

Our Broken Hearts

Rabbi Zoe Klein Miles, Yom Kippur 5786

Standing in the hall before the nurses' station,
mesmerized by the central telemetry monitoring system,
a giant screen continuously tracking the heart rhythms
of all the patients on the floor.

Room 324 is 80 beats per minute.

Room 302 is 72.

Room 314 is 95. 96. 97,
spiking now to 128.

I imagine the lives powered by each of these beating hearts.

And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart...

Lub-dub, lub-dub, lub-dub.

“Hey,” the nurse says. “You can’t look at that. HIPAA.”

I walk away, my own heart racing.

*And these words that I command you today
shall be upon your heart. (Deuteronomy 6:6)*

“Why does Torah tell us to ‘place these words *upon* your hearts?

Why not say place these words *in* your hearts?

The sages respond, “It is because our hearts are closed,

so we place the words on top of our hearts

until, one day, the heart breaks, and the words fall in.

Words of compassion, kindness, and covenant,

sit like berries atop a crème brûlée

until the shell is cracked,

and they fall in.

And if we don’t place words of love,

empathy, forgiveness, grace,

upon our hearts, and instead place words of

malice, woe, dread, bitterness, anger,

our hearts are more like a deadfall trap,

weighted with stone,

triggered by the slightest slight,

it kills the tenderness inside.

How many ways have our hearts broken this year?

As Angelinos,
fires demolished whole neighborhoods,
and while the world has turned to other devastations,
the Altadena, Pasadena, Palisades, Eaton fires
have left many still roiling in anguish and insurance battles
past memories scorched to ash,
future security up in flames.

As Americans,
sweeping ICE raids terrify neighborhoods,
families so afraid, they aren't seeking medical care
or sending kids to school.
Individuals kidnapped from jobs,
condemned without due process.
National clinical trials for cancer and rare diseases
have been slashed and gutted.
Global medical collaborations,
funding withdrawn for research and training for young scientists.

As Jews,
already heartbroken last Yom Kippur,
our hearts broken again and again,
the assassination of
Yaron Lischinsky and Sarah Lynn Milgrim,
Jewish students targeted and terrorized,
Molotov cocktails thrown into a march for hostages in Boulder, CO.
Seeing hostage Evyatar David, in a video released by Hamas,
emaciated in a tunnel, digging his own grave,
hostage Alon Ohel wasting away.
Our broken hearts are torn kriya ribbons.

They say that we knock on our hearts on Yom Kippur
to help crack them open, so the words of our prayers can fall in.
But it feels like knocking on a fractured glass door,
one touch and it can shatter into powder.

Parker Palmer in his book
Healing the Heart of Democracy,
wrote about two kinds of broken hearts:

“There’s the brittle heart that breaks apart into a thousand shards,
a heart that takes us down as it explodes
and is sometimes thrown like a grenade at the source of its pain.
Then there’s the supple heart,
the one that breaks open, not apart,
growing into greater capacity for the many forms of love.
Only the supple heart can hold suffering in a way that opens to new life.”

What have we let fall in our broken hearts?
Anger, hatred, revenge seeping through the cracks
like sepsis through surgical scars.

I put a spiritual stethoscope to my own heart,
and I find that it is severely constricted.
I find that I’ve put boundaries on my compassion.
I’ve had a “brittle heart that breaks apart into a thousand shards,
a heart that... is sometimes thrown like a grenade at the source of its pain.”
A heart that is so throbbing with anger...
at terrorists who want to kill us,
at antisemites who want to strike and silence us,
at allies who have abandoned us...
that I didn’t realize how sick my heart was becoming.
There was plaque building in me,
hardening and narrowing my coronary arteries
such that it blinded me from seeing things I didn’t want to see.

In April this year, on Yom HaZikaron,
there was a memorial event
at a Reform synagogue in Ra’anana
organized by The Parents Circle—Families Forum,
a group of bereaved Israelis and Palestinians
who’ve lost loved ones in the conflict.
And while they were mourning together,

Jewish protesters shouted for their death,
Threw stones, eggs, kicked, spit and beat those attending.
I wanted to block my heart from seeing.

There were so many times this year I've wanted
to block my heart from hearing.

So many times I've wanted
to block my heart from feeling.

My eyes were seeing the photo of a starving 18-month-old boy in Gaza and my heart was saying, "Media bias! He's not just starving. He also has hypoxemia, he has a bad heart. And, and who's really preventing food and aide from getting to him, it's not Israel, it's Hamas!" How could I make room for little Mohammed Zakaria alongside my heart-shattering grief for 10-month-old Mila Cohen, shot and killed in her mother's arms on Kibbutz Be'eri on October 7.

People think God hardened Pharaoh's heart during the ten plagues.
But that's not what the Torah says.
In Torah, Pharaoh hardened his own heart during the first five plagues.
And as cardiologists know, the heart muscle cannot regenerate itself,
once it is damaged, it cannot repair itself like other muscles in our body,
that's why we need bypasses, pacemakers.
We harden our hearts and risk being unable to go back, like Pharaoh.
Grief can make our hearts more expansive.
But it can also accumulate and harden like plaque.

