

Sermon for Yom Kippur - 2022 - The Spiritual Heart Diet

“Mister Arnowitz?” “Mister Arnowitz, I’ll just need to photocopy your driver’s license and insurance card.” This is inevitably how I am called to the desk at the doctor’s office after finishing the pages of medical paperwork. It is almost the only place I am called Mister Arnowitz and it feels weird.

I have been seeing a lot of doctors lately - mostly prophylactically to take care of my aging human body. I know the doctors do the best that they can, but with all the bureaucracy in health care, it is strange how dehumanizing taking care of our humanity can be. And if I told you what my GI made me do with Gatorade for test prep... Oh, I see some of you go to the same kind of GI as I do...I though test prep was a dirty word when I was in High School! I had no idea what middle age had in store for me!

Anyway, a few weeks ago I had a completely different experience in a doctor’s office. I went for a medical test and it was the *most humanizing* experience I think I’ve ever had. The test was an echocardiogram, an ultrasound of my heart, and with this technology I suddenly saw my heart, my heart! I could see it beating, I could hear the blood flowing through it’s chambers <Make sound> not the gruff thump thump of a stethoscope, but the delicate rushing of the precious liquid of *my* life flowing from chamber to chamber, the detail was so great I could even see the flaps between chambers opening and closing rhythmically. I looked and I started to cry. Witnessing the very engine of my life in all of its delicate, balanced glory, I’d never felt so mortal, so fragile, so...human.

It is no wonder the heart is such a powerful symbol of life, both physical and emotional. I’m sure you can think of lots of modern examples

of heart imagery in art, music, and literature, but this imagery is among our most ancient. As early as the epic of Gilgamesh, a text written around 2100 BCE in Ancient Mesopotamia, we see references to the heart as the seat of desire, such as the blessing to Gilgamesh and his best friend Enkidu, “May Shamash give you your heart’s desire...” We also see the first evidence of the idea of heartache, when Enkidu is killed Gilgamesh says, “How can I rest, how can I be at peace? Despair is in my heart.”

The Torah is from the same neighborhood, a few hundred years later, so it makes sense that we also find heart imagery in our most holy text. In the story of Noah God doesn’t just see the people are wicked, he sees “...that all **the inclinations of his heart** were nothing but evil everyday.”

Two very familiar passages that we recite each day reference the heart as the seat of love and lust. From Devarim, we find the words of the 1st paragraph of the Shema, “You Shall love the Lord your God with all **your heart...**” and from Bamidbar we find the words in the 3rd paragraph of the Shema “do not **follow your heart** and eyes in your lustful urge.”

Heart language and love language pervade our prayers - Perhaps most famously, the heart is invoked twice in the paragraph immediately following the amidah, the most intimate part of the service when we imagine ourselves standing right before God:

פֶּתַח לִבִּי בְּתוֹרַתְךָ וּבְמִצְוֹתֶיךָ תִּרְדֹּף נַפְשִׁי.

Open my heart to Your Torah and let my soul pursue Your commandments.

And

יְהִי לְרָצוֹן אֲמָרֵי פִי וְהִגִּיוֹן לִבִּי לְפָנֶיךָ יְהוָה צוּרִי וְגוֹאֲלִי:

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart be acceptable before You Adonai, my Rock and my Redeemer.

Rav Joseph Soloveitchik even named his famous book about prayer, “Worship of the Heart,” linking prayer as a love language, so to speak, for the Jewish people and God through the heart. In fact, since I started writing this Drash, I have started noticing all the places in our prayer where we say “lev” or “Lebav” in one form or another. The number surprised even me - try counting along as we daven later.

But there is one more crucially important set of emotional symbols related to the heart. We find in a Psalm we read on Shabbat and Festival mornings:

קָרוֹב יְהוָה לְנִשְׁבְּרֵי-לֵב וְאֶת-דֹּכְאֵי-רוּחַ יוֹשִׁיעַ:

The Lord is close to the broken hearted; those crushed in spirit God delivers.

The Psalmist is answering a difficult question: If the heart is our key not only to prayer but also to a loving relationship with God, does that mean that a broken heart alienates us from God? “No,” says the Psalmist. “God is close to the broken hearted.”

Unfortunately as human beings, broken heartedness is something we all have experienced and will experience again. It is an unavoidable part of life, no matter how hard we try to avoid it, or deny it. But what can we do to *recognize* God’s closeness in those times when our hearts hurt? How do we protect the beautiful, fragile heart inside us? How do we use it as a loving key to a path closer to God, and not fall victim to despair when it is broken?

I found answers to these challenging questions in the commonalities between our emotional, spiritual heart and the physical heart beating dependably in our chest. I first made this connection when studying the teachings of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, The Alter Rebbe of Chabad Lubovitch. He taught that the heart's physical structure is divided because we are spiritually divided. On one side is our *Nefesh Elohit* - our best self with our highest spiritual aspirations and the source of our *yetzer hatov*, our good inclination. On the other side is our *Nefesh Behamit* - our animal self seeking to fulfill our worldly needs and desires and source of our *yetzer harah*, our evil inclination. Throughout our lives the two are constantly battling for mastery of the "small city" as the Alter Rebbe refers to our bodies. According to The Alter Rebbe, the spiritual heart is at the center of a person's emotions and actions.

And our physical heart, well that's pretty central too. It isn't simply that we can't live without it - we could certainly make a similar argument for the essential nature of other body parts. No, what makes the heart special is its centrality in the body. After all, every drop of blood flows through the heart, carrying everything we consume, good or bad, healthy or poisonous, it all goes through the heart, which distributes it to every other part of the body. This is also part of why the heart is so fragile, why it wears down, why it gets stressed and we need to go for tests - the heart bears the unfiltered brunt of everything we do to ourselves. Does it not make a certain amount of sense that it is also the center of our spiritual selves and that the distribution of spiritual resources is also in our hearts? The positive experiences we give ourselves make the heart healthier, the poisonous things we pursue, well they affect our heart too.

