood, frogs, boils, etc.. Just as the Pharaoh is almost persuaded by each disaster to let the Israelites walk freely out of Egypt to the land of Canaan, God hardens his heart, he ignores his advisors and he continues to keep the Israelites in bondage.

Now this has always seemed like a peculiar story to me. Even if I could ignore the blood and the frogs, by the time the boils showed up, I think I would be paying attention, but not the Pharaoh. His heart is well and truly hardened, not to mention his head, and we are told that God is doing this to show his might and to punish the Pharaoh. Not to mention the Israelites who get caught in the cross-fire, an early case of collateral damage. Having one's heart hardened is, indeed, a great punishment because the whole thing ends with the death of Egyptian first born sons and, in a wild chase scene, the death of the Pharaoh and his army

This is one of the pivotal stories in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is the foundation myth of Israel. It was the story that inspired slaves in America, the story that inspired the Civil Rights movement. It is a story that sings of the desire for

freedom, for self-determination. We remember the songs of defiance, songs like, Let My People Go. We identify with the Israelites; we follow their story. We sometimes forget the Pharaoh and the blind stubbornness that led to his destruction, all brought about by an inscrutable God. It always seemed to me like the long way around to freedom. Why didn't God just make the Pharaoh give up, send the Israelis on their way, maybe even pack them a picnic lunch?

I should make it clear at this point that, as nearly as we can tell, this is a story. Archaeologists, Egyptologists, all sorts of scholars of the ancient world agree that the escape of millions of slaves and the death of a Pharaoh would have made enough of a splash to have been noted in the records that ancient Egyptians were already writing. The introduction of a completely new people into a neighboring country with the massive destruction of the natives of that country would have left physical evidence. Nothing like this appears to have happened. So that means that the Biblical story is a myth, an important myth. Like fiction, mythmakers can do anything with anybody's heart that they want to but events are usually constructed for a purpose, to make some kind of impact on the listener. So, why the hardening of the Pharaoh's heart?

It is tempting to think that this is simply a plot device. It heightens the suspense; it draws out the plot. And, it's true, it has kept our interest for a long

time, but that is usually not why elements of stories were used by ancient storytellers. If we hear a story well, we identify with all the characters in the story and we let their lives serve as examples, good or bad, for our own, so the hardening of the Pharaoh's heart says something to all of us, even if we will never wear the fabled crown of Egypt.

I had this story in mind when I read an article lately on the limits of human compassion. This was an interview with a psychologist, Paul Slovic, who has studied human reaction to mass suffering since the 1970's. He has come up with a number of depressing conclusions.

The first is that humans are not capable of responding to large numbers of disaster victims. He calls this effect psychic numbing and it kicks in remarkably quickly. It seems that psychic numbing begins when the number changes from one to two, because, as Slovic explains, "The feeling system doesn't really add; it can't multiply, it doesn't handle numbers very well. It's maximized at the number one: "Protect myself. Protect the person in front of me." People who are like us, near us, near in time, things like that, we get a strong, emotional response when they're in danger. We're compelled to help individuals. But the world's problems are too large to be solved one person at a time."

The second reason is the feeling of ineffectiveness. As he says, “That’s [the feeling] what you're doing just won't matter. That is influenced by the fact that you're only helping a portion of the problem. There are many people that you're not helping, and that sends bad feelings. The warm glow you get from helping gets hijacked by the negative elements in the picture.”

And, even if we do get through those barriers to compassion we face the fact that even the most heart wrenching story of an individual’s suffering only changes people’s attention for a short period of time. The story of the young child who drowned fleeing Syria resulted in an increase in donations for refugees, but only for a few weeks.

So we have some conditions under which humans find it natural to harden their hearts. There are other reasons as well. Some of them have to do with our own perception of ourselves and of our own deserts. Hardening of our hearts allows us to escape feelings of guilt—why *do* we have more than others? We like to think that we have more because of our innate worth, because we worked hard, because we were smart, but when we allow ourselves to feel compassion for others we come to question these assumptions. Could it be that we have more because we were simply fortunate? Could it be that we were born to the right people, or in the right circumstances? Could it be that we had opportunities, or were able to take

advantage of opportunities that others did not have or could not access? Could it be that we were given other advantages, as if by good fairies at our birth, such as certain kinds of abilities, talents, knowledge? There but for the grace, indeed.

Because of the idea that all our good fortune might not be completely our own doing, people respond with guilt and with defensiveness and those are uncomfortable feelings. One way to rid ourselves of them is to find fault with the people who seem to be asking for our help. If it is their own fault that they are in this predicament, then there is no reason for us to feel that we should have to help them. We shouldn't even have to feel badly for them. Feeling badly for others, when we feel there is nothing we can do, is one of the most uncomfortable feelings that we could have. And so we harden our hearts.

I was struck by this when I read Arlie Russell Hochschild's book *Strangers in Their Own Land*, a report on the disaffection by working class white people in Louisiana and their embrace of hard right politics. Among other reasons for their anger at liberals was their perception that liberals were asking them to feel sympathetic toward people perceived as undeserving, especially those different from them. Though this same group of people was generous to each other and to their neighbors, they resented the idea that they should have to care for people in distant places or people who lived different kinds of lives, refugees, welfare

recipients, African-Americans. They perceived them as the authors of their own misfortunes. I was mystified by this resentment, which was apparent even when no one was actually asking them for aid. They resented having to *feel* for others.

