

Softening Our Hardened Hearts

Have you seen any good movies recently?

What have you seen?

Did anyone like *The Shape of Water*?

I was thinking of *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*. How many of you have seen it? Wow – that's a lot.

Did you like it?

I have to say I loved it – great narrative, exciting drama, riveting action, compelling heroes, nice connections to the original movies, a few smiles, a few cute aliens and a powerful reminder that evil in our societies can cause great pain, especially to those on the margins.

So, a little spoiler alert for those still planning on seeing it, but the movie was released a month ago, so sorry....



One of the most important aspects of the film is that Han Solo and Princess Leia's son, Ben Solo, who has taken on the name Kylo Ren seems to have two competing inclinations: his inclination to the Dark Side and to the Light Side; or in our Jewish nomenclature: the *yetzer hatov* – the

inclination toward good or towards helping others and the *yetzer hara* – the inclination towards evil or towards helping one’s self.

The hero of this film: Rey is a powerful woman who shares a mysterious connection with Kylo Ren. At various points in the film, they can see into each other minds’ and even see each other. She senses that he is not merely consumed by the Dark Side, but is also attracted to the Light Side of the Force. Like his grandfather, Darth Vader, before him, there are two parts to Kylo Ren.

At one of the climaxes of the movie, he could have chosen the path of goodness, but his heart is closed and he and Rey go their separate ways.

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Similarly, at the opening of this morning's Torah reading, *Parashat Bo*, we learn that Pharaoh's heart is hardened; he is closed off to compassion, to changing his mind to letting the Hebrew slaves go free.



But the manner in which this occurs is problematic: the Torah states that God tells Moses that the Almighty has hardened Pharaoh’s heart. “*Kee ani hikhbad’ti et leebo v’et lev avadav* – because I, [God,] have hardened his heart and the hearts of his courtiers.” (Ex. 10:1)

This has always been a troubling notion to me. God is hardening Pharaoh's heart, seemingly removing some of his free will. That just seems wrong.

It turns out we are not the first ones to be troubled by this. The phrase “hardening of Pharaoh's heart” appears exactly 20 times in Exodus

– half of these are instances where Pharaoh hardened his own heart and in the other half, God causes this.

Most commentators see a progression here – Pharaoh closes himself off from compassion – hardening his own heart; and, once he has done that several times, he has become consumed by it and the notion that God caused this behavior, really means that Pharaoh is no longer actively choosing this path, he has become one with it, he no longer actively has to choose it.

The social psychologist and philosopher Erich Fromm explained it in this manner:

“Pharaoh's heart hardened because he keeps on doing evil. It hardens to a point where no more change or repentance is possible....The longer he refuses to choose the right, the harder his heart becomes ...until there is no



longer any freedom of choice left [for] him .” (*Etz Hayim*, p. 356)

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This can happen to any of us. We make a decision or feel something and we get stuck in that approach. Sometimes, it can be something mundane like completing a task that we really do not need to do at a time where something else is actually more important.

Sometimes it is something more significant like judging someone in a certain way, losing our ability to see them differently. Sometimes, this occurs to world leaders, clouding their ability to understand a situation in more nuanced manners.

Reminding us of how dangerous this is, the Torah is warning us about how easy it is to slip into this negative behavioral pattern.

As Ben Azzai teaches us in the Mishnah: *Aveirah goreret aveirah* – a negative act leads to more negative actions and on and on.

But the Torah is also offering another path; Pharaoh's hardened heart does not win the day; in fact, reading Exodus through this lens teaches us, that closing one's heart loses. Pharaoh and his army are decimated; the Hebrew slaves go free.

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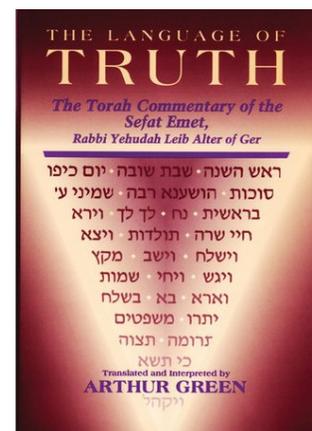
But, how do WE break out of these negative cycles or bad behavior or negative judgement or even destructive thought patterns that we can all get stuck in. How do we soften our own hearts.

