

Pharaoh's heart is one of the main protagonists of this parashah. It is increasingly 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, קָשֶׁה (*kasheh* – hard, strict, severe) is also used to describe the Israelites' condition of slavery. The second word is חָזַק (*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*). The third is כָּבֵד (*kabeid* – heavy, stubborn). *Kasheh* makes it clear that the harsh conditions of the Israelites' enslavement were imposed by Pharaoh himself. With this 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. Any opposition is not only wrong, it is sacrilegious, treasonous, and threatening. This is the fundamentalism that underlies all forms of religious and political zealotry, to this day. And that leads to the 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 13: "The Holy One of Blessing rendered his heart like this liver, which, when it is cooked twice, becomes hard. Thus, Pharaoh's heart became like that liver, and he did not accept the words of the Holy One of Blessing ..." But is Pharaoh acting on his own accord, or is he 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 our tradition rejects this premise for a variety of reasons based on one core truth: We are not helpless pawns; we have unlimited freedom of choice. However, the ability to perceive the long-range consequences of our choices, or even care, can be tragically skewed. Repetitive submitting to the pull of the evil inclination forms destructive habits, and it is difficult to know when the point of no return has been reached. 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, gamble, and play games, but few become addicted. The interplay between genetic predisposition and environment is the subject of much debate and research. It is noteworthy that the German word for narcissism *Selbstsucht* (addiction to self) recognizes that narcissism is both a core component and a particular form of addiction. Narcissists are driven by a grossly inflated sense of importance and an obsessive need for attention and admiration, which makes them incapable of empathy. Viewed in this light, Pharaoh is a textbook case of narcissistic personality disorder. After the first plague he turns away and goes inside (*va'yitchazeik* – his heart is strengthened); after the second plague he promises to let the Israelites go and then reneges (*v'hachbeid* – he causes his heart to be hardened); after the third plague he ignores the advice of his sorcerers (*va'yitchazeik* again); after the fourth he again breaks his promise to let the Israelites go (*vayachbeid* again); after the fifth he no longer pleads for relief (*vayichbad* – his heart hardens of its own accord). Driven by his emotions, Pharaoh is increasingly resistant to any form of persuasion. Finally, after the sixth plague HaShem strengthens Pharaoh's heart (*vayichazeik Adonai et leiv Pharaoh*). But he is not the powerless victim of HaShem's omnipotence, he is the unfortunate victim of his own weakness. HaShem's only act is to allow nature to run its course. Long before we had a word for it, our sages identified Pharaoh's behavior as a habit he could no longer break, i.e., addiction. Pharaoh is the tragic example of what happens when a person repeats a harmful behavior until it becomes a habit they can no longer break. Rigidity (*kasheh*) begins the cycle with his first defensive refusal. This leads to *chazak* – the continual repetition that eventually forms a habit. Finally, *kabeid*, emotional numbness, sets in and Pharaoh is trapped in a self-perpetuating cycle that spreads destruction and ends up destroying him as well. 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. There are some appalling examples on the world stage right now. Our Torah and sages see Pharaoh as the prototype of corrupted power: He cannot hear truth, he cannot imagine being wrong, he cannot tolerate dissent, he cannot empathize, and he cannot change. Pharaoh is a mirror held up to every generation and every human heart with a warning that is as urgent now as it was in Moses' time. We do not repeat Pharaoh's story simply to condemn him; we do so to recognize pharaoh tendencies not only in others, but also in ourselves. Our world is in a dangerous place. We need soft hearts and strong resolve to resist despair and stand against cruelty and injustice.

Shabbat shalom!