

## PARASHAT EKEV

### *Deuteronomy 7:12–11:25*

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*Parashat Ekev* continues the speeches of Moses to the Israelites. He tells them that, if they maintain their covenant with God by observing all the commandments, God will make them fruitful and victorious over their enemies. Reminding them of their forty years of wandering through the wilderness, Moses tells them: “God subjected you to the hardship of hunger . . . then gave you manna . . . in order to teach you that human beings do not live on bread alone. . . .” He then warns them that after settling in their land and enjoying its fruits, they should not arrogantly assume: “My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me.” Nor, continues Moses, should they conclude that it is for their virtue that God allows them to defeat their enemies and conquer their land. Rather, it is punishment of the inhabitants for idolatry, and it is God’s fulfillment of the covenant made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Moses recalls the disloyalty of the people; how they built the golden calf when he was receiving the Ten Commandments on Mount Horeb; how they rebelled at Kadesh-barnea; and how he intervened with God to save them, granting them another set of the tablets on which the Ten Commandments were engraved. Moses recounts the death and burial of Aaron. He also tells the people that God wants them to “cut away the thickening about their hearts,” observe the commandments, and learn from their history how God freed them from Egyptian slavery and led them through the desert. If you keep the commandments, Moses promises, God will dislodge all nations before you. No one will stand before your power.

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## OUR TARGUM

• 1 •

Continuing his speeches to the Israelites before they enter the Land of Israel, Moses warns them that “if you obey these laws and observe them faithfully” God will keep the covenant made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He informs the people that their land will be fruitful and without disease, and he tells them they will be victorious over their enemies.

He reminds the people of their journey through the wilderness. God, Moses explains, tested them with hardships to determine if they would keep the commandments. They received manna to eat, “in order to teach you that human beings do not live on bread alone, but they may live on anything that *Adonai* decrees.”

Moses cautions the Israelites against arrogance, advising that, when eating from the land, “give thanks to *Adonai* your God for the good land that has been given you.”

He warns: “When you have eaten your fill, and have built fine houses to live in, and your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver

and gold have increased, and everything you own has prospered, beware that you do not grow boastful and forget *Adonai* your God—who freed you from the land of Egypt, the house of bondage; who led you through the . . . wilderness . . . who fed you with manna.” Be careful not to say: “My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me. Remember that it is *Adonai* your God who gives you the power to get wealth, in fulfillment of the covenant that God made on oath with your ancestors (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), as is still the case.”

• 2 •

Moses also warns the Israelites: After you have been victorious over your enemies, do not say that “God has enabled me to occupy this land because of my virtues.” Moses points out that God has enabled the Israelites to possess the land by dispossessing their enemies because of their “wickedness.” God has also given them the land in fulfillment of the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.



• 3 •

Recalling the time when he climbed Mount Horeb [Sinai] and brought back the Tablets of the Covenant with the Ten Commandments, Moses reminds the Israelites that their ancestors built a golden calf. He tells the people that God said to him: "I see that this is a stiffnecked people. Let Me alone and I will destroy them and blot out their name from under heaven, and I will make you a nation far more numerous than they."

Moses reports that after shattering the Tablets of the Covenant, he sided with the people, arguing with God: "Do not annihilate Your very own people. . . . Else the country from which You freed us will say, 'It was because *Adonai* was powerless to bring them into the land that was promised them, and because God hated them, that God brought them out to have them die in the wilderness.'" (See discussion of parallel text in *A Torah Commentary for Our Times*, Volume II, *Parashat Ki Tisa*, Exodus 30:11–34:35, pp. 77–85.)

Moses relates that God gave him new Tablets

of the Covenant with the Ten Commandments and told him to resume the journey toward the Land of Israel. Moses also recounts the death and burial of his brother, Aaron.

• 4 •

"And now, O Israel, what does *Adonai* your God demand of you?" Moses eloquently asks the people. God, he declares, demands that they keep the commandments. "Mark, the heavens to their uttermost reaches belong to *Adonai* your God, the earth and all that is on it! Yet it was to your ancestors that *Adonai* was drawn in love for them, so that God chose you, their direct descendants, from among all peoples."

