

Pharaoh's heart is one of the main protagonists of this parashah. It is hard and unyielding, leading Pharaoh to decisions that prove disastrous for him and his people. Three Hebrew words are used to describe this hardness: First, and only this one time, קָשָׁה (*kasheh*): hard, strict, severe – the word that is also used to describe the Israelites' condition of slavery. The second word is חָזָק (*chazak*): strong, steadfast. After seeing Aaron's staff turn into a serpent, and after the first plague, Pharaoh's heart remains steadfast (*va'yechazeik leiv Pharaoh*). The third word is כָּבֵד (*kabeid*): heavy, stubborn. What is the difference between these words? *Kasheh* makes it clear that the harsh conditions of the Israelites' enslavement have been brought about by Pharaoh himself. With this fact established, it is unnecessary to use this word again. *Chazak* is primarily a positive attribute. Upon finishing each book of the Torah, we say *chazak, chazak, v'nitchazeik*. Be strong, be strong, and we will be strengthened (encouraged). In his own mind, and in the gullible minds of his loyal followers Pharaoh's resistance to Moses and Aaron is indeed positive. He is the valiant champion of the status quo, the only correct way. Anyone who believes otherwise is not only wrong but is also a potential threat. And that leads us straight to the third word, *kabeid*, which is also largely a positive attribute meaning weighty, or honorable. It is also the word for liver, a vital organ, and the heaviest and densest in the human body. Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish establishes a wonderful connection in Midrash Shemot Rabbah: "...that God has made his heart like a liver into which even if boiled a second time no juice enters; so also, was the heart of Pharaoh made like a liver, and he did not receive the words of God ..." Pharaoh's heart has become impenetrable, i.e., impervious to outside influence.

But was Pharaoh acting on his own accord, or was he simply a puppet controlled by HaShem? Discussed through the ages, this is indeed a thorny question. If Pharaoh has no choice, he is the pitiful, innocent victim of a cruel cosmic joke. But before we shed too many tears, let's remember that we are all endowed with the knowledge of the difference between good and evil, those opposing forces that guide the behavior of every human being. We have unlimited freedom of choice, but the ability to perceive the long-range consequences of our choices is often tragically skewed. Repetitive succumbing to the pull of the evil inclination forms destructive habits, but how do we know when we are on this slippery slope? Some people are intrinsically strong and gifted with a healthy sense of self-reflection, while others, for a wide variety of reasons, are weak and easily led by their emotions. The question of nature versus nurture underlies all forms of addiction. Many people drink alcohol, use tobacco or marijuana, surf the internet, and play games, but few become addicted. The interplay between genetic predisposition and environment is the subject of much debate and research. Narcissism is both a core component of addiction, as well as a form of addiction in itself. The German word for *narcissism* is *Selbstsucht* (addiction to self). Narcissists are driven by a grossly inflated sense of importance and an obsessive need for attention and admiration, rendering them incapable of empathy. Viewed in this light, Pharaoh seems to be a textbook case of narcissistic personality disorder. After the first plague he simply turns away and goes inside (his heart is strengthened – *va'yitchazeik*); after the second he promises to let the Israelites go and then reneges (he causes his heart to be hardened – *v'hachbeid*); after the third he ignores the advice of his sorcerers (his heart is strengthened – *va'yitchazeik*); after the fourth he once again breaks his promise to let the Israelites go (he hardens his heart – *vayachbeid*); after the fifth he no longer pleads for relief (his heart hardens of its own accord – *vayichbad*). Led by his emotions, Pharaoh is increasingly resistant to any form of persuasion. It is noteworthy that after the sixth plague it is HaShem who strengthens Pharaoh's heart – (*vayichazeik Adonai et leiv Pharaoh*). Based on what we know today about the human psyche, Pharaoh obviously has a predisposition for narcissistic behavior. The biblical description of narcissism is hardening of the heart. No, he is not the powerless victim of HaShem's omnipotence, he is the pitiful victim of his own weakness. HaShem's only act is to allow nature to run its course. Throughout the ages people just like him have caused untold tragedy. Narcissism radiates outward in concentric circles from the microcosmic to the macrocosmic. Not all narcissists have the power of a Pharaoh, but every narcissist has the power to wreak havoc on his/her own circle of influence. Fortunately, the ripple effect is usually quite small, but the damage is real and can persist over generations. In our own lifetimes we have witnessed many instances on all levels. We are witnessing some appalling examples right now, and we must take warning from them. Our scriptures warn us not to harden our hearts – i.e., to open ourselves to the needs of others. Every bad choice hardens the heart, while every good choice softens it, and with every bad choice freedom to change is diminished. Our world is in a dangerous place right now. May we all strive to keep our hearts soft and our minds open in order to participate in the important work of *tikkun olam* – of healing the world.

Shabbat shalom!