RECEPTION HISTORY ON “HARDENING OF PHARAOH’S HEART” (EX. 7:3; 10:1; 10:20; 11:1)
For I have hardened Pharaoh’s heart (Ex. 10:3).... R. Johanan said: This enables heretics to protest against his punishment, by maintaining that] he could not repent, since it says “for I have hardened his heart.” Said Resh Lakish to him: Let the heretics be struck dumb! It is as Scripture says “If it concerns the scorners, He scorns them” (Prov. 3:34). The Holy One Blessed is He warns a man once again, and yet a third time. If he still does not repent, He closes his heart against repentance in order to exact retribution for his sins. So it was with Pharaoh too. When He sent His orders to him five times, only to have them flouted, He said to him “You have stiffened your neck and hardened your heart. I will add uncleanness to your uncleanness! That is the meaning of the text, “for I have hardened his heart.”

When a man sins of his own free will and repeats his evil so many times that he becomes a sin addict, it is then extremely difficult for him to give it up. That is what we mean when we say that the road to repentance is barred to him.
I have hardened (hichhabad’ti). What does this word mean? That the Holy One blessed is HE, made his heart like liver (kabad), which becomes hard and unyielding when it is boiled a second time. Similarly Pharaoh’s heart became like such a liver, and God’s words made no impression on it.
For I have hardened his heart. This illumines the text: A stone is heavy and the sand is weighty but a fools vexation is heavier than the both (Prov. 27:3). The Holy one blessed is He said: I declared Israel important, weighty (lit. heavy) in the world by metaphorically calling it stone”. As it is written: The stone of Israel (Gen. 49:24). “And the sand is weighty “also alludes to Israel, which is compared to sand as it is written: Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand and the sea (Hos. 2:1). I made them weighty in the world, declaring “he that touches you touches the apple of his eye (Zech. 2:12). Yet they angered Me so that I would have destroyed them and cast them off; but I refrained on account of the wicked Pharaoh, lest he say, “He could not save them, therefore He slew them.” In that sense the verse continues: but a fools vexation is heavier than the both. Thus the true meaning of our text is: for I have taken account of the heaviness of Pharaoh’s heart (his stubborn taunting).

Others quote the following text: I said aphehem (Deut. 32:26). What does Aphehem mean? I said in My anger, ‘Where are they?” They shall no longer exist, but I will make their memory cease among men”. What then was responsible for their liberation? The fear of the taunt of the foe (pharaoh). To this our text alludes.
Said Resh Lakish: What is the force of the text (Mishlei 3,34): “IF to scorners he will scorn; but to the meek he will show favour”? If he tries to defile himself he is given an opening; if he tries to purify himself he is helped from Above. (implication is that Pharaoh was a scionr and not meek, and thus denied from help from above to repent)
MHG. T.S. 10,4

His heart and the heart of his servants... From this you learn that when Pharaoh softened the Egyptians (his servants) hardened, and when they softened, Pharaoh hardened. When both softened the holy One blessed is He, hardened their hearts as our text states. This means that He closed their hearts to repentance in order to punish them for their earlier stubbornness, as the text continues: in order that I may display these My signs among them.

Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation, by Rav Menahem M. Kasher, trans. H. Freedman
The L-rd hardened Pharaoh's heart.... At first "Pharaoh's heart was hardened" (7:13) and finally "The L-rd hardened Pharaoh's heart". Thus Resh Lakish said: if a person desires to defile himself, the road is opened for him; and in that spirit the Prophet says, "I will lay a stumbling block before him" (Ezek. 3:20); also "I the L-rd have enticed that prophet." For once a man desires wickedness a stumbling block is placed in his path by Heaven. But if a man desires to cleanse himself, he is helped.
And Pharaoh's heart was hardened.... A the first five makot we are told only that Pharaoh's heart was hardened (of his own accord). But when he did not let them go after 5 plagues, the Holy One, blessed is He, declared “Henceforth even if he wants to let them go, I will not accept it.” For in connection with the last 5 plagues it is written that “the L-rd hardened the heart of Pharaoh” (9:12 et passim). Then Moses would decree each plague and the Almighty would fulfill his decree; as it says: Then shall you decree a thing, and it shall be fulfilled for you (Iyov 22:28)
Pharaoh's heart is kaved (stubborn)… He is angry just as the kabel (liver) becomes angry, so has this man’s heart become kaved. He does not understand being a fool, “for anger rests in the bosom of fools” (Eccl. 7:9). Now with what do you chastise fools With a rod, as it says: A rod for the back of fools (Prov. 26:3). So was Moses to chastise Pharaoh with a rod, as it says: and the rod which was turned to a serpent you shall take in your hand (v. 15)
“If to scorners, he will scorn”: he will scorn, on his own initiative: No one will encourage him and no one will stop him. “If for the meek” if he is attracted to moral quality “He will show favour” he will be helped from Heaven. If he tries to defile himself, he is given an opening: if he tries to purify himself, he is helped from Above and an opening is prepared for him.

