



DEVARIM

Nitzavim

> Circumcise Your ... Heart?

September 8, 2018

CIRCUMCISE YOUR ... HEART?

ABSTRACT

Do you have heartburn? Put more accurately: Does your heart burn?

Well, it should. It should burn with the love of G-d, as this week's Torah reading tells us. But getting there is a challenge.

This heartfelt, heartwarming sermon will explore that age-old Jewish custom, that of circumcising the heart.

Huh? Did yours just skip a beat? Come discover what exactly it means to circumcise your heart, and how this highly nuanced procedure is preformed.

Learn about a paramedic that paged himself to his very own heart attack.

And meet the finest heart surgeon on planet earth, and find out how he differs from a car mechanic – even if it's one who can fix a Rolls Royce.

What better way to prepare for the New Year than to fine tune our hearts?

1. Mechanic vs. Heart Surgeon (Joke)

In a car garage, a world-famous heart surgeon was impatiently waiting for the mechanic to take a look at his Rolls Royce. To his misfortune, the mechanic was busy just then, removing the cylinder heads from the motor of another car.

Seeing the surgeon fidgeting, the mechanic decided to challenge the doc:

“Look at this car I'm working on. I also open hearts, take valves out, grind them, put in new parts, and when I finish this baby will purr like a kitten. So how come you, a heart surgeon, get the big bucks and I don't, when you and I are doing basically the same work?”

The surgeon, with the nonchalance of a seasoned veteran of life-and-death situations, very calmly replied: “Try doing it with the engine running.”

2. Heart, the Engine of Life

If the human being were a vehicle – every man and woman a Rolls Royce, surely – then the heart would be the engine of that spectacular driving machine.

But, unlike automobiles, our engines never have the luxury of turning off. Sticking a key into an ignition cannot restart a heart that has stopped beating.

We must rev our engines continuously, never taking our feet off the pedals, never idling even for a minute.

As we do so, our challenge is to refine our hearts, fine-tune our beats, while tearing up the highway of life at the maximum speed limit, without ever crashing and with our eyes always focused on the ultimate destination.

Sure, it would be easier if we could park our luxury vehicles in a garage for a week or a month to tune-up our respective engines and realign our cardiovascular systems.

Easy, however, is not the name of this game called life.

3. Heart Specialists

Neither is heart surgery, of course. Every heart surgeon worth his blood-flow has spent many years studying the heart and learning its nuances. Constantly does the cardio-specialist update his knowledge, understanding illnesses and discovering cures, educating himself on how best to treat every possible complication. This ensures preparedness, the ability to address unpredictable situations.

The treatment and optimization of the heart that is the seat of the soul and the engine of man is no different. We must be like heart specialists refining our hearts in the service of our Creator, searching the holy books in order to understand what the heart is all about and how best to treat its peculiarities. Our perpetual education – understanding our own hearts, the hearts of others, and the heart of the world – never ceases. It prepares us for life's inevitable unpredictability.

The ultimate book, the Torah, advises us on everything. And in this week's Torah reading, *Parshat Nitzavim Hayom*, as we stand (*netzavim*) at the cusp of Rosh Hashanah (*hayom*), the secret to a healthy and powerful heart is revealed.

4. Parshat Netzavim

This is what it tells us:

And the Lord, your G-d, will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring to love the Lord your G-d with all your heart and with all your soul, for the sake of your life.¹

Circumcise your heart? What could this possibly mean?

Of course, every Jew has heard of the mitzvah of *brit milah*. At the pure age of eight days old, a newborn male child is circumcised, entering into the covenant of Abraham. This mitzvah is pretty clear and straightforward. But how does G-d circumcise our hearts?

Like every mitzvah, the mitzvah of *brit milah* at eight days of age is performed by mortal human beings – by a mortal *moheh*, not by G-d – so why does it state that *the Lord, your G-d, will circumcise your heart...?*

This is even more perplexing when we compare it to an earlier verse: *You shall circumcise the foreskin of your heart ... and be no more stiff-necked.²*

So there, in *Parshat Eikev*, G-d instructs us human beings: you shall circumcise your heart. But here, in *Parshat Netzavim*, the Torah states that *the Lord, your G-d* will do it Himself.

What is the difference between G-d instructing us to circumcise our own hearts and G-d Himself doing the circumcision? And what insight into our personal lives today does all of this provide? How does this lesson of “heart” prepare us for the “head” of the year, Rosh Hashanah?

5. The Tanya’s Explanation

In his seminal work the *Tanya*³, the Alter Rebbe, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, whose birthday we recently celebrated (on Elul 18), explains the mystical intricacies of the circumcision of heart by quoting a verse from the Book of Psalms:

Of You, my heart has said, “Seek My presence.” Your presence, O Lord, I shall seek.⁴

¹ Deuteronomy 30:6.

² Deuteronomy 10:16.

³ Igeret Hakodesh, epistle 4

⁴ Psalms 27:8.

The simple meaning of this verse⁵ is that the heart says to the individual to seek G-d's presence. And this is what the individual shall do.

