

I was moved this year by the story of Dr. Marsha Linehan, the psychologist who is a recognized expert in treating severely suicidal people, especially those with borderline personality disorder, a self-destructive mental illness generally considered incurable and extremely hard to treat.

At age 68, at the top of her field, having introduced dialectic behavioral therapy, the most successful documented treatment for these victims of illness, she shared a secret with her patients and colleagues and the world:

She herself had suffered from borderline personality disorder, as a teen and young adult. She was institutionalized for over two years in her late teens, during much of which she was in a secluded cell, banging her head against the wall or floor in an attempt to end her life.

How painful all those years must have been even after she progressed and was able to function in society. Can you imagine sitting in the therapists' chair, successfully treating patients, and always wanting to shout - I know what you've been through! I was there in the cell myself!

It took Marsha Linehan 68 years to come to integrate a divided self, to allow herself to be whole. She now teaches for a therapy called "radical acceptance", whose premise is that before I can ever hope to change, I have to accept myself for precisely who I am.

I believe that is our work today, on Yom Kippur. Radical acceptance. I am who I am.

We must, though, recognize that in Dr. Linehan's treatment, and in the Torah's vision of the work of teshuvah, that is the beginning, not the end, but it is a most difficult and essential beginning. Radical acceptance is not the end goal. It is the springboard to change. Only once I realize and admit to myself who I really am, can I begin the process of change - even of teshuvah.

In those dark moments that came before radical acceptance, the life of bifurcation, Dr. Linehan described literally banging her head against a wall. She said, "My whole experience of these episodes was that someone else was doing it; it was like 'I know this is coming, I'm out of control, somebody help me; where are you, God?' " she said. "I felt totally empty, like the Tin Man; I had no way to communicate what was going on, no way to understand it."

In her twenties, she finally accepted herself, and began to change, and 40 years later she was finally ready to share her whole self with the world around her.

It is that 50 or so year process that we're trying to move through on this one day of Yom Kippur. Radical acceptance as the starting point, and then as the impetus to change.

But let's take a step back. Does Judaism really believe in radical acceptance? Even as a springboard to change, do we really, even for a short time, simply say, I love myself, sinner that I am, and I accept myself with all my wrongdoings? Isn't it actually dangerous to legitimize ourselves as sinners? It's one thing last night, before Kol Nidre, to say *אנו מתירין להתפלל עם העברנים*, we allow ourselves to pray with sinners, but with ourselves as sinners?

There is a particular moment that we repeat hundreds, actually closer to a thousand times - a thousand times! - over Yom Kippur, which I believe we often interpret as going against this notion of radical acceptance, and I want to reflect on that ritual in light of this question for a few minutes today.

It is the beating of our chests with a fist, the act which is almost the rhythm of the day. We do it at every confession in the Ashamnus, and we do it with the mention of every sin in the Al Hets.

What are we *doing* when we beat our chests?

The Shulhan Arukh never says anywhere to beat our chests on Yom Kippur. Neither does the Talmud. The Torah certainly doesn't. Its only instruction for this day is *ועניתם את נפשותיכם* - you shall afflict yourselves.

The idea seems to first surface in the writings of the Kabbalist, the Ariza"l, who simply says one should beat one's chest on Yom Kippur, without explanation. What do we assume this gesture means? To me, the simplest interpretation is that we are punishing ourselves. With every confession, we are giving ourselves a klop, a hit, almost self-administering the rabbinic and Biblical punishment of lashes.

I spoke ill of others. Bam!

I behaved disrespectfully. Bam!

I had disregard for the Torah and its mitzvot. Bam!

I always remember Yom Kippur in college, specifically the gabbai of the Orthodox minyan. He was respected as a serious guy, but also known as a person who liked to party and have a good time.

Standing next to me, who was the shaliach tzibbur, at the front of the room, he would pound himself

every ashamnu and al het with this resounding thwack. Everyone could hear it, and I remember being moved by his sincerity of self-affliction. Of self-punishment.

The beating also sometimes has the feeling of trying to induce our guilt and remorse. I know I don't even feel bad about this sin but I am supposed to - so I hit myself to tell myself what I did was wrong even if I don't feel it. To jar myself into line with the Torah and its values.

In these interpretations, though, like Dr. Linehan as a child, we are a bifurcated self. How can one part of us punish another part of us? Or force the presence of guilt? It is as if the fist is one person and the heart is another, almost a religious schizophrenia.

What reasons are actually given in the halakhic literature? The 17<sup>th</sup> century commentator on the Shulhan Arukh, the Magen Avraham, writes:

**מגן אברהם סימן תרז**

ובמדרש קהלת איתא שיכה על הלב לומר אתה גרמת לי

*In Midrash Kohelet it appears that one should beat one's heart to say, "you caused me to do this" - you caused me to sin.*

From here it seems clear that beating our chests cuts **against** this notion of radical acceptance. There is admission, yes, but there is never a moment of "this is who I am and I love myself for it". We are punishing ourselves. You, wayward heart! You are not who I truly am. You led me astray! This is, again, a bifurcated self. The sinning me is not the true me.