Just like our physical heart, the emotional heart will inevitably take some wear and tear over the years. But that's okay, the heart is fragile in some ways, but it knows how to keep beating under extraordinary circumstances. We will experience heartbreak and heartache, our heartstrings will be pulled, sometimes harder and farther than we think possible, but the heart can keep going. As another Hasidic master, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Ephraim of Sudilikov, the grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, taught, feeling bad is not a hindrance at all, but evidence that one can feel life in its fullness: "wholeness is specifically found in a broken heart," or as Leonard Cohen put it in his song Anthem, "Ring the bells that still can ring/forget your perfect offering/There is a crack, a crack in everything/That's how the light gets in."

There is wisdom for our spiritual heart health to be learned from our physical heart. My very humanizing cardiologist, who, by the way, does not call me mister, he calls me 'Rebbe' - he says that if I take care of my heart, it will last me longer. If I put less bad stuff into the system, it will get broken less quickly. He gave me a little medicine to help prevent the bad stuff from building up too much. He suggested a Mediterranean Diet, which, despite our Mediterranean heritage apparently does not include Jewish favorites like brisket and cholent, much to my chagrin. He also suggested continued exercise and reminded me that "Prevention is the best intervention."

It turns out his advice for the physical aspects of our hearts is also true for our heart's spiritual health, and so, as your spiritual cardiologist, I have a prescription for you too. The right diet and exercise program, along with some preventative medicine will go a long way to helping you feel better, no matter what life throws your way.

First the spiritual heart diet - start with a steady diet of time with people you love and who love you. There is no material object in this world that will keep your heart as healthy as tending your relationships with family and friends. Time spent, memories made, and experiences shared replenish the spirit and heal our hearts.

I know it's ironic, because those we love are also the ones whose fates will one day put our hearts at the most risk. That's part of the human condition. But somehow, when we've committed to deepening those relationships and tending to them regularly, our heart is more resilient when the heartbreak inevitably comes. That's what Tennyson meant when he wrote, "Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all." Not only is the joy of love worth the cost of sorrow, but when we love well, our heart is more fit for whatever eventual sorrow comes.

Next comes exercise - spiritual heart healing exercises are mitzvot and prayer. Make Jewish actions a central part of your life and your heart will grow stronger with every one. When we exercise our spiritual muscles in an act of kindness, a loving outreach to God, a moment of deep Torah learning, it is stronger for when it has serious heavy spiritual lifting to do. A healthy heart can help you carry the weight of the world.

And then there's the medicine that helps reduce the dangers to your heart. Is there a spiritual equivalent of a statin? You bet! The medicine is coming to synagogue. I know - you are saying, of course the rabbi is going to tell us to come to synagogue, but hear me out! Coming to synagogue enhances the benefits of your spiritual diet and exercise by interweaving you in a communal web. It will expand and strengthen the group of people who are around to support you when you need it and give you a chance to do the same for others. It will give you an avenue to do great mitzvot and

participate in meaningful prayer. As I said last night, our tradition teaches the spiritual power of gathering and there is no better place to do it than a Beit Kneset - It's Hebrew for synagogue, but it doesn't mean House of Prayer, it means House of Gathering. And as I also said last night, this synagogue has something for everyone, heart medicine in almost every flavor. Come and find the one you like best.

And lastly, my doctor wants me to come for an annual check-up. How about a check-up with your spiritual cardiologist? (That's me or Rabbi Dalton or Cantor Goldberg.) Please, set up an appointment with one of us. As much as we would love to reach out regularly to each of the almost 1500 people from almost 500 families that make up the WJC spiritual community, it is a tremendous challenge to do so. But we *want* to hear from you. Reach out when you need us, and when you don't. You can come visit or we can go for coffee and not only have a spiritual check-up, but also a good shmooze.

So, let's get down to tachlis...how does this spiritual heart health work in practice? Well, as we think about turning to Yizkor (or the Yizkor we just did), we may be heartbroken from the loss of our loved ones. But the relationships that we had with them, the steady diet of time we had before they passed, they are so spiritually powerful that it reaches even beyond death. When we lose a loved one, the spiritual heart break is real. It can be so painful, you can't imagine how you will survive. The community will intervene with lots of medicine - shiva, sheloshim, the 11 months of Kaddish - of course, when you are spiritually sick in Judaism, we don't prescribe quarantine, we won't leave you alone! And you can forget the Mediterranean diet - sometimes you get more bagels and schmears than a whole Mediterranean village could eat. When we feel we want to run and

hide from the world and be alone with our heart break, Judaism says spend time sequestered, but not alone. Instead spend it with those we love and those who care for us. Even in heartbreak, some spiritual exercise does us good.

And then, as your heart heals, you may just realize that those people are still with you. Yizkor isn't just remembering the ones we love for their sake; we remember them for our sake. It's more strengthening for our heart. When we are down, questioning who we are or what we are doing, it helps to think about someone who loves you and look at yourself through their eyes. That's what makes Yizkor so important on Yom Kippur when we are looking deeply and honestly at ourselves, our best selves and the rest of us. That can be heartbreaking, but look at ourselves through the eyes of those we remember today, and maybe it's not so bad. When we look for them, they are still with us, they live in our hearts now. Well, maybe not our whole hearts, but certainly in the side with the *Nefesh Elohit* and the *Yetzer HaTov*, where the best part of us dwells. Now is the time to check in with them - to honor *their* memories, but also, for *our* heart's sake. May our hearts be healthy in every way and may we do what it takes to make it so, making not only our hearts healthier, but also our lives more joyful and meaningful.