But, according to the literal meaning, why does the end of verse state *Your presence, O Lord, I shall seek* and not *Your presence I shall seek*?

Explains the Alter Rebbe: The words *ponai* (meaning, my presence or my countenance) and *ponecha* (your presence or your countenance) both refer to *penimiyut*, the innermost essence. In the first case, the essence of the heart, and in the second case, the essence of G-d.

In other words, if you want to become intimate with the essence of G-d, seek out the essence of your own heart, the divine spark within your own core being. For when you seek out the innermost recesses of your own heart/soul, you will then seek out and find the innermost levels of G-d Himself.

6. External and Internal Hearts

These words are nice and poetic. But what exactly do they imply? That there is an external heart and an internal heart? If so, how do they differ?

The Alter Rebbe explains this in the *Tanya* in a profound way. And perhaps I may lend a few of my own words to bring this idea home for each and every one of us here today:

If you look around this room, our house of worship, no two Jews are the same. If you look around at the global Jewish community, from here to Jerusalem, from Jerusalem to Sydney, Sydney to Beijing, surely no two Jews are the same.

Everyone knows the joke: Two Jews in a room. Three opinions.

Some Jews believe themselves to be believers while others believe themselves to be atheists or agnostics. Some Jews think they understand G-d while other Jews don't even understand themselves, let alone their own spouses. Some Jews love G-d; other Jews love themselves; still others love both. Some Jews meditate, others medicate. Some Jews adhere to the letter of the law as taught to them by parents and grandparents, while other Jews don't even know that

⁵ As per Rashi.

there is a letter, never mind a letter of the law. Some Jews observe the Shabbat, while other Jews observe those that observe the Shabbat. Some Jews eat kosher, some Jews speak kosher, some Jews think kosher and some Jews do all three. Some Jews love gefilte fish; some Jews cannot stand it; some Jews think that those who don't are anti-Semites.

In way fewer words, the Alter Rebbe says that our differences are symptomatic of the external heart. Perhaps these external levels are necessary for communicating with the external world, for definition, and for action in this actionable universe, but they are external nevertheless.

The internal heart, however, is something else. In the Alter Rebbe's words:

The internal heart is the innermost point in the heart – the depth of the heart, which transcends by far the categories of knowledge and understanding with which man can meditate in his heart on G-d's greatness...

He concludes:

And this is precisely the spark of Divinity in every soul of Israel.

In short:

The *external* heart accounts for all the differences in Israel – I believe, maybe you don't; I am religious, maybe you're not; I am right wing, you're left; I relate to G-d, you don't get it. But the *internal* heart accounts for all that Israel has in common, our underlying unity – *And this is precisely the spark of Divinity in every soul of Israel.*

A Jew is a Jew is a Jew.

7. Circumcise Reality

So why is that we aren't aware of the internal heart? Why are we always focusing on our external differences, which can create resentment, divisiveness hostility and friction among ourselves?

Says the Alter Rebbe: That is the nature of exile (*galut*) – psychological dissonance and spiritual displacement. Our hearts are imprisoned, covered by layer after layer of external inconsequen-

tialities, material nothings that hide who we really are. We have been removed from our center, from our Holy Temple, for so long that a film of haze and a veil of confusion shrouds our inner core.

Like a coating of dust, a superficial skin has covered ever our divine spark, our *brit olam*, our eternal bond with G-d.

Comes the Torah (in this week's reading) to remind us who we are under the surface and where dwells the internal spark of our essence.

How do we reach that innermost core? By letting G-d circumcise – reveal the innermost essence of – our hearts.

Everything has an external and internal. When the external is removed, the internal is revealed. Remove the peel and the fruit within emerges.

But the question still remains: Who does the circumcising and revealing of the essence? Why does the verse in *Parshat Eikev* state that we should circumcise (reveal the innermost essence of) our hearts *ourselves*, and here in *Parshat Netzv'im* the verse states that *G-d Himself* will circumcise our hearts?

What is to be gained if G-d does it? If G-d wanted to reveal our innermost hearts, shouldn't He have created us without the outer layers?

8. Two Circumcisions

Elsewhere,⁶ the Alter Rebbe discusses the first circumcision in history, that of our forefather Abraham.

There he says that first you have to circumcise yourself, and then G-d will circumcise you. The former is the preparatory work necessary for the latter – which is the redemption.

Healthy growth is defined by a combination of two elements: Proactivity and help from Above. First you, the individual, take the initiative to do everything in your power to improve your situation. Then, your efforts create the appropriate “container” to draw down and channel the

⁶ Torah Ohr, *B'etztem Hayom Hazeh Nimol Avraham*, Lech Lecha, p. 13b

Divine blessings into your life to help you finish the process and reach heights you could not do on your own.

Circumcising your heart means removing the outer layers to find the depth within. You have to invest your efforts to the fullest to “circumcise” your heart – to peel away the outer layers of materialism that trap you in the binding tentacles of self-interest and don’t allow you to experience your inner soul.