For those reasons, Moses continues, "Cut away the thickening about your hearts and stiffen your necks no more. For *Adonai* your God is God supreme . . . upholding the cause of the fatherless and the widow, befriending the stranger . . . with food and clothing. You too must befriend the stranger. . . . You must revere *Adonai* your God."

## THEMES

*Parashat Ekev* contains two important themes:

1. Arrogance and gratitude.
2. "Circumcising" the heart.

## PEREK ALEF: *Warning against Arrogance*

Moses raises important ethical considerations in these speeches to the people before they enter the Land of Israel and before he goes to die on Mount Nebo. Recalling their difficult years of wandering through the desert, he tells them that God has tested us with hunger, long days of hot sun, and long cold nights. All that we were given to eat was manna. The years were filled with harsh trials.

Moses, however, does not focus only on the past. He worries about the future. He foresees a time when the Israelites will be comfortable, prosperous, and secure in their land. They will have defeated all their enemies and will be enjoying a flourishing economy. He wonders what the

state of their spiritual health will be in such a future era of victory and abundance. Unsure of what they will choose to do, Moses presents them with four guidelines:

*Guideline One:* Remember the hardships of your past and how you were tested for forty years in the desert to teach you that human beings do not live on bread alone but on what God commands.

*Guideline Two:* God is bringing you into a good land where you will lack nothing. When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to *Adonai* your God for the good land that has been given you.

*Guideline Three:* When you are satisfied, have built fine houses, and have increased your herds, gold, and silver, beware of your heart growing haughty, of forgetting God's commandments, of

saying: "My power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me!"

*Guideline Four:* After you have defeated your enemies and you occupy the land, do not say to yourselves: "God has enabled me to occupy this land because of my virtues."

Several commentators note Moses' concern as expressed in his guidelines and ask: Why this anxiety about how the Israelites will deal with their future victories and prosperity? Why does Moses focus on their response to success?

Early rabbinic interpreters provide a clue in their discussion of *Guideline Two* in which Moses commands the people: "When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to *Adonai* your God for the good land that has been given you." Explaining this guideline, talmudic commentators point out that it was the catalyst that led the rabbis of the Great Assembly in Jerusalem to create the *Birkat ha-Mazon*, the blessing recited at the end of each meal. Concerned with fulfilling their "debt" to God, they reasoned that "whoever eats and enjoys fruits from God's world without pronouncing a prayer of gratitude steals God's property."

Rabbinic interpreters believed that Moses was deeply worried about the Israelites after their entering the Land of Israel. He feared they would settle in their land, enjoy its fruits, and conclude that they owed nothing to God. Moses presumed they would forget about all that God had done for them and reach the conclusion that they alone were responsible for their harvest of plenty.

For this reason, say the rabbis, Moses warns the Israelites not to eat without pronouncing blessings of thanksgiving, not to enjoy the fruits of the land without acknowledging God with words of gratitude. He compares "eating" and "drinking" without reciting a prayer of thanks to "stealing." (*Berachot* 33a-35a)

Rabbi Nachman and Rabbi Yochanan connect ingratitude not only to the dangers of "stealing from God" but also to "forgetting" and "denying" God. Moses, they argue, is concerned that the Israelites will enter the land, enjoy great prosperity, and forget all the commandments God has given them. Surrounded by abundance, they will grow arrogant and deny God's claim on them. Such "forgetting" will lead to abandon-

ing both their moral and ritual traditions. It will bring an end to the sacred society they are seeking to create. (*Berachot* 49b and *Sotah* 4b)



Ramban (Nachmanides)

Nachmanides also underscores the importance of Moses' emphasis upon "remembering." He claims that the Israelites, about to conquer the Land of Israel and enjoy its fruits, will assume that they alone have brought about all of their victories and are responsible for the bountiful harvests of their fields. Such a conclusion will be logical. After all they are strong men, people of courage and determination. They will have prevailed in war, and the produce of the land will convince them that they alone are the creators of their destiny. For that reason, says Nachmanides, Moses instructs them: "When you are about to say, 'My power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me!' *remember. . .*"