In Deuteronomy, it is written:

God will bring you into the land. Then your God will circumcise your heart and the hearts of your offspring, to love your God with all your heart and soul, in order that you may live.

God will perform open heart surgery on us,
surgery to open our hearts,
excising our spiritual stubbornness,
cutting away our callousness,
clearing our fatty buildup of whataboutism.
That we may see, hear, feel, live.

Our instinct is to close our hearts when we are in pain. To protect ourselves.

If I don't see it or hear it, I won't feel it, and I won't hurt.

But it actually hurts our hearts to pretend things didn't happen.

To erase history.

America's efforts to erase painful parts of our history don't help our national heart.

Having National Parks remove exhibits with references to slavery and forced displacement of Native Americans, curricula that minimizes slavery's brutality and instead states enslaved people "developed skills which, in some instances, could be applied for their personal benefit."

The Department of Defense deleting content celebrating the contributions and achievements of minority servicemembers, erasing the histories of medal of honor recipients who are black, the all Japanese-American combat team, and thousands of webpages highlighting contributions of underrepresented groups.

America is hardening its heart.

I know a family whose adult children were filled with so much pain and hurt over their parents. It affected their relationships, their work, their ability to find happiness.

Until their parents, now elderly, finally acknowledged the pain they'd caused.

They told their children, We hurt you. and we are so so sorry.

You didn't deserve any of it. We failed you.

We made a mess of it all. We're sorry.

And they didn't just say it once.

They said it again and again. Over many years.

Until their children accepted them.

Opened their hearts and let the words fall in.

And finally, the relationship healed.

When they talk of their parents now,

they are filled with admiration,

gratitude and love.

Acknowledging and taking responsibility for the past is a prescription for a healthier heart.

Parker Palmer talked about the brittle heart,
and also about the supple heart,
“the one that breaks open, not apart,
growing into greater capacity for the many forms of love.”

I want to have a supple heart.
I want my heart to be the souffle letting the berry-sweet words in,
rather than the deadfall trap, hardened and vengeful.
I don't want to be Lady Stoneheart.

My doctors at UCLA have told me what I need to do this year,
for my high blood pressure,
and elevated heart rate.
Less sugar, oil, salt.
More exercise, take statins.
But I know there's more I need to do.

Parker Palmer wrote:

What can I do to make my tight heart more supple, the way a runner stretches to avoid injury? That's a question I ask myself every day. With regular exercise, my heart is less likely to break apart into shards that may become shrapnel, and more likely to break open into largeness.

He's not talking about running, hiking, pickleball.
He's talking about compassion.
Regularly exercising compassion.

How big can my heart get? How open?
Can I exercise my heart to be big enough to include all the suffering?
A Yiddish phrase *Di klainer hartz nemt arum di groisseh velt*
means “The heart is small and embraces the whole wide world.”
How can this muscle, the size of a fist, open to hold the world?
Congo, Syria, Cameroon, Ukraine, Taiwan...

Could it even open wide enough to include those I hate?
I think about the final day of our Temple Isaiah trip to the south this year,
standing at the memorial of Dr. Martin Luther and Coretta King

in Atlanta, looking at the six principles of non-violence
engraved on the wall of the King Center.

Principle Three read:

Nonviolence Seeks to Defeat Injustice, or Evil, Not People.

Nonviolence recognizes that evildoers are also victims and are not evil people.

Could I take lessons from Dr. King
who took lessons from Ghandi,
and pray for the hearts of evildoers,
and see that the hearts of the oppressors
are also victims of a system of oppression.
Could I take lessons from Torah and our own tradition?

Mussar teacher Alan Morinis taught:

*With the goal of protecting your heart, you will tell yourself all the sound reasons you must
turn away. You then become less generous, and the victim is as much yourself as the other.*

Many of the most famous disputes in the Talmud are between
The House of Hillel and the House of Shammai,
However they always remained not only civil to one another,
They were friends. In fact, Talmud says,
“Make for yourself a heart of many rooms,
And enter into it the words of Shammai and the words of Hillel,
The words of those who declare a matter impure
And those who declare it pure.”¹
But how do I unlock chambers in my heart,
Rooms that have been barricaded by anger and pain,
How do I make room for my opponents?

How much can a single heart hold?
Could it hold *di groyseh velt*, the whole world?

My heart can barely hold to pain in my own little orbit.
I wrote this sermon sitting on the window seat in my parents’ bedroom,
in my childhood home,
while my father lay in bed, his pulse steadied by morphine,

¹ Tosefta Sotah 7:12

paddling down the gentle stream.
I would look over at him and think,
what becomes of his enormous, generous heart?
This man who would scoop up ants in his studio
with a paper cup because he didn't want to kill them.
This man who taught thousands of people how to love.
And what becomes of my heart, so broken?

The Kotzker Rebbe taught:

There is nothing more complete than a broken heart.

How can one's heart be more complete if it's broken?

