

The Words Upon Our Hearts

Rabbi Jan Uhrbach, Director of the Block/Kolker Center for Spiritual Life, JTS



In this week's parashah we encounter anew perhaps the most well-known words in our tradition, the first paragraph of the Shema (Deut. 6:4-9):

Hear, O Israel! Adonai is our God, Adonai alone. You shall love Adonai your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your "muchness." Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day. Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down, and when you get up. Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead; inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

In these verses, we are commanded to place before us at all times words of Torah. They are to be in our hearts, in our mouths, on our heads and hands, and at the entrances to our homes.

Indeed, according to the rabbinic tradition, the commandment in verse 6 to place these words on our hearts is intended to teach us how to fulfill the foundational commandment to "love God" found in the previous verse:

"These words which I command you today shall be upon your heart." Why is this written? Because it says, "You shall love Adonai your God with all your heart." But I do not know how one comes to love the Holy Blessed One! Therefore it says "these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart." Keep these words on your heart, for in this way you will come to

recognize the Holy Blessed One and to cleave to God's ways. (Sifrei Devarim 33)

This causal connection makes intuitive sense. Love for another is premised on our encountering and coming to know (or at least recognize) the other; it is then expressed by our acting on what we know (i.e., behaving in ways which will please the beloved). So too with our love for God. By bringing the words of Torah into our hearts, we sensitize ourselves to God's presence, learn more about God's ways, and are thus better able to act in consonance with the Divine will.

Rabbi Menachem Mendl of Kotzk, however, points to a problem with the phrase *al levavekha*, "on your heart": "[t]he text should have written 'in your heart' for it needs to be in the innermost parts of the heart." The challenge is significant. How effective are words of Torah which remain on the surface of the heart, never penetrating within?

The Kotzker answers:

But, the intention of the verse is that at the very least, the words should be upon your hearts. Because for the majority, the heart is closed. Yet, there is no person whose heart is never open. And then, the words can fall, truly, into the heart. And it is regarding this that we pray, "open my heart with Your Torah" (*petah libi betoratekha*); God will open our hearts with the Torah. (*Sefer Amud Ha'emet*, on Deut. 6:6)

The Torah commands us to place these words *on* our hearts, rather than *in* them, because it is not always within our ability to place words of Torah *into* our hearts. In Biblical parlance, the word "heart" (*lev*) refers at once to the seat of

intellect and of emotion. Human experience, however, teaches that the two are often quite far apart. Studying the words of Torah and understanding them intellectually—even at very profound levels—is no guarantee that they will permeate our being. We are all too capable of reading the words without living them, speaking them without integrating them into who we are. Sadly, this is often true despite our very real desire to live what we learn. For even when the mind is wide open, the heart can be sealed shut. Therefore, sometimes the best we can do is make the words available, so that should the heart open, the words will be there.

In acknowledging these limitations on our ability to internalize the words of God, the Kotzker subtly recasts our obligations as Jews. I am told that within the discourse of psychoanalysis, faith is sometimes described not as a belief “in” something, but rather as a disposition such that despite the trauma of the past, one remains open to the possibilities offered in the next moment.¹

Many of us carry disappointment, hurt, or shame that affects our religious lives, whether or not we’d call it “trauma.” We are the inheritors of a Torah filled with narratives of human beings and God disappointing and angering each other, and we likely each have our own stories. We may feel wronged by God or by “religion”—having lived or witnessed Job-like suffering or been wounded or disappointed by a faith leader or community. Or we may carry feelings of shame and inadequacy from our own failures, or hopelessness in the face of the failures of humanity. Looking at our individual and collective history, we might conclude that we will never be able to live up to what the Torah demands. No matter how many times we declare God’s oneness, we sometimes divide rather than unify, sow discord rather than harmony. Most often, we do not love God with all of our hearts, with all of our souls, and with all of our “muchness”; our resources are all too frequently engaged in the service of something else, usually our own egos. We may come to believe that no matter how

much we study, and how long we pray, our hearts and the hearts of our fellow human beings will remain closed, unable to receive as truth that which our minds know to be true.

So the Torah, in commanding us to continually place “these words” upon our hearts, commands us to remain open to possibility despite this “past trauma,” whether that trauma challenges our faith in God, ourselves, or humanity. To place these words upon our hearts is an assertion of faith that, because “there is no person whose heart is never open,” our past need not dictate our future. Despite our history—and our all-too-painful experience of ourselves and our world—we trust that our (and our fellow humans’) habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and acting will not govern us forever. Our usually closed hearts will indeed open, and the things we just can’t seem to “get” will one day take root and blossom within. To love God, then, is not simply to strive to better know God through words of Torah. To love God is to adopt a particular stance: that despite previous distance, greater closeness with God is always possible.

Each one of us has likely placed upon our hearts particular words of Torah that somehow cannot seem to find their way in. There are teachings that we as a people cannot seem to master, lessons that humanity cannot seem to learn. When the heart is closed, the imagination must take over. We place these words upon our heretofore-closed hearts yet again, day after day, imagining that perhaps today there will be a moment of openness and the words will sink in. *Petah libi betoratekha*—open my heart with Your Torah—for there is no person whose heart is never open.

¹ I am indebted to my dear friend Shirah Zeller (z”l), a gifted psychoanalyst and teacher of Torah, for this insight.