

## KOL JESHURUN EPISODE 2 –

### Softening Our Hearts, Renewing Ourselves

**Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz:** [00:00:00] Welcome to Kol Jeshurun, a podcast from Congregation B'nai Jeshurun. A vibrant and flourishing, reform Jewish community in Short Hills, New Jersey. Welcome. I am Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz, Kol Jeshurun is where you can come to engage with teachings of relevant wisdom and music. You will hear from our clergy, staff and guest speakers who will help bring meaning into a world that so badly needs it. If you would like to learn more about our congregation, please visit us at [tbj.org](http://tbj.org).

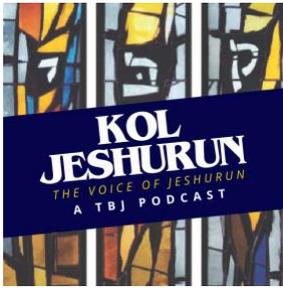
**Cantor Lucy Fishbein:** [00:00:38] The following is Rabbi Karen Glazer Perolman's sermon from Shabbat services on Friday, January 22nd.

**Rabbi Karen Glazer Perolman:** [00:00:48] I love looking through old photos. The real ones that my mom had printed and put into photo albums.

[00:00:56] The boxes of glossy prints I have always used to order double prints for some reason and of course, the almost twenty four thousand digital photos stored on my phone. Smartphones changed the way that all of us interacted with pictures, what was once an expensive and well planned moment is now utterly ordinary. One of my favorite ways to engage with all these thousands of photos is to search the day's date and to look at the way I've changed over the years. It's an exercise in nostalgia, self reflection, with only a hint of narcissism. But the changes are less dramatic than I remember. They are subtle and gray. So much of what changes can't be captured by the camera's lens. If we as a nation were to do this exercise, to look back at the images over the past four, eight, 10, name it years, what would we see? January twenty seventeen. Some of us in pink knitted hats, others of us in red ball caps.

[00:02:10] Some of us finally feeling heard, others marching, heartbroken.

[00:02:17] But if you zoom into the picture, any picture, you will see something almost imperceptible, something that has changed more than anything over the past four years. Our hearts.



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[00:02:31] Our hearts have changed. They have become smaller, they have become hardened. And they have become closed.

[00:02:43] It doesn't matter how we voted back in 2016 or even back in November, every one of us, our hearts have hardened a little. And before we blame or point fingers or try to explain the phenomenon away. Let's stop and acknowledge it, let's own it.

[00:03:05] In this last half decade, so many of us have grown tired, weary of the ways in which we feel limited and the people that we see as responsible. Our language has grown crude and angry. We speak about our elected leaders like schoolchildren on a playground. Our ability for nuance has been neutered. It is, as the sociologist Brene Brown said in her landmark 2012 TED Talk. "Religion," this is her quote, "Religion has gone from a belief in faith and mystery to certainty."

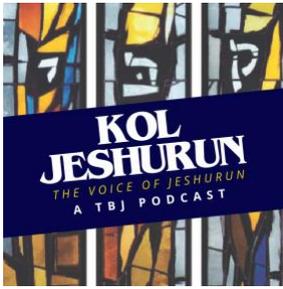
[00:03:44] I'm right. You're wrong. Shut up. That's it. She continues.

[00:03:50] "This is what politics looks like today. There's no discourse anymore, there's no conversation, there's just blame."

[00:03:59] That was 2012 in this week's torah portion. The mood of the Israelites and Egyptians is tense. Seven plagues have been brought upon the Egyptians and Pharaoh's heart is increasingly hardened in the first line of the past. Shall we read then the Eternal said to Moses, go to Pharaoh four.

[00:04:21] I have heard in his heart the hearts of those in his palace in order that I may display my signs upon them. Pharaoh's heart is his defining feature. We all know so much about his character or his lifestyle or his personality beyond this, but in so many ways it tells us everything.

[00:04:44] Pharaoh was not the kind of leader swayed by the inconvenience and unpleasantness of the early plague's a river turned to blood, frogs dancing in his palace, cattle disease boils. None of these seem to melt the ice over his heart. This week, the



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stakes are raised. Locusts filled the land, eating every crop, stinging, every animal filling the sky.