Implication is that Pharaoh who hardened his heart is a scorners to the Moses, the slaves, and Hashem. Therefore the positive help afforded the one who tries to purify themselves is denied Pharaoh. Pharaoh chose to do evil and the stubborness of his heart prevents him from repentance.
Pharaoh's heart is kadesh... The Holy One blessed is He declared “By your life! With the very same word with which you show the stubbornness of your heart, with that I will be honored to show my glory”; as it says: when I have gotten Me honor (bhikabdi)- same root) upon Pharaoh (14:18)

Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation, by Rav Menahem M. Kasher, trans. H. Freedman
Pharaoh's heart is stubborn. Our sages said: To what may you compare this? To a lion, an ass, and a fox who wee traveling in a ship, the ass collecting the dues on the ship. When the ass demanded dues of them, the fox said to it, ‘what impudence. You know that the king of beasts is with us, and yet you demand dues.” The ass answered, “ I levy dues even on the king, and I pay them into the king’s treasury”. Thereupon the lion... tore the ass to pieces, gave them to the fox and ordered him, “Arranged the limbs of this food in order.” The fox did so, but seeing the heart, he purloined it and ate it up. When the lion came and saw the carcass dismembered, he asked ‘Where is this fool’s heart?” The fox replied, “My lord the king: he had no heart, for if he had a heart he would not have demanded dues from the king. It was the same with the wicked Pharaoh: had he a heart he would not have said to the King of kings, “Give me a ransom.” i.e. a gift for release of the Israelites... Nor would he still have gone on saying “Who is the L-rd that I should hearken to His voice to let Israel go? I know not the L-rd” (5:2)
Know that all acts are ascribed to G-d, since He is their ultimate cause, some by absolute decree, and others through the operation of human choice granted by Him... In the sense that He is the author of all acts, He hardened Pharaoh's heart....

The acts ascribed to G-d in the Scriptures are those which are unusual, the causes of which are beyond human ken. Pharaoh's stubbornness was an example of this, since his persistent refusal to heed the portents of the plagues was a matter to be wondered at. Compare: “But the L-rd hath not given you a heart to know and eyes to see, and ears to hear, unto this day (Deut. 29,3)... “because the L-rd hath said unto him: Curse David (II Sam. 16,10)
The wicked man becomes pious and returns to the L-rd when the blow falls- out of fear of retribution as in the case of Pharaoh who said, “I have sinned this time, the L-rd is righteous (Ex. 4,27). Because such as situation savours of compulsion and not of free will, the L-rd hardened his heart, so that he imagined that the plagues was accidental rather than providential. This was to eradicate the cowing effects of the plagues itself, leaving his freewill uninfluenced by any compulsion. Only then could it be demonstrated whether his repentance was freely motivated. In this manner, the gates of repentance are shut in the face of the wicked. But far be it from the Almighty to withhold from man his free choice to do good! On the contrary, Scripture states (Ezek. 18, 32) “for I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth.... Wherefore turn yourselves and live”. But G-d leaves man to his free choice, exercising no outward compulsion on him.
The Almighty sent the plagues to stir the Egyptians to repentance.... And there is no doubt that, had not Pharaoh's heart been hardened the latter would have let the Israelites go, but his action would not then have been motivated by sincere repentance and submission to the Divine will, but merely because he could no longer bear the suffering of the plagues, as his servants intimated “Knowest thou not yet that Egypt is destroyed?”. But his would not have constituted true repentance. Had Pharaoh wished to submit to God and sincerely return to Him, nothing would have stood in his way. But God hardened his heart, fortified his resistance to enable him endure the plagues, and refrain from letting the Israelites go: “In order to show these my signs in the midst of them”, that they might thereby acknowledge My greatness and goodness and turn to Me in true repentance.
And Pharaoh's heart was hardened. By it-self. Pharaoh saw that the magicians were able to do what Aaron did.

And the L-rd said Pharaoh's heart is stubborn (kaved) is a verb in the perfect. It is like the word zaken was old in which Isaac was old (Gen 27:1) chafetz (were pleased) in If the L-rd were pleased (Jud. 13:23) ahev (he loveth) in such as he loveth (Gen. 27.9). The mem of me’en (refuseth) which is ta root letter, is vocalized with a tzere so that a dagesh is not palced in the alef which follows it. Cheref (jeopardized in jeopardized their lives (Jud 5:18) is similar.