This is, in fact, a critical part of the Rambam's vision of teshuvah. The Rambam, based on the Gemara, writes that a sinner must change his name as part of the process of teshuvah, to say - that is not me. The sinner is someone else. And maybe it needs to be that way.

There is another, beautiful interpretation of the beating of our chests that Rabbi David Wolpe suggested just in this past week's Jewish Week. He wrote:

"To me it most resembles an attempt to jump-start our hearts... The modern world is so crowded, with so many stories competing for our attention, with the rapid succession of news, that callousness is a frequent response to the sadness of life. Yom Kippur is a chance to stop. We beat our hearts because they have grown sluggish from the fray. The Al Chet is Jewish defibrillator. A few good, sharp knocks to the chest gets the heart sensitized anew."

I love this suggestion. We are awakening ourselves.

And yet still, this, too, is still a bifurcated self. I am not beginning simply by accepting who I am. I am beating my chest to say, I have been asleep and I shouldn't have been. But I am not starting from a point of making room for the me that is callous, desensitized, asleep.

So let's return to the source I quoted above - on Megillat Kohelet, that was quoted in the halakhic literature as the reason for the klopping. It actually offers a different way. While it is cited in the Magen Avraham as saying that we beat our hearts to say, "you caused me to sin", the actual midrash says something different.

The midrash comments on the verse that says it is better to go to house of mourning than feasting, because there is the end of all people, **והחי יתן אל לבו** - and the living will - literally - take it to heart.

The midrash says:

**קהלת רבה (וילנא) פרשה ז**

אמר רבי מנא והחי יתן אל לבו, אלו הצדיקים שנותנין מיתתן כנגד לבן, ולמה כותשין על הלב מימר דכלה תמן,  
*Rabbi Mana says, "and the living shall take it to heart" - these are the righteous who place their death on their hearts. And why do they beat their hearts? To say that everything is from there.*

Everything is from our hearts.

In fact, this midrash suggests that we are not beating our hearts to say that they led us astray and we must punish ourselves. When we beat our hearts, we are saying, everything comes from there. Our whole, undivided selves, are in there, and we must first embrace that before we can even begin to contemplate change.

Let's follow this through. Hundreds and hundreds of times on this day we beat our hearts. What are we doing in this act? Maybe we are punishing ourselves. Maybe we are trying to awaken ourselves. *But what if beating our hearts literally means mimicking, externalizing our heartbeat? Making our hearts beat. Beating our own hearts.*

Not lashing ourselves. Not even shocking ourselves. But actually enacting our beating heart, the place **תמן דכלה**, that everything, our good and our bad, our proudest and our most disappointed parts, flow from?

When I say *ashamnu*, and I beat my heart, I am saying, this is my rhythm. This is my blood, this is my life. It includes wrongdoing. *Al het shehatanu lefanekha b'galuy uv'seter*. This is who I am - I have done misdeeds out in the open and in private. And that is my heartbeat. That is my life. It all comes

from in there. It is not my bifurcated self, my good inclination fighting against my evil inclination. It is me.

We don't stay in that moment forever, but if we begin with self-love, with self-acceptance, with radical acceptance, that teaching of Dr. Linehan, perhaps it will be easier to move forward to change. We don't have to pretend.

כלה תמן - everything is in there, in the heart. We have hundreds of heartbeatings, hundreds of heartbeats, ahead of us today.

One of the hardest things on Yom Kippur, year after year, is returning to those things we stumble in year after year. I resolved to be better in reaching out to relatives, and I wasn't. I resolved to be better in watching my speech, and I wasn't. I resolved to be more present in my encounters with other people, and with God. And I wasn't.

When I beat my heart in those moments today, I want to stop pretending that it is as simple as mind over matter, as a new person embodied by my right hand who is just overpowering the weak sinner of my heart.

I want to say, this is me, this is my beating heart. Flawed. I accept that, first of all. Fully. I have a few minutes of living in it, not judging myself.

Then I can begin to ask: do I want to be different? What chambers of my heart can I unlock, from inside of me, to make this change this year. If I want it, I will find it in there. And as Dr. Linehan did, I can finally be at one with my whole self, in the process of teshuvah, and share myself with others.

May we find moments, today, of radical acceptance, and may they be the springboard to true, enduring change, as individuals, and as a community.

[In these moments we now move to Yizkor. These teachings can guide us in Yizkor as well. We are remembering whole people, real people. Let us not bifurcate them or our relationship with them. They, too, are our beating hearts. Let us remember the whole them as we reconnect with them in the service ahead.]