

A Matter of the Heart

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Shockingly, the Talmud¹ describes the period of the Second Temple as a time when the Jewish people were deeply engaged in the study of Torah, scrupulous performance of mitzvot, and even acts of kindness, *gemilut chasadim*, while their social interactions were governed by a profound level of hatred and animus, שנאת חினם. The Talmud harrowingly describes people who were superficially friendly with one another, בני אדם שאוכלים ושותים זה עם זה, and yet, in a moment's notice, would insult and verbally assault one another in the most vile and even violent ways, ודוקרין זה את זה, בחרבות שבלשונם.

In a sense, the description which our Sages articulate is one of a lack of spiritual integration. On the one hand, one finds people deeply committed to the study of Torah, performance of mitzvot, including interpersonal mitzvot. And yet, their hearts are blackened, filled with hatred and malice. They perform, but they perform outwardly. Their hearts, particularly as it related to one another, and the feelings of fraternal affection that ought to have been present, were corrupted.

In a narrow sense, they were guilty of violating the prohibition of “do not hate your brother in your heart”, “לא תשנא את אחיך בלבבך”². In a broader sense, in so far as the heart is the seat from which our entire relationship with the Almighty radiates, as our Sages remind us, הקדוש ברוך הוא ליבא בעי³, there was irreparable corrosion and damage. Apparently, the Torah that they studied so diligently, the mitzvot they performed so fastidiously, and even there acts of interpersonal kindness, were compromised, even tainted, given their emergence from hearts poisoned with venomous hatred.

Perhaps, it is specifically in this context, that we can better understand a certain celebrated exchange recording in Pirkei Avot. The leader of the Jewish people during this period in history, Rabban Yochanan b. Zakkai, asked his disciples, ‘what is the good path to which a person should cleave in life,’ “איזו היא דרך טובה שידבק בה האדם”? The answer which Rabban Yochanan b. Zakkai deemed correct, offered by one of his five closest students, R. Elazar b. Arach, was ‘a good heart.’ לב טוב⁴. Quite simply, as Rabban Yochanan b. Zakkai notes in that context, a good, soft, kind heart, devoid of the animus and malice which corroded that entire generation, is the necessary precondition for all other positive attributes, including those articulated by Rabban Yochanan’s other students, שכלל דבריו דבריכם.

¹ Yoma 9b.

² Va Yikra 19:17.

³ Sanhedrin 106b.

⁴ Avot Chapter 2

For Rabban Yochanan b. Zakkai, a good heart apparently meant, as detailed so exquisitely in the Talmud⁵, expressing sincere care of each and every human being, Jew and gentile alike. It meant successfully creating a culture in the academy at Yavneh of recognising the spiritual value of those who were not outstanding in scholarship or erudition, in so far as ‘their own hearts were directed towards Heaven,’ ‘אחד המרבה ואחד הממעיט ובלבד שיכוין לבו לשמים’⁶.

Indeed, this is the work in which we are presently engaged. As the voice of Yeshayahu will call out to us, as he does every Shabbat Chazon, cleanse yourselves, be purified, רחצו הזכו⁷, and only then, remove the wickedness which is in front of me, הסיירו רוע מעלליכם מנגד עיני חדלו הרע. What is needed first is a process of purification and purgation, רחצו הזכו, and the proper actions will follow. The coldest of hearts can melt, the hardest of hearts can be made soft. As envisioned by Yechezkel, our repentance, redemption and return will be defined precisely by this process, ‘I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh, and I will give them a heart of flesh’, ‘והסירתו את לב האבן מבשרם ואתן להם לב בשר’⁸.

⁵ Berakhot 17a.

⁶ ibid.

⁷ Yeshayahu 1:16.

⁸ Yechezkel 11:19.