

A Taste of Torah

Heart Surgery

By Rabbi Mordechai Fleisher

The heart is the subject of quite a few clichés. Broken heart, heart of stone, heart on your sleeve... But have you ever heard of a circumcised heart? If you listen well to this week's Torah reading, you will learn all about it. "Hashem, your G-d, will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, to love Hashem, your G-d, with all your heart and all your soul." (Nitzavim 30:6) This verse is discussing what will occur during the Messianic Era, and informs us that G-d will remove the impediments that get in the way of achieving spiritual greatness.

The Baal Haturim (Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher; c.1269-c.1343) comments that the first letters of the words "your hearts and the heart," "*es livavcha vi'es l'vav,*" are a mnemonic for Elul, the month that precedes Rosh Hashana. The verse thus alludes to the fact that the month of Elul is a time of circumcision of the heart. Rabbi Moshe Shapiro asks the obvious question: This verse is speaking of the Messianic Era, not current times; how could it be referring to a month that occurs yearly?

Rabbi Moshe Eisemann adds another question on this verse: Earlier in the Book of Devarim, in Parshas Eikev, Moshe tells the Jewish People, "And you shall circumcise the barrier of your heart and no longer stiffen your neck." (Devarim 10:16) The verse seems to indicate that it is our responsibility to remove the blockages that cover our hearts, not Hashem's.

I believe the answer lies in understanding a puzzling aspect of the earlier verse in Parshas Eikev. The verse cites stiffening of the neck in conjunction with circumcising the heart. What is the connection between these two things?

This question is a lot easier to resolve if we can answer yet another question: What exactly does "stiff-necked," that oft-cited

term used to describe the Jewish People when they sin, mean?

Rabbi Chaim Friedlander (1923-1986), based on the Sforno (commentary on the Torah authored by Rabbi Ovadiah MiSforno [1475-1550]), explains that "stiff-necked" refers to a person who, upon being rebuked by another, doesn't even turn his head to acknowledge the criticism. The stiffness of his neck precludes turning to listen, to contemplate, to examine the path that he has chosen. Instead, the stiff-necked person completely ignores the critic and continues on his merry way. This quality is quite harmful, for it prevents a person from realizing that he is headed toward his own doom.

The Torah thus tells us in Parshas Eikev that the blockage of the heart leaves a person stiff-necked; we are expected to remove that blockage, to get through to our hearts, and thus gain an awareness that we have gone in the wrong direction.

This awareness, however, is only a first step. After all, one may be well-aware of his shortcomings, and wish to improve, but his *yetzer hara* (evil inclination) will seduce him, time and again, into doing the wrong thing. This is the battle we face throughout our lives: to overcome our *yetzer hara*.

The Ramban (1194-c.1270), commenting on the aforementioned verse in this week's parsha, tells us that the circumcision of hearts that Hashem will perform in the Messianic Era will be the removal of our desire toward negativity. Until that time, says the Ramban, we must fight on, trying to bypass the blockage of the heart that is our *yetzer hara*.

We can now explain the earlier difficulties. There are two different blockages. One, the blockage that leads us to keep marching on a path of destruction,

Stories For The Soul

Sooner or Later...

The Nazis entered the small European town of Telz (Telšiai) in the summer of 1941, during the Jewish month of Tammuz. Though the Telz Yeshiva that had existed there had already been disbanded by the Russians in 1940, many of the students still studied in various locations in the city.

For three weeks, the Nazis tortured the Jewish residents of the town. On the 20th day of Tammuz, the Nazis murdered all the remaining Jewish residents of Telz.

Rabbi Avrohom Yitzchak Bloch, the Telzer Rov, bore much of the brunt of the Nazis' wrath. At one point, a Nazi officer was beating Rabbi Bloch, delivering repeated blows to his head. As he struck him, he gleefully demanded, "Herr Rabbiner, where is your G-d?"

Fearlessly and boldly, the great rabbi replied, "He is not only my G-d, He is your G-d as well, and the entire world will yet see this!"

Rashi in this week's parsha tells us that the Jewish People were terrified upon hearing the 98 curses from Moshe, wondering how a nation could withstand such tribulations. Moshe reassured them, however, telling them that the punishments were a means of ensuring their survival, and that they would continue to thrive as a nation for all time.

