

"And I will harden the heart of Pharaoh." (7:3)

We are taught that every person has before him two paths: the path of good and life, and the path of evil and death. One of our prime tenets of faith is that we have the freedom to choose between these contrasting paths. Pharaoh was evidently so evil that this opportunity was denied to him. There is a divergence of opinions among the commentaries regarding this denial.

A unique insight offered by *Horav Simcha Zissel, z.l.*, of Kelm sheds light upon this problem. He explains that by increasing Pharaoh's obstinacy, Hashem was revealing the true character of evil-doers who defy Hashem, despite their awareness of Him. As Hashem delivered the plagues, Pharaoh was slowly developing an intimate and profound understanding of the awesome powers of the Almighty. In order to maintain the balance of free-will, Hashem had to harden Pharaoh's heart.

Pharaoh's profundity was balanced by his impudence. *Horav Yaakov Kamenetsky, z.l.*, expanded on this idea in a lecture to *Torah* educators. He explained that the *Torah's* concept of free-will does not give one license to blindly follow his natural instincts, unconstrained by Hashem's protective counterbalancing influence. To have freedom of choice means to maintain a perspective of balanced alternatives. Where man is subject to his inherent passions, Hashem provides a force to counteract this coercion. If man were not to have Divine assistance, he could not resist the constant temptations catalyzed by his animalistic instincts.

Horav Kamenetsky stated that *Torah* educators are Hashem's vehicle for providing Jewish children with this counterbalance. Jewish education provides the opportunity for a Jewish child to study *Torah* and live a *Torah* way of life, enabling him to experience the balancing alternative to base instincts. Increasing Pharaoh's obstinacy was a favor to him, for it restored his free-will. Jewish education, condemned by the spiritually ignorant as a form of religious coercion, provides in fact, a necessary assurance of a child's spiritual freedom. To deprive a Jewish child of his or her right to a *Torah* education is tantamount to withdrawing his or her freedom of choice.