VAERA: Pharaoh and His Gambling Problem

Every time I read this Parasha, I feel perplexed and fascinated by the behavior of Pharaoh. During the plagues, Pharaoh even admitted that he was wrong and said: *"I have sinned before HaShem, your God … and now, please forgive my sin only this time, and pray to HaShem your God, to take away this mortal [plague from me]."* but as soon as the plagues disappear, Pharaoh changes his mind and refuses to let the people of Israel out of Egypt.

What's going on? Why does Pharaoh behave in such an irrational, suicidal way?

Two explanations.

The first is a theological explanation. HaShem intervenes in the 'heart' of Pharaoh. It influences his decision and triggers his "stubbornness". According to Rabbi Don Isaac Abarbanel, HaShem did this not to compromise Pharaoh's free will but to preserve it. Let me explain: If God would reveal Himself to us, and we could see and experiment His Presence beyond any doubt, would anyone dare not observe Shabbat, for example? Would anyone even think about eating non-Kosher food, and challenging God, so to speak, face to face? If our knowledge of God was *absolute*, we could not choose to obey or disobey Him. Certainty of His existence would turn us into robots (or "angels", but that is for another conversation), incapable of disobeying a Divine order. In this sense, the invisibility of HaShem, His deliberate concealment, allows us to maintain our ability to choose and disobey or the merit of obeying Him. Back to Pharaoh. Pharaoh was "the only person who knew" when each plague would begin and when it would end because Moshe reported directly to him. The evidence of Divine intervention, His "existence", was overwhelming for Pharaoh. Undeniable. Technically, Pharaoh should have become a robot, deprived of free will, unable to disobey, ergo, "free of responsibility." Therefore, to preserve Pharaoh's ability to choose –and make him accountable for his YES or his NO– HaShem intervenes in his thoughts making his "heart" stubborn and uncompromising, and in this way restoring his ability to

choose. Thus, Pharaoh becomes again responsible for what he chooses. Maimonides explains that this type of intervention in human thought is not the rule. A King's case is an exception.
The second explanation is rooted in psychology, precisely the behavior of a gambling addict. When an addict reaches a point of no return, they exhibit self-destructive behavior, continuing to gamble despite the obvious consequences. In the same way, after the fifth plague, Pharaoh could no longer go back and let the Israelites leave without losing all his remaining prestige and credibility. He has reached a point of no return and continues to gamble with the fate of his people.
I believe we can also explain the behavior of Pharaoh in this way. After the fifth plague, Pharaoh's position had become untenable. He had already caused immense suffering and loss for his people, and if he were to allow the Israelites to leave, he would lose whatever remained of his prestige and credibility. But instead of acknowledging the hopelessness of his situation, Pharaoh continues to gamble, refusing to admit defeat and releasing the Israelites. Pharaoh knows that he has reached a point of no return. And he decides to continue gambling. I believe it is possible to explain that Divine intervention brought the possibility of Pharaoh's free will, but the "gambling effect" also influenced Pharaoh's behavior and refusal.
What happened to Pharaoh is a great lesson for all: 1. We must identify possible points of no return in any area of our lives. 2. We must avoid falling into any downward spiral of self-destruction. 3. And if we ever, recklessly, find ourselves in such a spiral, we should learn from this story of Pharaoh that it is better to stop on time in one piece than to keep running towards the cliff.