

Hearts that are Supple
Parashat Devarim
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The Morning Ritual

The first thirty minutes of my morning don't change much. I'm usually awakened by our cat a few minutes before five. I ignore her briefly, then get up, put on a bathrobe, feed her, and make coffee. Then I step outside to retrieve the paper. This week in Seattle, daybreak is a little after five, so it is dark and still. I say the Shema loudly enough that I'd be heard by any imaginary person on the sidewalk.

I've made one change for the last ten days or so. Very quietly, I say one other thing: the walls have been breached. This disrupts the peaceful, sleepy state I'm been in before. I'm immediately feeling a little on edge, a little vulnerable, a little somber. This feeling doesn't last for long. Once I've done my bathroom chores, washed my hands for the requisite twenty seconds, poured and served our coffee, I return to bed and start reading. But the day, one of twenty one days, has been colored with a little sadness.

Commanding your Emotions

So why do I announce each morning that the walls have been breached? We are in a three week mourning period in the Jewish calendar called *Bein ha'Metzarim*, between the narrows. This period begins with the 17th of Tammuz and ends with Tisha B'Av. The Romans, who had besieged Jerusalem, finally breached the walls of the city and began their attack within it on the 17th. The destruction of the second temple was three weeks later, on the 9th of Av. We remember a number of other historical tragedies during these three weeks, some separated by centuries, but united in our memories: the siege of Jerusalem and destruction of the first Temple by the Babylonians, the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, the outbreak of World War One. Our classic response is the book of lamentations, a painful description of living through the siege of a walled city. We'll chant it, virtually together via Zoom, on Wednesday night, Erev Tisha B'Av.

This year, perhaps for the first time, I'm beginning to understand the impulse of tossing the memories of so many tragedies into a single three week box. It guarantees that we will remember them in future years, and it also gives us some sense of containment. Our own *Bein ha'Metzarim* today seems much larger than three weeks. It has been 140 days since the announcement of a quarantine in response to the COVID pandemic. We are in a narrow place, our actions constrained, our lives under siege.

A Broken Heart

The first part of the Shema, beginning with the six words that I say aloud on my porch each morning, comes from next week's parashah. Two verses later, we are instructed to keep these words on our heart. A Hasidic tale begins with a follower's profound question to his Rebbe: "Why does Torah tell us to 'place these words upon your hearts'? Why does it not tell us to place these holy words in our hearts?" The Rebbe answers: "It is because as we are, our hearts are closed, and we cannot place the holy words in our hearts. So we place them on top of our hearts. And there they stay until, one day, the heart breaks and the words fall in."

Parker Palmer, in a blog that begins with that tale, writes this:

"Suffering breaks our hearts—but there are two quite different ways for the heart to break. There's the brittle heart that breaks apart into a thousand shards, a heart that takes us down as it explodes and is sometimes thrown like a grenade at the source of its pain. Then there's the supple heart, the one that breaks open, not apart, growing into greater capacity for the many forms of love. Only the supple heart can hold suffering in a way that opens to new life."

So how can we be sure that our heart is supple, not brittle? Mr. Palmer, who is an author and moral educator, suggests that we need to exercise our hearts. How? By remaining open to the lessons that life provides—the sorrows as well as the joys.

Individual and Collective Loss

Judaism has much to teach us about exercising our hearts. For our deepest losses as individuals we have prescribed periods of mourning: Shiva, Shloshim, the remainder of the first year, the *yahrzeits* thereafter. The shape of this sequence of mourning is instructive. The mourning never really ends, but it moves from acute intense individual loss to participation in a broader world. Throughout our lives, we will say Kaddish in a minyan. At first, that can feel very difficult. How do I praise God when I have just lost so much? That feeling, though, is precisely what makes saying Kaddish itself praiseworthy, and the community can learn much by listening, and supporting, the mourners within it. In the last step of this sequence, the *yahrzeits*, the recitation of the words has been smoothed by time and practice, the hurt lessened, but the memory of those whom we have lost is reawakened.

The three weeks is somewhat different. The loss is not just individual, it is communal. The loss is not just immediate, it is historical. The mourning during these three weeks is designed to grow in intensity. We begin the process by remembering the breaching of the walls, we end with the chanting of lamentations. We begin with the three haftaroth of admonition, but we can look forward to the seven haftaroth of consolation that will follow.

So, my little morning ritual right now leavens the twenty-one days of this period with a touch of sorrow. I'm exercising my heart.

I'm going to close with a poem. It is by Mary Oliver, who wrote extraordinary poetry about the natural world we all share. A warning—this is a very sad poem, and it is another way to exercise our hearts.

The Loons

Lead, by Mary Oliver

Here is a story
to break your heart.
Are you willing?
This winter
the loons came to our harbor
and died, one by one,
of nothing we could see.
A friend told me
of one on the shore
that lifted its head and opened
the elegant beak and cried out
in the long, sweet savoring of its life
which, if you have heard it,
you know is a sacred thing,
and for which, if you have not heard it,
you had better hurry to where
they still sing.
And, believe me, tell know one
just where that is.
The next morning
this loon, speckled
and iridescent and with a plan
to fly home
to some hidden lake,
was dead on the shore.
I tell you this
to break your heart,
by which I mean only
that it break open and never close again
to the rest of the world.

Shabbat Shalom, and have an easy fast.

A few References

I virtually attend a candle lighting service on Friday Evenings offered by the Kavana Cooperative in Seattle. Often a volunteer will offer a brief *derashah* on the current portion, and I've learned to listen carefully when the volunteer is Heather Paul. You can learn more about her through her blog called scattered leaves, at <https://scatteredleaves.net>. She wrote one for our service on the 10th of July, that was crucial to this writing. It is titled "Holding the Shattered Pieces".

That blog entry begins with a reference to another blog, this one by Parker Palmer, written in 2015. It is titled "Heartbreak, Violence, and Hope for New Life, and can be found at <https://onbeing.org/blog/heartbreak-violence-and-hope-for-new-life/>.

In turn, it ends with a portion of the Mary Oliver poem, which can be found at <https://books.google.com/books?id=CErFfdNS8hEC&lpg=PP1&dq=bibliogroup%3A%22New%20and%20Selected%20Poems%22&pg=PA54#v=onepage&q&f=false>