

PHARAOH

by Rabbi Berel Wein

Pharaoh and Egypt sustain a slew of plagues and misfortunes as they are vividly recorded in this week's parsha. There are those among the Egyptian leadership who waver and realize that Egypt is lost if it does not allow the Jews to be freed from slavery and to leave Egypt. But Pharaoh is still not convinced. His heart is not only hardened but it is unalterably predisposed to refuse the requests of Moshe.

The Talmud teaches us that "even when standing at the gates of Hell, wicked people will remain unrepentant." Admitting error, changing one's predisposition on important matters, and reversing course - these are very difficult challenges for people to deal with. Our ego gets in the way of our sense of reality. It prevents us from dealing wisely and practically with circumstances as they are now, not as they once were, nor as what we wish them to be.

Power always brings with it an inflation of ego. Pharaoh cannot change course because doing so would deflate his ego and weaken his perceived power base. His strength, his power, is really his ultimate weakness. The great Pharaoh cannot admit his past mistakes for then he would no longer feel himself to be the great Pharaoh.

He is the victim of his own position and the power that comes with it. Ordinary people, even his own advisors, can admit to error and change course and policies. Not so the great Pharaoh, who deems himself to be a god and above all other humans in his realm. The more arrogant and prideful a person is, the less likely it is that he or she will allow reality to alter preconceived ideas and policies. Pharaoh is trapped in the web of his own making.

Moshe's observation of the folly of Pharaoh and of his personality flaw constitutes a great personal lesson and plays a significant part in the development of Moshe as the greatest teacher and leader of Israel. Witnessing Pharaoh's arrogance and display of egocentric behavior drives Moshe to become the exact opposite type of person - the most humble of all human beings.

The Torah records for us instances when Moshe admits error and reverses decisions previously enunciated. Moshe's humility is legendary and his sense of real and practical judgment, of circumstances and of the Jewish people for good or for better, is the hallmark of his leadership of Israel for the next forty years. Once ego is tempered and dealt with, true personal growth and concern for national welfare will undoubtedly follow.

The contrast between Pharaoh and Moshe can therefore not be any clearer. Unlikely as it may

sound, the meek and modest will in the long run always triumph over the arrogant and prideful. This is a life lesson that the Torah and Judaism impart to us in a repetitive fashion. We all should learn from Pharaoh's faulty personality and behavior. And we should all certainly attempt to emulate the character and nobility of the trait of modesty and humility as exhibited by our great teacher and leader, Moshe.

Shabat shalom

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