

And Pharaoh's Heart Was Heavy

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Parshat Va'era

The Hebrew text uses three distinct words, three distinct linguistic roots, in referring to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart – חזק, קשה, and כבד. The underlying meanings of these three roots are, respectively, *strong*, *hard*, and *heavy*.

The first reference to כבד, to Pharaoh's heart being *heavy*, follows immediately after Moses and Aaron's first appearance before Pharaoh.

Pharaoh hardened [יחזק, *yehезak*, strengthened] **his** [own] **heart and did not listen to them** [Moses and Aaron, although the Hebrew word, by the change of one vowel, can mean "G*d," but that will be a subject for another lesson], **just as the Eternal had said. Then the Eternal said to Moses, "Hardened** [כבד, *kaved*, heavy] **is Pharaoh's heart, in that** [the Hebrew word *l'ma'an* carries an implication of causality] **he refuses to let the people go."** (Exodus 7:13-14)

Pharaoh has refused to heed G*d's message conveyed by Moses and Aaron, rigidly strengthening his heart against G*d's instruction, and G*d responds by describing Pharaoh's heart as "heavy."

The ancient Egyptian religion taught that, when an individual died, the person's heart would be weighed by the gods to determine its character. One who was faithful in following the gods was judged to have a "light" heart; one who had offended the gods was judged to have a "heavy" heart.

And so, after Pharaoh refuses to heed G*d's command, G*d judges Pharaoh in Pharaoh's own terms, as having a "heavy" heart! It is Pharaoh's act of refusing to let the people go that made his heart "heavy."

Where, then, are our hearts? Hard, rigid, and heavy? Or gentle, flexible, and light?

To the lightening of our hearts may we soon be led.

Shabbat Shalom.

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