

Yom Kippur 2017 5778

Many of themes we are meant to review for ourselves during this High Holiday season are found in subtle places in the prayers of the Machzor, the High Holiday prayer book. One curious theme comes from a passage in Deuteronomy, בְּרִיםֶדֶד. Moses is sitting in front of the whole congregation of the Israelites, who are encamped in the southwestern hills of what is now Jordan, where they can see down to the land of Israel, the final destiny back to the land they wandered through the Sinai to find.

עוֹד תִּקְשׁוּ לֹא וְעִרְפְּכֶם לְבַבְכֶם עָרְלָת אֶת וּמִלְתֶּם

You shall circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and therefore, be no more stiff-necked.

Several chapters later, the concept is repeated:

וּבְכָל-בְּכָל-לְבַבְךָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֶת-יְהוָה לְאַהֲבָה זְרַעְךָ וְאֶת-לִבְּב תִּלְבַּבְּךָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ יְהוָה וּמֵל
חַיֶּיךָ לְמַעַן נַפְשְׁךָ

And the Lord, your God, will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, [so that you may] love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, for the sake of your life.

In the Machzor, right after the *Ashamnu* prayer where we klop our hearts to admit our sins as a community, and just before quoting this passage from Deuteronomy, we read:

Circumcise our hearts so that we can love and revere Your name.

We spoke last week about the covenant between G-d and all of the Jewish people, not just those who actually stood at Mount Sinai, but all future generations, even all Gentiles who associated with the Jewish community. This covenant, this *Brit*, is the same word used to the actual *brit*, the circumcision Abraham performs on himself and his sons as a sign of his everlasting covenant between G-d and his future generations.

Thus, it is somewhat curious that here, in Deuteronomy, we are admonished to “circumcise our hearts”. Clearly, we have not invented a cottage industry for *mohels* to become interventional cardiologists.

Rashi, the 12th Century Torah commentator, interprets the term “foreskin of your heart” to mean the “blockage and covering of your heart”. Indeed, circumcision is thought of as an act of “completion” for Jewish men, an act that physically marks them as Jews. But here, in regards to our hearts, we are not removing flesh, we are meant to remove the allegorical walls to and from our emotions, to and from our essential nature.

What we are being asked to do during this penitential season is to open up our inner selves to G-d, to our friends, family and neighbors, and to ourselves.

I actually like Rashi’s allegory- the notion that to fully love G-d, our fellow man and ourselves, we must remove the “blockages and coverings” of our hearts- hearts being allegorical for our emotions, our true selves.

What is the consequence of having a blocked and covered heart?

Rabbi Abraham Twerski (also a Psychiatrist) relates how lobsters grow even though their hard shells are on the outside. As the lobster’s inner soft body grows, it eventually puts pressure on its shell. This signals two processes: the body absorbs even more water, causing more pressure on the shell, and because of this pressure, the body then reabsorbs much of the calcium from shell into internal glands. This causes the old shell to become brittle, allowing the lobster to squeeze free of it, and then over the next hours, to release the calcium stores onto its skin so as to form a new, larger shell. This molting, this process of Ecdysis, occurs multiple times in the life of a lobster, but for it to grow and develop, it must release itself from the coverings that confine it. Its molting is a type of circumcision. But one thing is very clear, during these short periods when the lobster is without a cover are when it is most vulnerable.

This is the same is true with the human heart, with human emotions. We cannot grow as emotional or spiritual beings unless we allow ourselves to circumcise away the blocks and coverings that hold us back. And yet, we all have these blocks, these coverings. We all worry that an emotional block between colleagues at work, between friends, between siblings- we worry that these walls will get thicker and thicker, confining our emotions and our growth. We are scared of opening up because, like the lobster, we will be vulnerable without shells.

My friends, if these blockages were not a palpable significant concern in our lives, we would not have the Oprahs, the Dr. Phils, the “men are From Mars, Women are From Venus” lectures, the weekend meditation retreats, the American Ashrams, the 12-Step Programs- the massive industry that tries to address how our hearts can be allowed to molt away from their covers.

But for Jews, we have had this form of “retreat” for thousands of years- it’s Yom Kippur. It’s a week of contemplation, a week to visit the graves of our ancestors to remind ourselves of our sweet memories, our traditions, our legacy; it a week to remind ourselves to do acts of *tzdakah*, acts of charity and kindness. This is why those who wrote the liturgy of the Machzor included reminders of how we need to take this formal day- one day in the year- to review where we are emotionally and spiritually, where we are as Jews, where we are as citizens of the world. This is where we are reminded to “circumcise our hearts” so that we can shed the shell that has prevented us from growing to our fullest potentials.

This is where we are also reminded of G-d’s covenant, of G-d’s everlasting commitment to us; that during these periods of molting, of vulnerability, G-d will make sure we are protected. This *brit*, this covenant, tells us, “go ahead and open up, you’re protected”.

Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin summed it up so nicely:

Emotions ebb and flow throughout these holy days. Paradoxes swim in the stream of prayer. At one moment, we believe our deeds to be of such import that the world stands still so that we may take account of them. At another moment, we imagine ourselves so small, so insignificant that our lives are like a passing breath. We are great; we are small. We are at the center of the universe; we are nothing at all. And yet, not matter how large we imagine our sins to be, and no matter how puny we imagine ourselves to be, G-d will never forsake us.

As we rise for the Yizkor service to remember our ancestors, I wish for you, you family and friends, a safe and meaningful journey as you free yourselves from the shells of past years.