“If he is for scorners”- The L-rd will scorn; will repay his scorning. “But to the meek he will show favour” –He will reward them with favour and grace.” (Pharaoh was a scorners who was not meek).
There are many passages in scripture which seem to contradict the principle of free will, and many have been misled by their tenor. They imagine that the Holy One preordains man to do good or evil. I shall however provide a key to understanding these passages.

When a man sins of his own freewill, he is punished... sometimes in this world, sometimes in the Hereafter, and sometimes in both. When does this apply? When he does not make amends. But if he makes amends, repentance is an antidote to retribution. The same as man’s sin is of his own free prompting, so is his repentance.

But it may sometimes happen that man’s offence is so grave that he is penalised by not being granted the opportunity to turn from his wickedness, so that he dies with the sin that he committed. To this the Almighty referred in Isaiah: “Make the heart of the people fat, and make their ears heavy and shut their eyes” (6:10). Cf too (2 Crhon. 26:16): “but they mocked the messengers of G-d, and despised His words, and scoffed at his prophets, until the wrath of the L-rd arose against His people and there was no remedy.” In other words, they sinned of their own free will, till they forfeited the opportunity of repentance which is the classic remedy. To this end, Scripture states too: “And I shall harden Pharaoh's heart.” He sinned first of his own free will.... Until he forfeited the opportunity to repent. Similarly Sihon’s iniquities were such as to warrant repentance being denied him: “for the Lord thy G-d hardened his spirit, and made his heart obstinate (Deut. 2:30). The Canaanites, too forfeited by their abominations their opportunity to repent, as it is stated: “for it was of the L-rd to harden their hearts, to come against Israel in battle that they might be utterly destroyed” (Josh.11,20). The Israelites were also denied repentance in the days of Elijah, because they sinned grievously as it is stated: For Thou didst turn their heart backward” (I Kg. 18:37) implying that Thou didst deny them the opportunity to repent.

We may conclude therefore that it was not G-d who forced Pharaoh to do evil to Israel or Sihon to commit iniquities in his land or the Canaanites to adopt abominable practices, or Israel to serve idols. All of them sinned at their own promptings, forfeiting their right to repentance.

Moses Maimonides Commentary to Mishnah Aboth, Bloch Publishing Co., trans. Arthur David
And I will harden Pharaoh's heart. The rabbis said in Midrash Rabbah: G-d revealed to Moses that He was destined to harden Pharaoh's heart in order to bring judgment upon him for he caused them to work in cruel bondage. It is also stated there in Midrash Rabbah: For I have hardened his heat. Rabbi Yochanan said, “this provides a pretext for the heretics to say that G-d did not allow Pharaoh to repent. Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said, “the mouths of the heretics be closed! Only, if it concerneth the sconorners, He scorneth them. When HE warns one on three occasions and he does not turn from his ways, He closes the door of repentance on him in order to punish him for his sin. Such was the case with wicked Pharaoh. After the Holy One blessed be He, sent him 5 times (the request to let His people go) and he paid no attention to His words, the Holy One blessed be He, said to him: You have stiffe ned your neck and hardened your heart; I will double your defilement.

The Rabbis in the above midrash have thus discussed the question which all ask: If G-d hardened his heart, what then was Pharaoh's sin? For this there are two explanations and both of them are true. One is that Pharaoh in his wickedness had unjustifiably perpetrated such great evils against Israel that justice required that the ways of repentance be withheld from him, as is so indicated in many places in the Torah and in the Writings. He was judged according to his wickedness which he had originally omitted of his own free will. The second explanation is that half of the plagues came upon him because of his transgressions, for in connection with them it is only said: And Pharaoh's heart was hardened; And Pharaoh hardened his heart. Thus Pharaoh refused to let the children of Israel go for the glory of G-d. But when the plagues began bearing down upon him and he became weary to suffer them, his heart softened and he bethought himself to send them out on account of the onslaught of the plagues, no in order to do the will of his Creator. Then G-d hardened his spirit and made his heart obstinate, so that his name may be declared throughout the earth. Similar in meaning is the verse, Thus will I magnify Myself and sanctify Myself and I will make Myself known in the eyes of many nations, and they shall know that I am the Eternal. And that which He said before the plagues, and I will harden his heart and he will not let the people go, was merely His warning to Moses of that which He was destined to do to Pharaoh in the last 5 plagues, it being similar to that which He said, and I know that the king of Egypt will not give you leave to go. This then is the meaning of the verse (before us), and I will harden Pharaoh's heart and multiply My signs. That is to say, “I will harden his heart so that My wonders may be multiplied in the land of Egypt,” since in the last five plagues as well as at the drowning in the sea, it is said, And the Eternal hardened the heart of Pharaoh, for the King's heart is in the hand of the Eternal; He turneth it whithersoever He will.
ME’AM LO’EZ ON EX. 10:1

Some authorities however dispute the opinion of the Rambam. They say that there is never a case whereby a person can repent and not be accepted. Pharaoh was an exception, because his crimes against an entire people were so great. Therefore, even if he had repented, it would have been to no avail.