[00:05:11] And then the thick fog of darkness fell upon Egypt.

[00:05:15] The text reads, It was so dark, people could not see one another for three days, people had to stay in their homes. No one could move about.

[00:05:25] And it was only the final plague that finally reached Pharaoh's heart, the death of his son.

[00:05:32] The death of every first born in Egypt, a cry from every household.

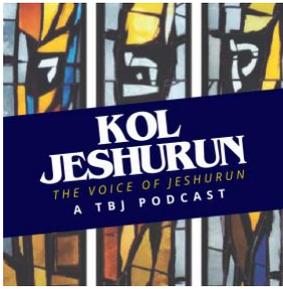
[00:05:38] Finally, his heart was broken, broken open enough that he freed the Jewish people and as we celebrate each year with God's help, allowed them to leave Egypt and begin their journey towards freedom and redemption.

[00:05:55] I was recently asked why Farah wasn't more easily moved by the earlier plagues. After all, a river of blood would mean that people got sick. In fact, so many of the plagues must have been so disruptive and destructive.

[00:06:10] But his "lev kated" his heavy and hardened heart went out.

[00:06:17] I've always thought that in another life, I would love to be a presidential speechwriter to do as a writer and composer, Lin Manuel Miranda said this week, quote, to put the right words in the right order and change the world.

[00:06:33] I was listening on Wednesday morning, maybe you were too, when President Biden spoke these words. "We must end this uncivil war that pits red against blue, rural versus urban, conservative versus liberal. We can do this if we open our souls instead of hardening our hearts."



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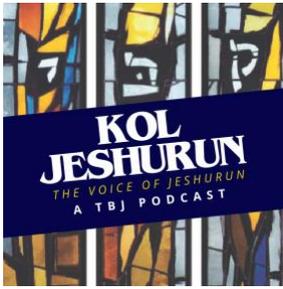
[00:06:58] Now, I don't know if the president or his speechwriters were aware of this week's Torah portion, but the symmetry is too good to overlook. He continued, "If we show a little tolerance and humility, if we're willing to stand in the other person's shoes for just a moment, because here's the thing about life, there is no accounting for what fate will deal with you. There are some days when we need a hand. There are other days when we're called on to lend one, and that is how we must be with one another." These words of empathy, leadership and pleading were delivered by our 46th president, a man who was elected to serve the most divided period in recent American history. I don't need to list all the challenges he faces.

[00:07:53] But I was moved, by the way, he called upon all of us to open our souls and unfreeze our hearts.

[00:08:03] Perhaps that's because President Biden is a man whose heart could have been hardened so many times.

[00:08:10] His desire to serve after his several failed presidential runs. His willingness to choose life after his wife and baby daughter were killed in a car accident, his strength when his beloved adult son died of brain cancer five and a half years ago, his plea for unity and kindness and renewal of our relationships are the ingredients toward what can be a new, open hearted nation.

[00:08:42] In Judaism, our hearts are not simply the beating aorta in our chest, nor an organ of only feelings. Our hearts are the epicenter of our beings, the place where our thoughts and values and feelings and desires coalesce its way into their heart to prayer. We chanted earlier today that it commands us to love God with all our not our hearts, but our minds. They translate the word live, not as hurt, but as more the way in which our hearts and minds connect. It is thought that when we saw in our hearts defrosting them after the years of being in the back of the freezer, it's not only our feelings that will change, but our thoughts, our way of being in the world and our relationship with other people.



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[00:09:34] In the prophet, Ezekiel tells of what will happen in the time of our ultimate redemption.

[00:09:41] He says, I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you, I will take away the heart of stone out of your body, and I will give you a heart of flesh.

[00:09:54] Now, what is this kind of heart, according to Rashi, it means that an inclination that has been renewed for the better. A desire to do better in this world. A heart of flesh is not a perfect heart, but it's one that invites us to make better decisions. Ezekiel says that the messianic era is not one where everything will be perfect and we don't need to do any spiritual work, but rather we can make better, holier and kinder decisions. A time in which our hearts will be better prepared to listen to God, to repent and repair ourselves.