This, then brings us to the next level – the ultimate unveiling of the external and revealing of the internal and eternal heart, which will be done by G-d Himself at the time of the ultimate redemption.

It isn’t possible to touch true essence without G-d’s help, since G-d is the essence of existence. But our efforts create the proper platform for G-d to do His part.

In other words: we all have to begin to work on ourselves, to reveal our personal sparks (*You shall circumcise the foreskin of your heart*), which will then surely lead to the global revelation of the internal heart of the whole world that G-d Himself will reveal (*the Lord, your G-d, will circumcise your heart*).

9. The Paramedic’s Story (Optional)

A paramedic, who was suffering a suspected heart attack got a shock when he received a pager message sending him to his own medical emergency.

Roger Flux (yes, that is really his name) worked as a volunteer community responder for Hampshire Ambulance Service, a British outfit in which volunteers in their local communities help ensure that medical help reaches patients as quickly as possible.

The 66-year-old began experiencing chest pains while lying in bed at his New Forest home in March this year. His wife quickly called 999 (the equivalent of 911 in the United States) as a precaution.

Paramedics were on the scenes within minutes, at which point Mr. Flux got a pager message scrambling him to an emergency at his own house.

Mr. Flux said: “I was on call that evening and during the middle of the night I had severe chest

pains right across my chest and jaw. In a couple of minutes the ambulance crews were here and examining me ... meanwhile my pager went off, telling me to attend to a man with chest pains. Then I looked at the address – it was my own.”

Mr. Flux said that later – after cardiac specialists at Southampton General Hospital decided it had been a false alarm, and he did not have a heart attack after all – he saw the funny side of it.

He added: “At least it shows the system works.”⁷

10. Personal Lesson

This story offers us a lesson that can be applied to our personal lives:

Each of us is our own world-class heart surgeons, we are our very own emergency responders, honing and refining the engines of our personal Rolls Royces. The pager is in our own hands! We, each in our own way, can – and will! – peel back the externals that divide us, and reveal the internal spark that unites us.

Practically, this means that each of us ought to resolve on this last Shabbat of the year – the one immediately preceding Rosh Hashana – to open our (inner) hearts: “circumcise” the outer layers of our hearts, and focus on the soulful commonalities that we share with each other, instead of the materialistic differences that separate us.

As our Torah portion begins: *Atem netzavim hayom kulchem lifnei Hashem Elokeichem*, today you all stand together before G-d, and the verse goes on to enumerate the ten categories of people comprising the nation – from your leaders and officers to your woodcutters and your water drawers. Despite all your differences – from one end of the spectrum to the next – today, on Rosh Hashana, you all stand together, united as one.

We need to “circumcise” the outer dimensions of our hearts that separate us, and emphasize the spiritual connection we Jews have with each other. The factors that connect and unite us as a people. The unity that has carried us through the ages, and that keeps us strong and invincible when we stand as one.

Remember the rule: Bodies divide. Souls unite. Materialism separates. Spirituality connects.

⁷ <http://metro.co.uk/2006/10/10/medic-called-to-own-emergency-261816/#ixzz1aTukqTGD>.

When we stand as one, then G-d surely “circumcise” the remaining outer elements, and lead to a global transformation, where the externals of the world will be removed and the internal purpose is obvious for all to see.

We simply have to peel back the outer layers of our own hearts, and G-d will do the rest.

As the Sages teach: If we but initiate with a tiny opening the size of the eye of a needle, G-d will reciprocate, turning that opening into an opening the size of a gargantuan atrium.⁸

As with anything in the Torah, this isn't merely rhetoric: We do what we have to do and G-d will do the rest.

11. The Brother-In-Law (Joke)

A man suffered a serious heart attack and consequently had a quadruple heart bypass surgery. He woke up to find himself in the care of nuns at a Catholic hospital. When he had recovered sufficiently a nun began to ask him questions as to how he was going to pay for the treatment he'd had.

She asked, “Do you have health insurance?”

The man replied in a raspy voice, “No health insurance.”

The nun asked, “Do you have money in the bank?”

The man replied, “No money in the bank.”

Now somewhat disconcerted the nun asked, “Do you have a relative who will be willing to help you settle the account for your treatment?”

The man replied, “I only have a spinster sister who is a nun.”

The nun became agitated and announced loudly, “Nuns are not spinsters! They are married to G-d.”

“Well, in that case,” the man retorted, “please send the bill to my esteemed brother-in-law.”

⁸ Midrash on Song of Songs 5:2

12. Conclusion

Of course, the notion of G-d as an in-law is ridiculous. But one thing is for sure: G-d surely does take care of our hearts – and also pays the bills.

The key of life, if we could distill it into one pithy statement, is to open our hearts – to remove as many layers as possible that cover our respective hearts and come close to the essential core.

This lesson, this heartfelt and heart-pounding message, will surely guarantee that the coming year will pulse with the heartbeat of heaven right here on earth, both in our personal lives and in our communal lives as the entire Jewish nation. Amen!

Shabbat Shalom, and a ketiva v'chatima tova!

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