Kollel Happenings

KOLLEL'S DONOR APPRECIATION EVENT SEP. 20TH
The Kollel will be holding its annual Donor Appreciation Event on Sunday, September 20th, 6:45 pm, at the home of Drs. Joel and Goldie Cohen, 12 Sedgwick Dr. Englewood, CO 80113. To RSVP please email info@denverkollel.org.

LEARN 2 LEARN
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THE M.B. GLASSMAN FOUNDATION GOLD LUNCH & LEARN PROGRAM

The M.B. Glassman Foundation GOLD Program is a division of the Denver Community Kollel dedicated to bringing Torah study to seniors in the community. Don't miss a great Lunch and Learn class on the weekly parsha at the East Side Kosher Deli, 499 S. Elm St. at 12:00 am. There is no charge for the lunch or the learning! Transportation can be arranged. For more information, contact rmf@denverkollel.org or call 303-820-2855.

Increase Your Jewish IQ

By Rabbi Yaakov Zions

Last week we asked: What practical difference is there between the various reasons discussed above for not reading the Shabbos *mussaf* offerings as part of the weekly Torah reading?

A: When Rosh Chodesh occurs on Shabbos, the *aliyah* of *maftir* reads the *mussaf* offerings of Shabbos and Rosh Chodesh. This seems to be in line with two of the reasons given for normally omitting the Shabbos offerings from the Torah reading – due to its small size or its effect on the *haftarah* – as the additional verses for Rosh

Chodesh enlarge it, and the *haftarah* focuses on Rosh Chodesh regardless. However, if the omission is due to the lack of a *chatas*—offering, there does not seem to be a reason to append the Shabbos *mussaf* offerings here, either.

This week's question: : How many Torah-related items can you think of that relate to the number 70?

To submit an answer to Rabbi Zions, email ryz@denverkollel.org

Ask the Rabbi

Kittel Question

Alan Shear wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

I have read through the entire section of Rosh Hashana in the Mishna Berura, yet found no source which mentions the custom of the *shaliach tzibbur* (cantor), the *ba'al tokeah* (one who sounds the shofar), or the *ba'al korei* (public Torah reader) to wear a *kittel* (white ritual robe) on Rosh Hashana. Is there in fact a source for this custom? Certainly on Yom Kippur, but no source for Rosh Hashana!

Dear Alan Shear,

There are two reasons given why a *kittel* is worn:

- 1) The *kittel*, being a plain white garment, symbolizes purity from sin.
- 2) A person is buried wearing a *kittel*. Therefore, when a person wears a *kittel* he feels humble and remorseful for his sins, remembering the day of death.

According to reason #1, the *kittel* would only seem appropriate for Yom Kippur, when we are cleansed of our sins, but not for Rosh Hashana. Reason

#2 is also not totally applicable to Rosh Hashana; although Rosh Hashana is a day of repentance, it is also a joyous holiday of solemn celebration and one should not display undue sadness.

In some communities the *kittel* is in fact worn on Rosh Hashana by all congregants. This custom is mentioned by Mateh Moshe and has its source in a medrash which describes how the Jewish People wear white on Rosh Hashana, confident that their sins will be forgiven. Perhaps the custom you mention, namely that the *shaliach tzibbur*, *ba'al tokeah* and *ba'al korei* wear a *kittel*, is based on this medrash, due to their crucial role in the Rosh Hashana services.

Sources:

Yalkut Shimoni 4:825

See *Aruch Hashulchan Orach Chaim* 581:13 *Bereishet Rabba* 34

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ignoring all calls to stop and reassess. We are responsible to cut away this blockage. The second blockage, that of the *yetzer hara* convincing us to sin, will remain until Hashem removes it in the future.

The month of Elul relives the period of time when the Jewish Nation repented for the catastrophic Sin of the Golden Calf; this forty-day period, from the start of Elul, culminated in Yom Kippur, when Hashem completely forgave the Jewish People. The greatest claim made against them was that they

were a stiff-necked people. Their repentance, then, was to remove that blockage that led to that state, and that is what we must strive to do every Elul. Elul is, therefore, a mini-Messianic Era, in that it is a period of time where we have the opportunity to circumcise our hearts to some degree, a job that will be completed by Hashem Himself with the arrival of Moshiach, may it occur speedily, in our days.

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