Nachmanides points out that, for Moses, "remembering" is an antidote to arrogance. He explains that the great leader understands the tendency of human beings to take credit for their accomplishments and victories. Self-congratulations are always a dangerous temptation. So Moses warns them to recall their history and cool their pride by remembering that it is God who liberated them from the slavery of Egypt, where they had no power; and it is God who sustained them in the desert wilderness, where they were helpless and hungry. When they are dwelling in comfortable homes, celebrating the bounty of harvests and their wealth, they are advised to recall that it is God who gives the power to accumulate riches. And, when they are about to boast of their victories and gloat about their virtues, they are to recall that it is God who gave them the power to destroy their enemies.

#### *The dangers of pride*

*The people of Israel are compared to a vine to teach us that just as a vine has large and small clusters of grapes, the larger ones hanging lower*

*than the smaller ones, the greater a person is (the heavier his wisdom), the profounder his humility.*

*King Solomon teaches that pride causes a person to speak dishonestly. It forces a person to deviate from the truth and to make accusations that are unfounded. God weeps over those who are filled with pride. (Bachya ben Asher, Kad ha-Kemach, Encyclopedia of Torah Thoughts, Charles B. Chavel, translator, Shilo Publishing House, Inc., New York, 1980, pp. 130-136)*

Nachmanides maintains that such recollections, precisely at the moment of celebration, place pride into perspective. They moderate human claims to glory and the dangers of self-centered flattery. History humbles human beings. It prevents arrogant assumptions about human power by setting victories and defeats into the larger and more mysterious context of all life. In his warnings to the Israelites, Moses seeks to teach them that all their bountiful harvests, their wealth and amazing triumphs are not the work of their hands alone but are gifts of God. (Comments on Deuteronomy 8:18-9:4)

***By bread alone***

*Human beings do not live from physical bread . . . but only by God's power, which went forth at the time of creation and which caused bread to come into existence. It is from this spiritual essence that human beings live because it is the food that provides nourishment for the soul. (From Likutei Torah, as found in A.Z. Friedman, Wellsprings of Torah, p. 387)*

Rabbi Moshe ben Chaim Alshekh agrees with Nachmanides. He comments that "the person who enjoys exceptional wealth and apparent good fortune" must deal with powerful temptations. It is difficult, he explains, not to "incline toward arrogance" and "the feeling that one is the architect of one's own good fortune independent of God." The danger of such feelings, says Alshekh, is that they often lead a person away from following God's commandments.

The process of moving away from God's commandments, Alshekh argues, "is gradual, almost imperceptible in its progress." It begins "by observing the commandments with the expectation of some material reward. Next, one eats without giving thanks or credit to God. Finally, one takes the credit for successes and bounty and then rejects God and turns to idol worship." Moses, says Alshekh, understood these dangers, and this explains his guidelines to the people. (Commentary to Deuteronomy 7:4-8:14)



Leibowitz

Modern commentator Nehama Leibowitz echoes the conclusions of both Nachmanides and Alshekh. She points out that Moses' observations focus on the tendency of human arrogance and the resulting dangers in forgetting human reliance upon God. "In blindness," she writes, "human beings tend to detect the guiding hand of God only when it is visible in miracles, as had been the case with Israel during the whole of their progress through the wilderness. They fail to see the hidden miracles performed for them continually, even when the world around them . . . seems to be going on as usual."

Moses, Leibowitz seems to be saying, is intent on warning the Israelites against such "blindness." He is anxious that they retain their sense of awe about the world and their unique history. This explains his reminder to them of God's power at work in their past. "Recollection of visible miracles," she concludes, "is designed to open our eyes to the hidden ones that are the foundation of the whole Torah . . . to awaken our faith in the direct intervention of God." (See *Studies in Devarim*, pp. 90-96.)

