

Vaera

The grand story of our birth as a nation presents an elemental question. That question is, plainly expressed, “What’s going on with Pharaoh?” Doesn’t he get it? Can’t he take a hint and see it’s not working out? Water to blood, frogs all over the place, pestilence, hail... What does it take to convince this man that it’s just time to let go, lick your wounds, cut your losses, and give up. Just let them go! Why this long painful process?

There are many cute answers we could come up with to this question: Pharaoh’s a fool and can’t get off that easily (the Losers-Never-Win Approach), Pharaoh’s ego got in the way (the Freudian Approach), Pharaoh just couldn’t deal with change (Systemic Approach), and lastly, only through reinforcing stimuli of about 10 major extraordinary events Pharaoh could be conditioned to behave properly in response to national devastation (the Behavioral Approach). Ultimately, this question, in one form or another, is asked by all the great commentaries and midrashim, yielding many beautiful and insightful answers, most based on a combination of Pharaoh’s stubborn, wicked desires and ultimately G-d’s influence on Pharaoh’s will (the True But Complicated Approach). Let’s take a closer look at this latter approach.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the highly-esteemed leader of 19th-century German Jewry, makes a profound insight into the multiple forms of “hardening of the heart” that recur with Pharaoh. He points out that there are three different words in Hebrew used to describe this phenomenon: (קשה, כבד, קשה, kashed, and chazak). Literally, they mean: hard, heavy, and strong. He expounds on their meaning, giving us an insight into Pharaoh’s internal struggle to resist letting the Israelites go, and perhaps it also provides us with a key message on the proper conduct of our own hearts in relating to the words and messages that Hashem provides us with through the Torah and our lives.

קשה kashe – Hard

The first expression is literal hardening. Rabbi Hirsch describes this as an inability to receive impressions. Pharaoh’s heart was subconsciously closed off to external stimuli. Sometimes a person can be so emotionally blunt and inaccessible that the words and experiences around them, which clearly demonstrate a glaring lack of success, cannot penetrate and have no effect. His heart is hard and steadfast on its path, but that path is the wrong one. Pharaoh was unwilling to allow the obvious message of the miracles going on around him to make any impression on his paradigm on life.

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We also find this trait in ourselves. When we feel so sure of ourselves and what is best for us, we can be blind to the messages of both the Torah and the reality around us, precluding these factors from influencing our decisions. How can we avoid this trait? By softening (or opening) our hearts. We achieve this by making an effort to allow external reactions and events to influence us. In particular, this means allowing the supremacy of the Torah, the word of G-d, to have an impression within us and impact our choices in life.

כבד קאבד – Heavy

A heavy heart is accessible but unable to connect with our actions. Rabbi Hirsch further describes being heavy as an inability to move or set one's self in motion. We can recognize what's right or wrong, but we cannot get ourselves to act on it. Pharaoh understood that he must let the Hebrews go, but he was unable to connect that understanding to any concrete action.

The antidote to becoming ineffectual through such an emotional disconnect is to make our hearts lighter, by strengthening the connections among our intellectual impressions, our emotions, our decisions and our actions. We can soften our attitude toward change, toward doing what's right, and allow our good hearts to guide our actions. Through more self-awareness, and by having our mind guide our actions, we can be true to ourselves and achieve what is right from the inside out.

זיין חזק – Strong

This is the most painful of the three. This kind of “hardening” expresses itself as pure apathy to everything going on around us. When such a hardened person sees suffering around them, they have no connection nor concern towards it except for how it affects their own needs and desires. Pharaoh saw his nation under duress and in an existential crisis, yet he would not allow this horror to affect his decisions.

We must guard against this trait. How can we accomplish that? By making extra efforts to care for, and be concerned for, the welfare and needs of those around us, we can open ourselves up to sympathy and indeed empathy for others' feelings and needs. First, we must make a cognizant decision to empathize with others regarding the challenges and suffering they experience in life. Then we must make concrete efforts to help them, and relieve them of their anguish.

Sometimes the greatest lessons for the light comes from the depths of darkness. From the teachings of our Holy Torah and the descriptions of Pharaoh, one of the most wicked of men to exist, we can learn to set ourselves on the right path for a life of soft-, light-, and warm-heartedness to all.

Shabbat Shalom

