

D'var Torah – Parshat Eikev
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Shabbat Shalom. This week's parsha, Parshat Eikev, is filled with references of the *Lev*, the heart. This parsha teaches us that God tested us by wandering for 40 years in the desert to learn what was in our hearts, to understand whether we would keep the commandments. The parsha warns us that our hearts should not grow haughty when we have "eaten (our) fill and have built fine houses to live in." It instructs us that we must remember that God has provided for us and it is not due to our own merits alone that we have succeeded. The parsha also gives us the text found in the Shema and her blessings. It tells us to "love Adonai your God and to serve God with all of your heart and all of your soul." It asks us to impress these words upon our very hearts and if we do this, God will grant us rain in the proper season. Clearly, what is in our hearts matters tremendously.

Given that context, there is another reference to the heart in this week's parsha that raises a lot of questions. We are told to "circumcise the foreskin of our hearts." What does that mean? The rabbis interpret this as telling us to stop whatever is blocking our hearts, so that we may open ourselves up to God's teaching. But why this metaphor of circumcision? And why specifically of the heart?

As so much of this parsha does, let's begin by focusing on the heart. There are multiple ways of looking at the heart. Today, we think of the heart as the metaphorical source of love. It is what we find on love letters and greeting cards. But the Rabbis of the Talmud understood the heart as the source of the intellect. They understood that we should show our love for God by studying and fulfilling mitzvot. At a basic medical level, today we understand the important role of the heart as it pumps blood throughout our bodies. It is an incredibly strong and powerful muscle. Yet, I am all too aware of its frailties.

One of my closest friends growing up was named Craig Barson. We first met as middle schoolers at Camp Blue Star in North Carolina, attending a Kadima and USY leadership retreat. We immediately became the best of friends. A year later, we wound up attending the same high school. We often had the same classes and would study together and collaborate on projects. We attended Hebrew High together and were in the same group of friends in USY. We had a very brother/sister type relationship. Although we loved each other, we were always fighting. At our junior year open house, Craig looked at the copy of my schedule that my sister was holding for me. When he realized that we had six of our seven classes together, he said, "Irit and I are going to kill each other." But, we didn't. Our friendship just became closer.

I was thrilled when we wound up attending the same university. We often hung out and spoke on the phone all the time. One afternoon, I walked by the dorm where Craig lived. His roommate Ryan, still one of my best friends, was celebrating a birthday later in the week, so I thought about dropping by. But, given the huge exam I had coming up, I decided to be responsible and go back to my room and study. I would see them sometime soon. The next day, Ryan called with a message I will never forget. “Something happened to Craig. He’s in the hospital. Come right away.” In a daze, I raced to the ICU of the university hospital. Craig, at 19 years old, had had a heart attack while watching a football game. Ryan and our friend Darren had carried him down the bleachers to rush him to the hospital. For days, all of our high school friends sat in the waiting room, praying for Craig to wake up. We all felt so helpless. There was nothing we could do. Craig never woke up. He stayed in a coma for six months before finally passing away, on the 2nd anniversary of our high school graduation. I never forgave myself for not stopping by that afternoon.

Yes, I am all too aware of the frailties of the heart. So, when I keep hearing about the heart being the emphasis of so much of this week’s parsha, I am concerned. What do they mean by that? Is the heart really strong enough to be the foundation of our relationship with God? And what about our second question? Why the metaphor of circumcision?

The prophet Jeremiah echoes this language of “circumcising the heart” in chastising the people for their unjust treatment of the poor and the absence of morality in Judean society. He commands them to “cut away the thickening about your hearts...” and change the way they interacted with others. Rabbi Sheldon Blanks writes that “biblical psychology localizes feelings and emotions in the body and looks to the heart as the organ of comprehension – an uncircumcised heart is a closed mind.” The act of traditional circumcision is not enough. If one’s heart is “uncircumcised,” then the physical circumcision is nullified, rendering the Jews equal to the uncircumcised nations, who do not follow the mitzvot and are not part of the covenant. But, when the foreskin of the heart is removed, the spiritual sensation is made more intense, as contact between the self and the Divine becomes unobstructed.

