

## **You want me to do what to my heart?**

**Rabbi Mona Alfi**

**Shabbat Eikev – August 7, 2020**

From the time I could talk, I have prayed every night before I go to sleep. When I was little I would say the Shema and ask God to protect the people I loved. And then at some point I shortened it to just the Shema. But about 10 years ago, I remember hearing Oprah Winfrey say something about a gratitude journal. Considering I had a baby and a kindergartner at the time, that just seemed like too much work. So I took the idea and modified it, and since then, before I go to sleep, I say the shema and I thank God for all of my blessings, and I go through them one by one. Thank you God for my health. Thank you God for my husband and my children, and that they are healthy. Thank you God that I have a job. Thank you God that I have a home. And so on and so on.

I do this every night. I do this for three reasons, first, so I don't take any of these things for granted. And secondly, because I have found that if I fall asleep thinking about my blessings, rather than the things that might have bothered me during the day, I sleep better and wake up the next day with a better attitude. And thirdly, I have found that the more I allow myself to experience gratitude, the more I am not only able to feel empathy for others, but also greater is my desire to help others who do not have these things.

This attitude has helped me through the pandemic. When someone asks me how I'm doing, I do a quick mental check list, my family and I are all healthy, my husband and I are working, we have a house to take shelter in, and we can take care of our children. And so I reply, "We're good, thank God. I have nothing to complain about."

Does that mean there's nothing that I'd like to see changed? Of course not. Does it mean there are not things that are seriously wrong in the world right now? No. Does it mean I'm not bothered by things? Absolutely not. What it means is that I am very aware that there are so many who are truly suffering, and that what I am experiencing may be an inconvenience, but it is not, thank God, a tragedy.

And this may sound neurotic, and I am nothing if not neurotic, but if I'm feeling really blue or sad, I think of our congregant Bernie Marks, z"l, who survived Aushwitz and who lost almost his entire family because of the Holocaust, and I ask myself, is what's bothering me really worth complaining about? I know it's dark, but it helps me put things in perspective and to remember what really matters.

This week's Torah portion, Parashat Eikev, reminds us of the importance of gratitude. Moses cautions the Israelites that once they enter the land of Israel they shouldn't forget all that God did for them when they were vulnerable and weak in Egypt and in the wilderness. But rather, we should remember what it felt like when we needed God's protection to exist, and that we should treat others with the same compassion that was given to us.

The word "lev" or "heart" is used 96 times in the Torah, 47 of those times are in the Book of Deuteronomy, and 12 of those are in this portion alone. And one of the ways it is used will totally floor you.

Moses said "...the Eternal took delight in your ancestors to love them, and God chose their seed after them, you above all people ... Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiffnecked." (Deut. 10: 15-16)

I feel that it is important to state that "circumcising your heart" is only a metaphor, and not something you should ever actually try to do.

What Moses is really saying is that we should actively strive to have a softened heart, open and caring to others. In other words, we should be the opposite of Pharoah, who hardened his heart over and over again, not just against the Israelites, but also against the suffering of all of the Egyptians, permitting plague after plague to befall all of Egypt, because he had deliberately hardened his heart against the our ancestors, and he refused to care what the cost would be on all of Egypt. It was only when his own house was touched by tragedy with the death of his first born, that he finally allowed us to go, and not because his heart had been softened, but because it had been pierced by personal tragedy.

This warning reminds me of an old tale told by the Nanticoke tribe about a boy and his grandfather.

“One evening, an elderly Cherokee brave told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside of people.

He said, my child, the battle is between two ‘wolves’ inside us all. One is evil. It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority and ego.

The other is good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith.”

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather “which wolf wins?”

The old man simply replied, “the one that you feed.”

(<https://www.nanticokeindians.org/page/tale-of-two-wolves>

## The Tale of Two Wolves - Nanticoke Indian Association

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Moses says to “circumcise the foreskin of your hearts” and not “soften your hearts” because one is a choice that you have to make, and the other is passive and can simply happen. Moses is telling us that we must actively choose to be sensitive to the needs of others, choose not to be stubborn and stiff necked, because compassion and cruelty are choices we make by what we do, or choose not to do. As the grandfather in the story teaches, the wolf that wins is the one we feed.

Earlier in Deuteronomy chapter 10, just prior to Moses urging the Israelites to circumcise their hearts, he says: “And now, Israel, what

does the Eternal your God require of you, but to fear the Eternal your God, to walk in all God's ways, and to love God, and to serve the Eternal your God with all your heart and with all your soul...(Deut. 10:12)"

In order for us to serve God we must fully open our hearts to the world around us. To walk in God's ways is to do as God did for us, not only when we were slaves in Egypt, but also when we were unable to care for ourselves in the wilderness. This is how we serve God with a full heart and a full soul, we begin with a sense of gratitude.

Elie Wiesel, who lost his family in the Holocaust and who himself survived the Concentration Camps, said "when a person doesn't have gratitude, something is missing in his or her humanity. A person can almost be defined by his or her attitude toward gratitude."

May the Holy One of Blessing, help us in being able to open our eyes to the abundance of blessings we enjoy every day, so that we will soften our hearts and our attitudes towards those who need us most. May we never be like Pharaoh with hearts made hard from indifference and hate. But rather, may we walk in the way of the Eternal One, helping all who need us.

Ken yehi ratzon – may this be God's will. Amen.