Rabbi Morris Adler sees in Moses' guidelines something beyond that suggested by previous commentators. He suggests that the awareness that "human beings do not live on bread alone" is "the highest objective of all religious enterprise and aspiration." Adler argues that, in this "great primary statement," Moses is claiming that human beings are "not only body, but also mind."

They are capable of thought and do not realize their potential unless their intellectual powers are awakened to ask questions and seek answers. "Intellectual curiosity is one of the most stirring and significant aspects of human life. . . . When this capacity develops to its fullest, you get scientific knowledge; you get the understanding of the world about us. . . ."

Moses seeks to stress the importance of the human mind by warning the Israelites that feeding the body bread is not enough. Human beings require intellectual nourishment as well. Education must be given highest priority in human affairs because it is the way the intellect is cultivated and evolves.

Adler, however, believes that, when Moses warns "human beings do not live on bread alone," he also means to emphasize that human beings are seekers both of good and of faith. They cannot live without exercising their sense of justice, their sensitivity to what is right and fair. Nor can they exist without acknowledging that "there is mystery in this world; there are vistas of which our limited human understanding can have only the faintest and vaguest of comprehension."

Moses, Adler seems to be suggesting, means to counter the arrogance of those who declare, "My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me," or who assume that their victories and harvests are of their own proud making. He senses the dangers of their "moral callousness," their selfish concerns, their "loss of obligation" to use their talents and abilities to benefit others, and their impaired understanding that human beings are "dependent upon cosmic forces" that sustain all life. Through his warnings, Adler argues, Moses is urging upon the Israelites the wisdom of gratitude and humility that ultimately leads to responsibility. "True gratitude," he concludes, "always flowers in obligation."

Nearly all of our commentators see in Moses' guidelines significant lessons. They single out arrogance and pride as dangers that lead to moral insensitivity, corruption, and the denial of God. Moses, they believe, is suggesting that the antidote to arrogance is both gratitude and the power of recollection. Our interpreters extend his view,

concluding that an appreciation of history puts all human accomplishments into perspective. It roots us in gratitude and a sense of obligation for the gifts of God.

### PEREK BET: *Cutting Away Thickness about the Heart*

In these speeches to the Israelites, Moses not only recalls the past but speaks eloquently about the challenges of the future. He recalls how he climbed Mount Sinai to bring the Ten Commandments to their parents' generation and how they rebelled by building a golden calf. Then he recounts his intervention to save the people and his return to Sinai to bring them a second set of the tablets, having shattered the first upon seeing them dancing around their golden idol.

All that history, says Moses, is a prelude to obligations for the future. Having reminded the people of how easily, after just forty days, their parents had given up on him and enthusiastically donated their gold to create an idol, Moses puts a hard question to them: "And now, O Israel, what does *Adonai* your God demand of you?"

He allows no pause between the rhetorical question and his answer. "Only this," he tells them, "to revere *Adonai* your God, to walk only in God's paths, to love and serve *Adonai* your God with all your heart and soul, keeping God's commandments and laws, which I enjoin upon you today, for your good." Seeking to enlarge their understanding of God, perhaps to break the dangerous tendency toward reducing God to an object or an idol, Moses points his finger to the heavens. "Behold, the heavens and infinite stars, the earth and everything on it belongs to God." In other words, God is greater than any *thing* a human being might make, even greater than the sum of all the wonderful aspects of creation. God is the Source of everything in the heavens and on the earth.

Yet, Moses does not conclude his description of God with this observation about God's creation of all aspects of the cosmos. He stretches the imagination of the Israelites by declaring, "And with it all, God was drawn in love to your ancestors and chose you, their direct descendants, from among all peoples."

One can sense the satisfaction and pride felt by the Israelites listening to Moses. His declaration makes them feel special, selected for privileges denied to others. It is satisfying to believe that God “loves” them and will protect and provide for them. “To be chosen by God,” one can almost hear the Israelites whispering to one another, “means to be designated from all that exists in the heavens and on the earth for special treatment! We’re the lucky ones!”