There are however, a number of situations when it becomes very difficult to repent: (1) when a person has committed many serious sins, (2) When a sin has been purposely repeated many times, (3) when one wishes to repent, but stubbornly refuses to do so, (4) when one sins against his fellow man. [according to Yoma must ask forgiveness 3x from person one offended]

In these cases, a person's heart is often closed so that he never even thinks of repenting and improving his ways.

All of these reasons existed in the case of Pharaoh. He was intrinsically a very evil person. Even when he agreed to free the Israelites, it was not because he had repented, but because he feared the plagues (makot)... Even when a person repents under duress, the repentance is accepted But if a persons returns to his old ways after the duress is gone, it is a clear sign that the initial repentance was meaningless. Even if Pharaoh had repented, it was not with his heart and soul etc. It was for this reason that G-d hardened Pharaoh's heart. The whole world would know what a sinner he was. Therefore even though G-d knew how wicked Pharaoh was, He warned him again and again. Since Pharaoh repeated ignored these warnings, no one could say that G-d had dealt unfairly with him.

As we have discussed when a person commits a crime against G-d he must seek forgiveness from God, However when a person commits a crime against his fellow man, he cannot be forgiven for his sin until he gains forgiveness from the one he wronged [mishnah Yoma]

The Torah Anthology, Me’am Lo’ez by Rabbi Yaakov Culi, trans. By Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, Moznaim Publishing Corp, NY, 1979
Pharaoh claims that he is a god. He has gone as far to claim that he created himself. I will therefore show him that he is nothing, and if anything, you are more like a god than he. I will show that he is completely evil so much that compared to him you will be like a god. He will fear you like he fears his gods. Ultimately all the world will mock him for his false claims.

“I will harden Pharaoh's heart and he will constantly refuse to let My people go. I will then be able to increase the number of my signs and wonders in Egypt.
G-d will repay the scorners in their own coin. Others will scorn them just as they scorned others. But G-d will reward those who respect the lowly by inspiring others with respect for them. (implication is that Pharaoh was a scouter and scoured Moses and the slaves who were lowly showing them no respect).
Gd said to Moses: Pharaoh's heart is stubborn, etc. What did Gd tell Moses here that he did not already know? Perhaps Pharaoh had not refused the request to let the Israelites go in so many words, but had merely remained silent after watching Aaron's demonstration. Gd informed Moses that the Meaning of this silence was that Pharaoh refused to release the Israelites and did not even think it necessary to say so.
SHA’AR BAT RABIM

And I will harden Pharaoh's heart... Why did G-d tell Moses in advance that He would harden Pharaoh's heart? The reason is that He was afraid that when Moses and Aaron saw that Pharaoh refused to listen to them and to send forth the Israelites, they would not want to continue on their mission as emissaries of the redemption. G-d therefore told them this in advance, so that they could anticipate Pharaoh's refusal.

Pharaoh's heart was hardened. The root of hazak here is like holding on to. We find the world in the same sense in Samuel II:18, 9 “his Avshalom’s head hair was gripped by the oak tree. The meaning of our verse is that this miracle which Moses had performed himself so impressed him that he could have been expected to react to it positively. The Torah merely tells us that remarkably he did not react to it in the appropriate fashion. Something held him in its grip, just like the foliage did Avshalom’s hair, so that he could not react logically.

Of a stubborn heart.... This root is also used to describe extreme mental pain and sadness which penetrates up to one’s heart. One example we know is Job 23:2 “my strength is spent on account of my groaning. Another example of the world kavad in this sense is Isaiah 24:20 “its sin will weigh it down (depression).
In reference to Pharaoh's heart we find three expressions: (a) kasha to be hard altogether, not to receive impressions, to let everything pass over one without making any impression (b) kavad, heavy, one can receive impressions but there can be a big gap between the impression and the moment one lets oneself be guided by this impression, heavy, difficult to move, to set in motion. But even if it takes a lot of effort this moment can be reached, but (C) hazak firm consciously opposes any pliancy, any submission. Even the impression is completely lost as far as any consequences of it go. Pharaoh's coldness his apathetic insensibility becomes a means for the performance of a whole series of otiot (signs) from which all subsequent ages could derive a knowledge and conviction of the Almightyness, the Presence and the Direction of Gd in human history. After that there should be no necessity for nisim.