We know circumcision as a sign of the *Brit*, the covenant between God and the Jewish people. This metaphor of cutting as a sign of the covenant is a powerful one, but the child having a bris does not have much say in this choice. And the parents often struggle tremendously at the idea of causing their child pain. In fact, we do not even say *shecheyanu* during a bris to acknowledge this pain. But we can all choose to circumcise our hearts, to choose to continue to be a part of this covenant.

Even more amazing is that our tradition regularly reinforces that we really are part of two covenants. We are commanded to fulfill two types of mitzvot - *mitzvot bein Adam la-makom* (*mitzvot* between man and God) and *mitzvot bein Adam la-chaveiro* (*mitzvot* between man and man). It is noteworthy, that in many ways our commitment to God is given just as much weight as our commitment to our fellow human beings. In some cases, such as in our preparation for the high holidays, our commitment to our fellow man comes first. We cannot receive forgiveness from God until we have received forgiveness from those we have wronged.

But the *mitzvot bein Adam la-chaveiro* (*mitzvot* between man and man) do not always come easily. If we truly love and care for our fellow human beings, for the members of our community, it comes at a real price. It is our hearts that are often wounded or even broken in the process. We are lucky here at Beth Shalom to be part of a real community – a place where we care for one another with tremendous *hesed* and *kavod*, kindness and respect. Our lives are intertwined in deep and binding ways. So, when someone in our community is hurting, we feel their pain at a profound level. Far too many of our congregants right now have lost their jobs, have experienced deaths in their families, or are facing heroic battles with cancer. Each struggle, each loss – we all feel deep in the core of our hearts. We feel the circumcision, the breaking away of the protective barrier – and we are reminded of the *brit*, the covenant we have with one another. And the Torah is aware of this. Although it happened nearly 40 years earlier than our current story, Aaron’s death is recounted in this parsha to teach us that the death of a righteous person is as grievous as the shattering of the original Tablets of the Covenant. Both represent a diminution of God’s presence in the world. Even forty years after the loss, the hole in our hearts remains. We cannot undo the circumcision.

Yet, sometimes I wish I could close off my heart a bit more. I sometimes feel each loss, each struggle so deeply that I wish I could shelter myself from it – to close off my heart from feeling this pain. However, Rashi teaches that “once a person’s heart is sealed, God’s wisdom cannot enter; God’s words of Torah are locked out. Whatever barrier is blocking access to the heart must be cut away to restore understanding, seeing, hearing, and sensitivity.”

Judaism is replete with an understanding that the heart hears best once it has been opened. Before we can shout “Mazel Tov” to the newly married couple, we break the glass to remind us of the destruction of the Temples. Before the streets of Israel come alive in celebration of Yom Ha’atzmaut, the country mourns in commemoration of Yom HaShoah and Yom HaZikaron. Most recently, we mourned for so many tragedies during Tisha B’av and are comforted by Shabbat Nachamu. This

prepares us for the difficult work ahead of us in Elul, as our hearts must be open for the work of T'shuva, of asking for forgiveness and forgiving others.

The circumcision of the heart is a difficult price to pay, but it is also what keeps our hearts open to receive the many blessings that we also have upon us. Do I wish that the hole in my heart left by the death of Craig could have been left closed? That the death had never happened? Of course I do, more than I can even begin to express. But since I cannot change that, I must work to learn whatever lessons I can from this terrible experience. I must keep his memory alive and honor the many ways that he forever touched my heart.

Life is about balance – about facing the darkness of the hard times so that we can embrace the light of the good times. In an actual bris, despite the pain of the procedure, we keep a chair for Elijah as a reminder that one day the *moshiach*, the messiah, will come. The Etz Hayim Humash translates “Eikev” as “on the heels of.” Perhaps the circumcision of the heart is a reminder that good things can and do come “on the heels of” the hard times. In spite of tremendous losses and difficulties in the world, it is good for us to remember that we are not alone. We have circumcised our hearts to allow in the light and love of God and of our fellow human beings. It reminds us that we are God’s partners in finishing the world. The pain we feel in connection to the heartbreaks of others and of the heartbreaks in our own lives, can also help us to open our hearts to the many blessings that surround us, if only we will find a way to let them in. As we rapidly approach the introspective and thoughtful month of Elul, I encourage you to circumcise your own hearts – to make yourselves open to the joys and sadness’s of being a part of a community. My hope for you is that the blessings that will come will help to alleviate the pain. Shabbat Shalom.