Moses, however, does not allow the people time to relish such conclusions. Instead he uses tough language to stun them into another dimension in their relationship to God. He tells them, “Cut away the thickening about your hearts and stiffen your necks no more. For *Adonai* your God is God supreme . . . the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who shows no favor and takes no bribe, but upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and befriends the stranger, providing them with food and clothing.—You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. . . . Love, therefore, *Adonai* your God, and always keep God’s charge, laws, rules, and commandments.”

It is a powerful statement. Moses intends to stir the Israelites before him. He uses the language they know in an entirely novel way. They are familiar with the commandment to circumcise their newborn infant sons, but now Moses is commanding them to “circumcise their hearts.” What can he mean? Does Moses really have in mind some kind of grizzly ritual of cutting flesh?

Within Jewish tradition, circumcision, which consists of “cutting away” the foreskin of the penis and exposing the glans, is not only a surgical procedure. From the time of Abraham it has also been a ritual for identifying a Jew with the *berit*, or “covenant,” between the Jewish people and God. The ceremony is called *berit milah*, or the “covenant of circumcision.” Traditionally, the ritual is performed on the eighth day after the birth of males, or as a part of the male conversion ceremony, in fulfillment of the Torah’s commandment: “Every male among you throughout the generations shall be circumcised . . . that shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you.” (Genesis 17:9–14)

While circumcision of the penis is a “mark” of being a Jew and has been a significant force for Jewish identity and survival, one wonders why Moses draws a parallel between “circumcising” the penis and the heart. A clue may be found in the speeches of the prophet Jeremiah to the leaders and people of Jerusalem during the reign of King Josiah (639–609 B.C.E.). Seeing the unjust treatment of the poor and outraged by the corruption of the rich and the absence of morality throughout Judean society, Jeremiah calls the people to return to their faith. Speaking in the name of God, he commands them: “Circumcise your hearts to *Adonai*. Cut away the thickening about your hearts, people of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, lest My anger break forth like fire and burn, with none to quench it, because of your wicked acts.” (Jeremiah 4:1–4)

Commenting on Jeremiah’s message, modern interpreter Rabbi Sheldon Blank writes that the “symbol” of Jeremiah’s concern is the “uncircumcised heart.” He explains that “biblical psychology localizes feelings and emotions in the body and looks to the heart as the organ of comprehension—an uncircumcised heart is ‘a closed mind.’” Blank points out that Jeremiah draws an analogy between the human heart and a field where crops are planted. “A farmer does not plant an untilled land that weeds have taken over. To make the soil productive, first he plows it and rids it of weeds. So it is with human beings; the human mind as well must be cleared of noxious growth and made receptive. Only then can ideas strike root and grow. This,” Blank concludes, “is the obvious meaning of the figure in its first appearance: the uncircumcised heart is the unreceptive mind.” (*Jeremiah: Man and Prophet*, Ktav, New York, 1961, pp. 193–207)

According to Blank and other modern interpreters, Jeremiah warns the people of Judah that, unless they change their ways and “return” to carrying out the commandments of Torah, they will encounter “disaster after disaster.” Their nation will be destroyed by nations sweeping in from the north. “Wash your heart clean,” the prophet admonishes them. But all he encounters is stubbornness, “the unreceptive mind.” As a result, he complains bitterly in the name of God: “For My people are stupid, They give Me no

heed;/They are foolish children,/They are not intelligent,/They are clever at doing wrong;/But unable to do right.” (Jeremiah 4:14, 22)

Jeremiah’s definition of the uncircumcised heart is moral insensitivity. It is acting cleverly; conniving to cheat others; taking advantage of them; oppressing the poor, homeless, and hungry; turning away from those who require healing and help. The uncircumcised heart is a form of stubbornness that leads to callous and cruel treatment of others.