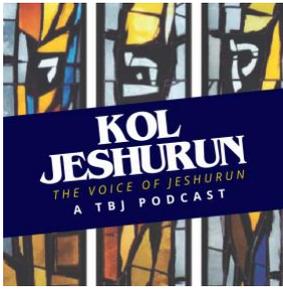
[00:10:34] A heart of flesh is a heart that is open, listening, compassionate and ready to fix what is broken within the self. Even in the time of our ultimate redemption, we are not without work. Rather will have to be more open, willing and prepared to repair what is ruptured within us.

[00:10:59] For some, this new administration is nearly messianic.

[00:11:05] But let us not misinterpret Biden's own words when we view this historic week. Let us not see this moment as a reshuffling of teams who now get to fight against each other, let us see this moment as an invitation for a new heart.

[00:11:23] Like when we update the software on our phones or we get a new one when the hardware is worn out, all of us in this great nation are up for renewal. You don't have to wait in line. And there are no extra charges for turning it in early. But the offer doesn't last forever.

[00:11:45] Look inside yourself.



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[00:11:48] Could your heart use some rehabilitation? I'm not talking about the veins and arteries, but your lev.

[00:11:56] This Shabbat, only two weeks after we were reminded how fragile and tenuous our national fabric is, we are still fragile, grieving, anxious and worried. It may feel too hard to slip back in the photo album into a time where our hearts were sweet and innocent.

[00:12:17] But it is possible all of us are up for renewal.

[00:12:24] Our lev kaved, are hardened hearts, they can become a lev kaved, a heart filled to the brim with respect, empathy, kindness and compassion.

[00:12:38] This shift is as small as the vows which turn kaved (בְּיָדָיִךְ) into kavod (בְּיָדָיִךְ). Because the president is right. There is no accounting for what fate will deal, any of us.

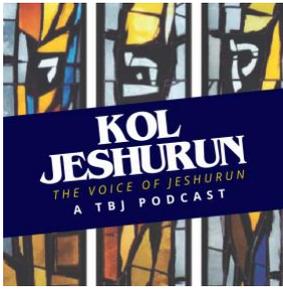
[00:12:54] There will be days where all of us will need to lend the hand. There are other days that we will need that hand. That is how we must be with one another.

[00:13:07] So, dear God, give us the strength to begin softening when we see the river starting to turn to blood, make us willing to see how good life can be when we see each other through the lens of love and honor.

[00:13:26] Let us soften enough so we don't check the lawn sign. Before we help our neighbor in need.

[00:13:34] Let us be a nation, a community of people. Where we know the value of those open heart. Ability to walk forward.

[00:13:50] To be connected in an unbroken chain of tradition, in our tradition, we say L'dor Vador, from generation to generation. A change of heart united not in unanimous agreement, but in sacred dialogue, civil discourse.



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[00:14:11] And ultimately for love for every human being. We are up for renewal today. I hope you'll consider the offer.

[00:14:23] Music: We are gifts and we are blessings, we are history in song We are hope and we are healing, we are learning to be strong. We are words and we are stories, we are pictures of the past. We are carriers of wisdom, not the first and not the last...

[00:14:23] L'dor vador nagid godlecha - L'dor vador... we protect this chain From generation to generation. L'dor vador, these lips will praise Your name.

[00:14:23] Looking back on the journey that we carry in our heart. From the shadow of the mountain to the waters that would part. We are blessed and we are holy, we are children of Your way. And the words that bring us meaning, we will have the strength to say...

[00:14:25] L'dor vador nagid godlecha - L'dor vador... we protect this chain From generation to generation. L'dor vador, these lips will praise Your name.

[00:18:31] Thank you for listening to this edition of Kol Jeshurun. If you would like to learn more, visit our website at [tbj.org](http://tbj.org) and follow us on social media for updates on all our upcoming opportunities for engagement. We really hope to see you soon.