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Kol Rinah  
Parashat Tzav/Shabbat Parah/Trans Day of Visibility  
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## A New Heart

What is the personal transformation that you long for, the transition of your inner life for which you yearn?

We read this morning in the Haftarah from Ezekiel God's promise to the Israelites who, in the wake of the destruction of the First Temple, have been captured from Israel and brought in captivity to Babylonia, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit into you: I will remove the heart of stone from your body and give you a heart of flesh; and I will put My spirit into you" (Ezekiel 36:26-27).

There are more times than I'd like to admit, to myself or to anyone else, when I feel like I have a heart of stone, when my spirit feels empty and tired, and in need of a renewing that no amount of coffee or dose of Shabbat can refresh.

Imagine receiving, from God, a new heart—a heart of flesh to replace your heart that has become calcified, that beats for you only. Imagine feeling like you were infused with a new spirit, with God's spirit.

Can you imagine what changes a new heart and new spirit might enable you to make in your life, and in the world? What, or better, *who*, would you have the patience for, the energy for, the courage for, the compassion for?

A new heart, explains Rashi, is an inclination, a *yetzer*, that is renewed for good, suggesting that our hearts now (or at least the hearts of the exiled Israelites to whom Ezekiel was speaking) may be inclined toward bad, but will be inclined rather toward good now.

Radak (Rabbi David Kimchi) gets more specific—it's not just a good heart, but rather a *לב שומע*, a listening heart, and a correct spirit that receives with love the words of God. For Radak, a new heart and spirit are about being open and listening with love—to what people and God are trying to tell us.

I want to think about these metaphors of a new heart, a heart of flesh replacing a heart of stone, and a new spirit from God, in the context of a day that is tomorrow, that may not be on your radar screen—and I don't mean Easter.

Tomorrow, March 31, is Trans Day of Visibility. Trans Day of Remembrance (November 20) was begun in 1999, as a way of remembering all the trans people lost to violence.

In 2010, trans advocate Rachel Crandall "created TDOV in response to the overwhelming majority of media stories about transgender people being focused on violence. She hoped to create a day where people could celebrate the lives of transgender people, while still acknowledging that due to discrimination, not every trans person can or wants to be visible."<sup>1</sup>

I'm speaking today as someone who is not trans but cis-gender, whose gender aligns with the sex he was assigned at birth.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://glaad.org/tdov/>

A heart of stone, as Radak implicitly suggests, is a heart that cannot listen with love. Pharaoh, whose heart is hardened, both by himself and by God, cannot hear or see the Israelites with enough love to let them go worship their god in the wilderness for three days (and that's all that Moses asks for).

Ten years ago, I'm not sure Kol Rinah was a welcoming, safe or comfortable place for queer or trans people. But through learning, and work, through mistakes, and most of all through the persistent presence of queer people, of trans people, we have become a community that I think, I hope, is largely and often welcoming, safe and comfortable for people who are visibly (or invisibly) trans.

Our hearts have become softer, and able to listen and see with more love. I'll take a little credit by for trying to lead by example. But what changed our hearts, most of all, has been people willing and able to be visibly trans, sometimes I know uncomfortably.

In her glorious book *The Soul of the Stranger: Reading God and Torah from a Transgender Perspective*, Joy Ladin suggests that God, who seems to possess qualities of all genders and yet transcends gender too, is the primary, nay the primordial, trans icon.

And if it is God who turns our hearts from stone to flesh, and it is the sometimes brave visibility of trans people over the last decade at Kol Rinah that has helped change our hearts, then those trans people are to be identified with God, the most visible, yet invisible, trans icon.

Our world, our society, that genders people the moment they are born, if not while they are still in utero, could be described as birthing us into bodies with hearts of stone—our gender is determined for us, and we live in a society with formidable, solid definitions, even still, of binary gender, of male and female.

And yet, there are people—trans and nonbinary people, who have shed the heart of stone they were given, and replaced it with a new heart, a heart of flesh, a heart, a gender identity, that is truly theirs.

(I imagine there are many ways trans people could describe this transition—one that comes from outside of them, or from the deepest place inside, or that there was never a change, just a realization of an unchanged reality to which to adjust to, or many more options, or combinations of these. This is just a metaphor which may work better for some people's experiences than others.)

For some of us, the transformation we long for with a new heart and new spirit might be related to gender, and/or to gender roles. It might be about showing up differently in our familial and intimate relationships. It may be about doing the work in the world that is most needed, that we feel the most called to, even if we're not doing it now. It may be about being healthier versions of ourselves—emotionally, spiritually, physically, healthier.

What's the transformation for which you most long for, that a new heart and new spirit could enable you to accomplish?

This may seem far beyond us, in the heavens, beyond the sea, to paraphrase Parashat Nitzavim (Dt. 30:12-13). But we have here, and around the world, more and more people who have in some measure created for themselves, or been given, a new heart—a new spirit, one different than the one they were presumed to have, maybe even different than the one they thought they had.

They become who they really needed to be. They are visible, and unintentional exemplars of the fact that personal transformation is indeed possible.

This Trans Day of Visibility, let us notice the ways our hearts, all our hearts, are softening, are becoming softer, more loving, more listening.

Let us recommit ourselves to allowing, to longing, to working so that our hearts soften from stone to flesh, to be made new and renewed more every day.

Let us see and love and admire and be inspired by all the trans people, here at Kol Rinah, and everywhere, who are exemplars of knowing themselves, and knowing God.