

## This Week In Torah Bo

There is a certain irony when it comes to the Hebrew language. The Hebrew root, or *shoresh*, conveys certain understanding and interconnectedness that may leave one scratching their heads. Take for example the word from the opening verse of our *parasha*: “Then יהוה said to Moses, “Go to Pharaoh. For I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his courtiers, in order that I may display these My signs among them, and that you may recount in the hearing of your child and of your child’s child how I made a mockery of the Egyptians and how I displayed My signs among them—in order that you may know that I am יהוה.” The verb for hardening the heart is *cuf-bet-dalet* which is the same root for words associated with “heavy” and with “honor.” What do the words “heavy”, hardening the heart” and “honor” have in common that they all have the same *shoresh*?

Let’s examine this—the root *Kbd* appears in the TaNaCH 376 times. Twice, its meaning is literally "heavy", as in the I Samuel 4:18, where Eli is said to be "heavy", and in II Samuel 14:2 where Absalom’s hair is described as "heavy". However, the dominant usage of the root throughout most of the text is "heavy", with a meaning negative in connotation.

Reviewing my notes from when I was in seminary, my teacher Dr. Stanley Nash z”l noted that the negative usage of “heavy” fell into 3 categories: "insensitivity or dullness of the human body," so that in our *parasha*, *kbd* is used to describe the hardening of the Pharaoh’s heart; "severity", in terms of "slavery or famine; and "burden. The use of *kbd* as a positive in connotation does also appear in the Hebrew Bible. In Genesis, Abraham is described as very "heavy" in the context of his material wealth and importance and other figures to whom positive adjectives such as "heroic" or "glorious" are attached, are also described as *kbd* ("heavy").

Instead of using K-B-D, the Talmud uses the Aramaic word *yaqar*, meaning "be heavy," and "be precious," which may have subsequently entered Hebrew as an Aramaic loanword. In Hebrew, Y-Q-R is found in modern Hebrew to signify something or someone is special or precious.

Rabbi Doug Sagal shared his understanding with me. He sees that the key to understanding the irony is found in the second verse thru the word “mockery”—he noted that it was a reflexive verb down to the self. He believed that irony was the sense of arrogance that led Pharoah to believe in his self-importance and caused his heart to harden. The heaviness of the work was ignored by him as he assumed he was a deity. God had to mock him and show him as well as all Egyptians that Pharoah was just a flawed mortal whose ego weighed so heavily on him that he failed to recognize the pain he was inflicting. The Talmud echoes this sentiment by citing that there are only 2 times when one person can mock another: when that person is going to perform some sort of foreign idolatrous worship [*avodah zarah*] or when they are going to engage in a type of incestual, illicit sexual act. RaSHI comments that there the *k-b-d* is clearly hardening of the heart because of one’s arrogance, myopic, and insensitive behavior.

The apparent contradiction between “honor” and “hardening the heart” is a reflection of lacking proper perception of the self. By seeing oneself as more important than you are, one can become insensitive to another’s needs or indifferent to another’s sense of self. Arrogance is self-absorbing and leads to myopic behavior as well as self-aggrandizing. That was Pharoah’s burden!