The cure for such a hard heart is to “circumcise” it, to “cut away the thickening” that causes the insensitivity and produces the “closed mind” and the inability to choose right from wrong. Yet, how is that to be accomplished? How do you prevent the heart from hardening again into dangerous and selfish habits? Jeremiah suggests that the human heart, or “mind,” must be nurtured like a crop-bearing field. It requires plowing, constant weeding, and seeding. For Jeremiah “circumcising the heart” begins with the acknowledgment of God’s covenant with Israel. By conscientiously integrating the commandments of Torah into every aspect of what we do, we uplift our awareness of good and evil, of what improves the quality of human society, and of what harms the common good. The sensitive heart for Jeremiah is synonymous with a wise, just, and caring heart.



Rashi

Jeremiah’s use of Moses’ command to the Israelites to “cut away the thickening about your hearts” also seems to form the basis of Rashi’s interpretation. He argues that Moses is telling the Israelites to “remove the closure and cover on your hearts that prevent My words from gaining entrance.” Rashi does not identify how the heart, which for him is the center of human affection and intelligence, is covered and closed. What he makes clear is that, once a person’s heart is sealed, God’s wisdom cannot enter; God’s words of Torah are locked out. Whatever barrier is blocking access to the heart must be cut away

to restore understanding, seeing, hearing, and sensitivity.

How shall that be done? Rashi suggests that the remedy for dissolving the membrane that, from neglect, grows around the heart is constant study, self-scrutiny, and performance of the ethical and ritual mitzvot of Torah. This, presumably, is what Moses means when he shocks the Israelites with the words: “Circumcise your hearts.” Study of Torah, says Rashi, is the way Jews “cut away the thickness” about their hearts. (Comments on Exodus 6:10 and Deuteronomy 10:16)

Rashi may have had in mind a comment by Rabbi Avira or Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, both of whom identify the “thickening about the heart” with the *yetzer ha-ra*, or the human “inclination for wrongdoing.” The *yetzer ha-ra* is our tendency to self-centeredness, to weighing all decisions by how they will benefit us. It is evident in our uncaring attitude about the feelings and needs of others. The rabbis claim that unless the *yetzer ha-ra* is carefully balanced by the *yetzer hatov*, our “inclination for doing good,” it will clog the heart, causing an “occlusion.” It will prevent us from doing the will of God. Moses, the rabbis conclude, understands this danger and, therefore, cautions the Israelites to remove the “occlusion,” or *yetzer ha-ra*, from their hearts. (*Sukab* 52a)



Hirsch

***Make your heart obedient . . .***

*Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch suggests that by telling the Israelites “to circumcise their hearts,” Moses meant “to make your heart obedient to yourself and to your God . . . to do away with the intractability, the insubordination of your heart, to bring your heart with its feelings and desires under your mastery . . . [and] not to allow yourselves to be detracted from the service of God by any uncontrolled thinking or willing and by no stubbornness and self-willed obstinacy.” (Comment on Deuteronomy 10:16)*





Rambam (Maimonides)

Moses Maimonides sees in Moses' statement a warning against "obstinacy" or "stubbornness." He argues that the whole purpose of the Torah is to put human desires and creativity into human hands. Freedom of choice is given to us. The Torah helps direct our choices. It encourages us to realize that we make mistakes; stubbornness and selfishness often overwhelm our best intentions and confuse us.

Moses, says Maimonides, understood this. For that reason he warned that the Israelites would settle in their new land and sink into self-centered obstinacy. They would forget about God, who had liberated them from slavery. They would abandon God's Torah and commandments, making decisions based on selfishness and greed rather than on the Torah's laws of justice, kindness, and love. Maimonides maintains that, sensing the danger, Moses commands them to "circumcise their hearts." By this he meant: In making decisions, keep your hearts open to the teachings of Torah, to the anguish of others, to the mistakes you will make and the need to rectify them. (*Guide for the Perplexed* 33)

Not satisfied with Maimonides' rational interpretation, some chasidic rabbis suggest that Moses was not referring to human stubbornness or the painful plight of others when he told the Israelites to "circumcise the thickening about your hearts and stiffen your necks no more." Instead, say these chasidic teachers, Moses suspected that the Israelites would begin to question the Torah and its commandments. They would raise doubts about the ethical behavior commanded, pointing out that by following the Torah we must give charity to the poor and, therefore, take less for ourselves. Questions, say the chasidic rabbis, can lead to dangerous answers and choices. Proof that Moses realizes this lies in his statement, "Circumcise the thickening about your hearts," which when punctuated with some minor adjustments means, "If you wish to circumcise the

thickening about your heart and your neck, then ask no more questions."