The Torah offers us a way out.

Later in the *parashah*, the text reads: "You shall take a bundle of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and touch your lintel and two doorposts." (Ex. 12:22) This is the moment that the Hebrew slaves indicate that their homes should be passed over. The word the utilizes: *pasah* – like the word: *Pesah*, Hebrew for Passover.

Our rabbis in the Midrash explain that even though the hyssop is lowly, when it is joined together in a bundle – into an *agudah* – a group, their very lowliness will bring them help from the Holy One.

The Sefat Emet, the great Hasidic commentator, explains that even something small can effectuate a



change; in fact, changing from a hardened heart to an open-heart can often begin with a small step.

We can stop and pause.

We can listen.

We can meditate.

We can open ourselves up to another person.

We can think and reflect.

We can practice compassion.

That is not to say that this is easy; it is not.

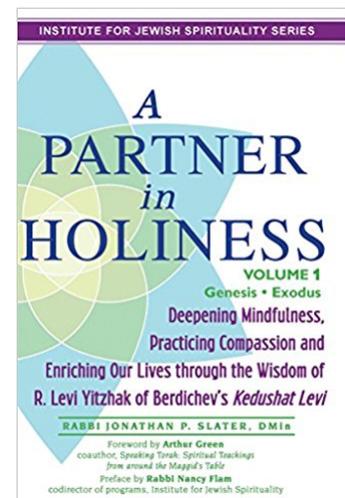
Too often, we believe that we can change by taking a pill or by engaging in some other almost-magical process of change. Real change does not work like that.

Moving from a hardened heart to open-hearted takes time and works better, with small steps.

As my teacher and our Glatzer scholar last year, Rabbi Jonathan Slater, teaches: we should stop and challenge ourselves “to look even more closely at our spontaneous reactions to events in our lives, to ask – even against our natural instincts and strongly held values – ‘What is true here? What is the wisest response in this instance?’” (*A Partner in Holiness*, I, p. 154)

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Whether we are trying to break away from the Dark Side or the *yetzer hara* or a hardened heart, our tradition offers us tools.



I see our entire practice of prayer to be one of moving beyond one's self, cultivating connections to others. That is why the *Shaliah Tzibbur*, the prayer leader should look around the *minyan*, look around the synagogue, and see the faces that she or he is leading in prayer. This helps the leader feel a sense of compassion – I try to do this when I recite the *Mi Shebeirakh* prayer for those who are ill, I look at each person holding them with a sense of compassion, thinking about their loved one who is in need of healing.

And when I lead the Mourner's Kaddish, I look at each mourner, sending them my love and support. That empathy moves to a place of open-heartedness and compassion, to the *yetzer hatov*, or in the Star Wars terminology, towards the Light Side of the Force.

Perhaps my favorite moment of this occurs in the evening service where the congregation initiates the prayer service before the leader begins – an usual way of beginning. And the opening words focus on God's being compassionate. The message is that God is *rahum*, merciful, and we should be that way too.

Once those who have gathered have acknowledged that they are turning away from any closed-hearted place to a place of compassion, then we have created a space in which the community can pray and then, only then, can the leader begin the *Ma'ariv* service.

Rahum is from the word, *rehem*, meaning womb – the paradigmatic place of nurturing and compassion, a feminine word of support.

Every evening, as we are letting go of the day, with its inevitable stressors and difficulties, we pause to move ourselves away from that

negativity, from that harshness, from that hardened heart back to compassion.

And by literally practicing that in the *minyan*, with a community of others, we strive to bring that into our lives.

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Whether it is Pharaoh, Kylo Ren, today's modern Pharaohs, or even ourselves, let us not remain stuck in the narrow spaces of the Dark Side, or the negative thought patterns, but utilizing our tradition and even small steps, move to *rah^hamim*, to a world of compassion, softening our hearts.