

CHOICES

A commentary on *Parashat Va'eira*

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Parashat Va'eira recounts the steps leading up to the ten plagues, and the first seven plagues. It is a *Parasha* full of drama and characters (boo the evil Pharaoh! Cheer as Aaron helps Moses overcome his stutter!). Apart from a brief recap of Moses' and Aaron's ancestry, it is a linear story moving through the plagues.

Parashat Va'eira, usually read towards the end of January / early February, seems to have clear resonances with Holocaust Memorial Day (27 January).

Since the time of Joseph, Hebrews had lived successfully in the Goshen neighbourhood. They maintained a distinct identity yet were part of the Egyptian cosmopolitan 'melting pot'. But by the time of *Parashat Va'eirah*, they had had rights taken away and had been living as slaves.

Reading it close to Holocaust Memorial Day, we recall the Nazi policies which, from 1933 onwards, systematically withdrew rights from Jewish Germans, moved them into defined areas, and forced them to be slave labourers in ghettos and concentration camps – adults and children, just as in Egypt in the period

of *Parashat Va'eira*. Ordinary

Germans too often turned a

blind eye, were inactive due to fear or apathy, or even actively benefitted.

Yet these resonances are illusory. In the *Parasha*,

G-d is the main character;

we know the plagues occur

at His design. Each time Pharaoh

'hardens his heart' and rejects Moses' petition, G-d sends another plague, through Moses and Aaron seemingly performing magic: a wand-like staff raised across the Nile causes frogs to swarm out; throwing soot into the air leads to painful boils.

In this one *Parasha*, almost every aspect of Egyptian

life is affected. The land itself suffers: the Nile turns to blood; vegetation is destroyed by fierce hail. Homes invaded by frogs in every corner and cooking bowl. Bodies subject to lice and painful boils. Wild animals roam the land. Cattle succumb to disease.

But though the *Parasha* is full of activity, it is curiously silent about how Egyptians, and how Israelites, felt.

Were Egyptians resentful (and terrified?) of their capricious, arrogant leader, bringing plagues upon his people? Or furious with the Israelites and their G-d, and standing four-square behind Pharaoh? Did the Israelites feel that Moses was only jeopardising their precarious lives of slavery still further? Or were they full of hope that freedom was around the corner?

The only glimmer of feeling is of Pharaoh's. We hear, over and over, that G-d '*hardened Pharaoh's heart*' and Pharaoh '*hardened his heart*'. This could mean two different things – one with Pharaoh subject to G-d's actions and with no free will, and one with Pharaoh taking action himself.

Rabbi Hertz suggests that each time Pharaoh obstinately refuses to agree to Moses, he entrenches himself further, making it less likely he will be able to listen to G-d and change his position. Pharaoh's own actions of refusal result in the curtailment of his own free will – he boxes himself in and is less able to choose to accede to Moses' request.

Perhaps this is where the resonance is greatest. How many ordinary people in 1930s Europe '*hardened their hearts*'? Each incremental step of oppression ignored or tolerated, yet building to the unprecedented attempt to destroy the Jewish community in its entirety. Each time a civil or human right is withdrawn or denied to a group of people, those unaffected have choices. Yet choosing not to challenge – often for 'good' reasons - makes it so much easier not to challenge the next time. Until there comes a time when we don't even notice or perhaps don't care.

Underlying the drama of *Parashat Va'eira* is the insistent repetition: Pharaoh hardened his heart. Perhaps this is the real warning of the plagues.