



# Pharaoh and the Oobleck

## Topic

Passover

## Grade Level(s)

5-8

## Goals for the Lesson/Activity

### Students will:

- Examine how Pharaoh's heart hardened with each plague
- Explore why it is difficult to give in regardless of the severity of the consequences
- Evaluate when one should cut one's losses as opposed to continuing to fight

## Materials needed

- Oobleck ingredients
  - Corn starch
  - Water
  - Food coloring (optional)
- Buckets, small bins, kiddie pool, or other vessel to hold oobleck
- Drop cloths
- Stubbornness Texts (available to download)
- Stubbornness Sheet (available to download)
- *Chumashim*

## Technology needed

- Devices to shoot videos (optional)

## Background for Teachers

In the first encounter between God and Moshe related in the Torah, God tells Moshe that Pharaoh will refuse to send out *B'nei Yisrael* (the Israelites) from Egypt when Moshe goes to him. In fact, God informs Moshe that God will harden Pharaoh's heart and that Pharaoh will refuse to send out *B'nei Yisrael* (*Shemot* 4:21). Later, as God begins to send plagues upon Egypt, the text of the Torah relates that Pharaoh's heart hardens/strengthens as each of the first five plagues come. Only after the sixth plague (*Shemot* 9:12) does the language change to indicate that God is the one doing the hardening. However, from there forward, the Torah continues to indicate that God is the one doing the hardening.

How to understand this aspect of the narrative is a problem that has plagued commentators for centuries. How can God take away Pharaoh's free will? How can God take away the opportunity for Pharaoh to do *teshuvah* (repent for his wrongdoing)? How can the merciful and compassionate God be so cruel as to prevent Pharaoh from sending out *B'nei Yisrael* and to continue demolishing Egypt and Egyptians?



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One possible solution given to this problem is that, in fact, God simply reinforces Pharaoh's natural tendency to harden his own heart (Seforno on *Shemot* 4:21). Another possibility is that God does not actively harden Pharaoh's heart. Rather, Pharaoh continues to harden his own heart; but he does so as a direct result of God sending the plagues. That is to say that either Pharaoh has already made his heart so hard that he cannot go back (Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance, various, especially 6:3) or Pharaoh steels himself even more each time because he does not want to give into God no matter the consequences.

### **Oobleck**

Oobleck is a substance (based on the substance in the Dr. Seuss book *Bartholomew and the Oobleck*) that is a liquid when left at rest but a solid when pressure is applied to it. Thus, it will run through one's fingers; and objects at rest will fall into it. However, if people walk on it, squeeze it, etc. it will harden and push back.

Note: Although God does harden Pharaoh's heart one more time after *B'nei Yisrael* leave Egypt so that Pharaoh chases after them, this lesson focuses on the plagues and ends with the tenth plague, the death of the firstborn of Egypt. Also, this lesson focuses on one aspect of God's assessment that Pharaoh will refuse to send out *B'nei Yisrael*. The issue of whether one can have free will if God already knows how one will choose is a separate discussion.

### **Prepare in Advance**

#### [Make oobleck.](#)

- Pour 2 parts corn starch into a bowl.
- Pour 1 part water into the bowl.
- Add food coloring if desired.
- Mix.
- Remember that oobleck resists pressure so be careful about burying objects, hands or feet in it.

Put drop cloths around the room to catch stray oobleck.

### **Description of Activities**

1. Pass out buckets/bins with oobleck and let students play with it.
2. Ask students what they notice about the oobleck as they try to manipulate it. They should notice that it is runny when they let it be but that it hardens when they apply pressure to it.
3. Divide students into pairs and hand out the Pharaoh's Heart source sheet. Students explore what happened to Pharaoh's heart after each plague.
  - a. Students should notice that Pharaoh hardens his own heart in the first five verses while God plays a role in the hardening afterwards.



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4. Discuss as a class why God hardening Pharaoh's heart might be problematic. How do students feel about the amount of control that God seems to exert over Pharaoh here?
5. Explain that this issue is one that has plagued Jewish thinkers for millennia.
  - a. One possible solution is that the language of God hardening Pharaoh's heart is a way conveying that Pharaoh is being stubborn (i.e. the more God pushes Pharaoh, the more Pharaoh pushes back) even in the face of great destruction to his land and people.
6. Ask students to reflect on a time that they refused to back down about an issue even when they sensed that bad things would happen as a result. Students use the Stubbornness Sheet to focus their thoughts.
7. Students share their reflections if they are comfortable.
  - a. **Tech Option:** Students shoot videos of themselves telling their stories.
8. Pose the question, "How might people be similar to oobleck?"
  - a. Consider how oobleck becomes hard when force is applied but is malleable when no force is applied. Are there people like this? Are all people? What does this metaphor say about how to relate to other people?
9. Discuss: In what kinds of situations might it be good to be stubborn? In what kinds of situations might it be detrimental to be stubborn? Why do you think there is a stigma to giving in?

### Differentiation Options

Knowing that students learn in a variety of ways and modalities, the following options are provided to adjust the above lesson to meet the unique needs of your learners.

#### ***For learners who need more assistance***

- Students listen to recordings of relevant *pesukim* (verses) instead of reading.
- Students use speech recognition to record their ideas.

#### ***For learners who need extension opportunities***

- Students use *Chumashim* to explore the context of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart.
- Students explore what happens after *B'nei Yisrael* leave and how it fits with the rest of the narrative.