In many ways, I think this discomfort is a testament to human compassion, to its part in our hardwiring. We resent having just to feel pity. Pity hurts us because it asks us to stand in another's place and absorb some of the pain of that position, even if we never give out a dime. Pity, mercy, compassion, all take their toll on the human psyche, as much as if we were stacking sandbags or writing a large check. Hardening our hearts is one way we survive. It is part of human nature.

If it is part of human nature, then should people be blamed for this human response? Paul Slovic, the social scientist whose work I cited above, has a few answers to that. He says,

“That[it is part of human nature] doesn't mean we should accept it. That doesn't mean it's right. It means we need not to rely on our feelings, which don't get it, but we need to think in a more reasoned, careful, deliberate way about the realities beneath the data that we're getting. Then we need to design laws and institutions and procedures that are based on the deliberative thinking, not based on our feelings.

It's not enough to break through the numbing. You have to give people somewhere to go. You have to then have some action options that they can take. [You need to] fight against this false inefficacy feeling. Even partial solutions can save whole lives. Sure, it doesn't feel as good. Don't be misled by the fact that you can't do it all.”

And, in response to his own feelings of inefficacy, he realized “you don't have to solve every problem that you point to; the first step is to create a wider awareness of the problem, to get more people to recognize that we have to be on guard against numbing and all those feelings of inefficacy and so forth.”

At one point, he toyed with the idea that a machine might make more compassionate decisions than human beings and such a machine might be used for this purpose. I think this overlooks two problems. The first is that people build the machines and people tell them what to do. There is no deus ex machina. The second is that, even if we could build such a machine, it would not let us do the important work of human development and human evolution that is necessary if we are to go on living on this planet together.

It is true that hardening our hearts can be necessary. It is often necessary to set limits to help others when they are not able to help themselves. It can be necessary when to do otherwise is not prudent, not reasonable, not safe. It can be

necessary when we do not have the capability or the resources to help. It is true that we cannot do everything for everyone. Priorities are important. But that kind of practical heart hardening also has its limits. We need to avoid the kind of heart hardening that means we resort to blaming the people most at need because we are not able to help. Compassion and understanding can remain even when we don't have the means to give material aid. We are still able to listen to others, no matter how painful their stories. We are still able to understand others, even if their world is very different from ours. We are always able to give people worth and dignity, no matter what their circumstances. With generosity and humility, we can welcome people into our lives.

We sometimes overlook the fact that simply to conduct our lives in accordance with our principles is doing something. When we are willing to be models in our behavior toward accepting others, we may do much good even if it seems invisible.

I began with the example from Exodus. This story was a guide for the development of Judaism. The idea that God hardens people's hearts for their own destruction runs through much of the Hebrew Scriptures, especially in the prophets, and this theme continues on into the New Testament. We may or may not believe that our actions and attitudes are determined by a force beyond ourselves,



but clearly people throughout many ages have found that hardened hearts do not yield a blessing. Instead, it is a curse, not just on one person, such as a Pharaoh, but on an entire society. It is the path to destruction.

We sometimes do not count the cost of hardening ourselves against others. Those who do live in a world that few would envy. In place of the opportunity to know and enjoy a wider variety of people, there is suspicion. It is hard to live with others when every contact must be scanned for the potential for exploitation. It is a world of judgement, when all who judged also end by feeling judged themselves. It is a dark and cramped world, where people turn away from any escape from the cave they have created. How can people live in freedom and joy in such a world?

There is much of this fear and suspicion around now, much worry about other's motives, much concern that we not be played for fools. In such an environment, we construct prisons, real prisons and the prisons in our own minds. Prisons are very costly and, in the long run, they seldom work. They are only extended until all the world is a cage. In order to run the world of ancient Egypt, the overseers of slaves had to be very numerous. The Pharaoh had to be always on guard. This is not the kind of world in which we would be happy. It is a fragile world, one whose path always, eventually, leads to violence, to being swept away by the waves of anger it has caused.

What is left unsaid in this story is that, below the everyday life of the world, there are connections and consequences. As our world becomes ever more linked, ever smaller, the consequences of one act are felt very quickly in many places. We often talk of rights, but what is needed is not a world of competing rights and demands, a world that will only drain everyone and everything in it to nothingness, but a commitment to create a world in which human flourishing can happen. And, of course, ultimately human flourishing depends on the flourishing of all living things.

In order to create such a world, we need to listen to all voices, not just the pronouncements of the rich and powerful. We cannot create a world that helps all humans if we don't understand how things work. And, in order that all people may speak, freely and honestly, there needs to be trust. This is hard work. It doesn't involve ignoring our feelings but it does involve finding a way to manage them. Prayer, meditation, many methods have been given to us to find a way to understand tragedy without being drowned in its waves. Let us soften our hearts and, Egyptian and Israelite together, let us walk safely into the Promised Land.