Supporting their view, these chasidic interpreters recall how Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi was constantly besieged for answers to difficult questions about the meaning of various Torah commandments. Wherever he traveled, Jews would crowd about him. As he finished his prayers in the synagogue, they would approach him with their most difficult questions. One day, when he apparently recalled Moses' speech to the Israelites, he told them, "Ask no more questions! Instead, join with me in singing this melody. Hum it if you do not know the words." As the people sang, their spirits were renewed and their minds cleared. They were able to look upon the Torah and uncover answers for their questions. (See S. Y. Zevin, *A Treasury of Chasidic Tales*, Volume Two, Mesorah Publications, New York/Hillel Press, Jerusalem, 1980, pp. 512-515.)

The chasidic masters are concerned with the attitude of cynical rationalism, which assumes that if you ask enough of the right questions you will understand everything—all the mysteries of creation, heaven and earth, life and death. Such a presumption leads, they believe, to arrogance and dangerous assumptions of superiority and insensitivity. Moses, say the chasidic teachers, feared such attitudes. He identified them with what he called the "thickness about your heart." He knew that human beings are incapable of answering all questions and that there is much about our universe and ourselves that will always remain shrouded in mystery. So, say the chasidic teachers, he tells the Israelites: "If you wish to circumcise the thickening about your hearts and your neck, then ask no more questions. Be satisfied with what the Torah teaches and with the vast mysteries and wonders of life."

Clearly the command to "circumcise the heart" is a strange and baffling one. As we can see, interpreters reach a variety of opinions about its meaning. On the face of it, "cutting away the thickening about the heart" is a frightening, even grizzly, suggestion. Yet the aging Moses knows that he must attract the attention of the young Israelites as they ready themselves to follow Joshua into the Land of Israel. Perhaps that explains why he uses such a shocking metaphor. Human

sensitivities for justice, truth, honesty, and kindness can easily be calloused. "See enough violence," psychologists observe, "and you begin to get used to it. You begin to tolerate it, even excuse it."

After leading his people for forty years, Moses knew their hearts and his. He understood human strengths and weaknesses and the dangers of anger, pride, self-centeredness, habit, callous insensitivity, and stubbornness. These needed to be "cut away," not unlike the foreskin, as a sign of the covenant between God and the Jewish people.

The purpose of the covenant between God and the Jewish people is to raise human life to levels of sacred behavior, justice, caring, honesty, and love. Anything that prevents Jews from such an accomplishment must be removed. Thus, Moses warns the Israelites with a powerful metaphor. Using the ritual of circumcision, he commands them: "Cut away the thickening about your hearts and stiffen your necks no more." Achieving the Promised Land requires heightened moral sensitivity and integrity.

## QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. The Book of Proverbs contains several warnings about pride and arrogance. We are told:

"In the mouth of a fool is a rod of arrogance,  
But the lips of the wise protect them." (14:3)  
"Pride goes before ruin,/Arrogance, before failure./Better to be humble and among the lowly/Than to share spoils with the proud." (16:18-19) "A person's pride will humiliate him,/But a humble person will obtain honor." (29:23) Would you agree with these ancient observations? Why do Jewish commentators see dangerous ethical consequences in pride? Can the act of giving thanks curb arrogance? What else do our commentators suggest as antidotes to pride?

2. Our commentators define the "uncircumcised heart" as the unreceptive, thoughtless, and insensitive mind, clogged by habit and stubbornness. Chasidic tradition argues that the way to open such a mind is through quiet meditation or song, not through debating questions and answers. Would you agree? Are there other "better" means of "circumcising" the heart for the purpose of achieving sensitivity, compassion, and wisdom?