Rabbi Lizzi Heydemann taught,

Our broken hearts tell us what we love, what moves us, what motivates us, what helps us get out of bed in the morning. Our broken hearts remind us that we're alive— and as long as that's true, tears may flow at night... but joy comes in the morning.

How much can a single heart hold?

How big can it get?

Medically, it shouldn't get too enlarged.

Rabbi Dara shared a podcast

Your Nervous System and the News: Staying Informed Without Staying Dysregulated
by Amanda Armstrong, who said:

When you read headlines about crises, disasters, conflicts, your sympathetic nervous system activates. Your body releases stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline, your heart rate increases, your breathing becomes more shallow, your muscles tense up, all preparing you to respond to threat. Your nervous system does not know the difference between a tiger in your closet and what you're watching on TV.

Staying informed is important, but staying chronically dysregulated does not make you a better advocate, ally, parent or human. In fact, it oftentimes makes us more reactive and less grounded, more likely to spiral or shut down, less able to discern what actions might actually help.

When we can't discharge our energy into meaningful action, we tend to lash out at others. We point to others and say, what are we going to do about it? Tell me! What are we going to do about the tyrants in the world? What are we going to do about war? What are we going to do about corruption?

Armstrong suggests the following:

Only consume the amount of news that's proportionate to your capacity or ability to take meaningful action.

And by meaningful action, she suggests it could be direct action like donating and advocating. Contacting representatives, voting. She talks about directing that agitation and energy into local action, where we can make a difference. Community building, participating in OBKLA, in One-LA. It could also be indirect action, like learning a skill, participating in a conversation in which you bridge an aisle, taking care of your mental health, taking care of your heart. Say a prayer.

This summer when dozens of people, mostly campers,
Were killed when a river flooded in Central Texas,
I was reading everything, consumed with grief for these families,
I wanted to know the placement of the cabins,
Who built the cabins,
How did they get permits to put them in the basin,
who owns the camp, what alert system did they have,
how many weather forecasters were laid off leading up to this.
I read about individual victims, their families,
and then I remembered Armstrong's words,
Only consume the amount of news that's proportionate to your capacity or ability to take meaningful action.

And I looked up from my scrolling.
I know enough about this event.
What meaningful action can I take?
I wasn't about to go to Central Texas,
but I could dedicate more time to the little campers in our community,
and act locally in their honor.

What meaningful action could I take when it comes to Israel?
I reach out to Israeli friends who are among the million and a half Israelis
marching in the streets.
We've have invited bereaved parents, an Israeli and a Palestinian,
to come to Isaiah this April through the Parent Circle—Families Forum
to share their stories.
I can educate myself. We had a book group this year
to better understand the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

We can bring films. We will be screening two award-winning films.
On October 19 We Will Dance Again,
and on November 9 The Other.
We can bring speakers, provide opportunities for the community
to connect in ways that are meaningful to them.

In the book of Ezekiel it is written:
I will remove the heart of stone from your body and give you a heart of flesh.

Standing here in Royce Hall,
this congregation like a giant telemetry screen
tracking the heart rhythms of all the worshippers,
80 beats per minute.
72, 95, 128, deep breaths, down to 111.
Lub-dub, lub-dub, lub-dub.

Some of us need bypasses.
To bypass the hunger for vengeance,
bypass the reflex to scorn.
bypass the noise, the fury,
To open the way for mercy,
for love.
Some of our hearts need pacemakers,
peacemakers,
so that our rhythm returns,
so that our hearts can flow,
so that our EKG,
our Empathy Keeps Growing,
so that our hearts are flesh again.

At a wedding, the couple stands under a huppah,
four open walls, like the four chambers of the heart,
there they proclaim their love,
and when they seal their union with a kiss,
they also shatter a glass,
reminding us that
life is filled with joy and heartbreak,
but we learn to turn the heartbreak

not into brittleness
that is thrown like a grenade at the source of its pain,
but into suppleness,
growing into greater capacity that opens to new life.

Do not hate your brother, or any other, in your heart.
Pray for the heart of the evildoers.
Let your small fist of a heart open to hold the whole world.
Let the words of compassion fall in.
Let not our hearts harden into indifference.
Parker Palmer wrote:
“There are many ways to make the heart more supple,
but all of them come down to this: Take it in, take it all in!”

At the hospital,
a nurse was finishing up taking my father’s vitals,
and the nurse said, “Do you have any questions?”
And my father said to him and said, “I’m 83 years old.
I’ve lived a phenomenal life.
Do you have any questions for me?”
And the nurse sat down and said,
“Hundreds.”
And they began to talk about the world,
and how in the end, in the end
it’s about how you love and were loved.
It’s about your heart.

Let us do the labor of the heart,
exercising the heart’s compassion,
that our hearts become supple,
that our hearts, when they break, break open into largeness,
and let fall in words of empathy, forgiveness, grace,
so that even in their brokenness
they remain in optimal condition,
curious, caring,
right and regular in rhythm and rate,
May our hearts be less Humpty Dumpty
and more pomegranate.

And may our hearts, in their breaking and in their mending,
be healthy, steady,
and whole.
Amen.