

Leading from Our Heart: From Inside to Out **Daniel Freedman's 4th Year Sermon- Hebrew Union College**

I received my very own “mini Torah” at consecration when I was 6 years old. I was thrilled about receiving a “mini Torah” and did not believe life could get any better...until it did! Our religious school teacher asked us to bring shoe boxes to class so that we could design arks to house our mini Torahs. For a child who loved Judaism and design, this was a dream come true. When I brought my “mini Torah” and ark home, I decided to take the project one step further. In my bedroom, I designed a space to house my “mini Torah” and shoebox ark. My childhood bedroom included a lofted bed with a desk underneath. Behind the desk, there was an extra space accessible by crawling underneath the desk. I placed the ark at the back of this space, essentially creating my own sanctuary.

My interest in design led me to believe I wanted to be an architect. But when it came time to apply to colleges and decide what I wanted to do for the rest of my life, I felt unsure. After taking several career tests, attending two architecture summer programs and shadowing a few professionals, I chose to pursue the field. After successfully completing my year of pre-architecture, I was officially accepted into the program. Days later, I made one of the most challenging decisions of my life. I chose not to enroll in the architecture program. My heart was not in it.

In *parshat Vayakel*, we learn more about Bezalel, the man chosen by God to be the architect of the tabernacle. In *Ki Tisa* we learn about Bezalel's skills. In today's *parsha*, Bezalel's skills are not only referred to in Hebrew as *chochma* or wisdom but as *chochmat lev*, wisdom of the heart.

“He has been endowed with the wisdom of heart to do any work—of the carver, the designer, the embroiderer in blue, purple, crimson yarns, and in fine linen, and of the weaver—as workers in all crafts and as makers of designs.” Now, proceeding this verse, we also learn that Bezalel has an additional faculty of his heart, the ability to instruct.

וְלִהְיוֹת נֹתֵן בְּלִבּוֹ

Thus, not only is his skill now directly tied to his heart, but in his heart, he has been given the ability to instruct. Regarding the word, *lhorot* or instruct, Ibn Ezra states, “God put in Bezalel’s heart the ability to instruct because there are many wise people who instruct with great difficulty.” This comment may help us to discern why Bezalel was chosen by God to be the architect of the tabernacle. It was not his skill alone, for there were many skilled people who helped create the tabernacle. Bezalel has *Chochmat lev* and the ability in his heart to instruct others so that his wisdom can be shared with all of Israel.

A midrash found in Berakhot 55a illustrates the way Bezalel’s *chochmat lev* and ability to instruct enable him to be the lead designer of the tabernacle. In the midrash, Rabbi Yochanan explains that in *Ki Tissa*, when God said to Moses: Go say to Bezalel, “Make a tabernacle, an ark, and vessels.” Moses reversed the order and told Bezalel, “Make an ark, vessels and then a tabernacle.” Rashi comments on this midrash to explain that Rabbi Yochanan derived his proof of Moses’s mix up from *parshat Terumah*. In this *parsha*, Moses relays God’s words by first speaking about the ark, then the vessels and finally the tabernacle. The midrash continues with Bezalel saying to Moses, “Moses our teacher, the standard practice throughout the world is that a person builds a house and only afterward places the vessels in the house, and you say to me: Make an ark, vessels, and a tabernacle. If I do so in the order you have commanded, where shall I put the vessels that I make? Perhaps God told you the following: “Make a tabernacle, ark and

then vessels,” The midrash concludes with Moses saying to Bezalel, “Perhaps you were in God’s shadow, *Bezalel*, and you knew.” Rabbi Jill Hammer, director of spiritual education at AJR New York and co-founder of a spiritual leadership program for Jewish woman called *Kohenet Hebrew Priestess Institute*, understands this midrash to teach us about the significance of heart. Through Bezalel’s inner wisdom, he intuitively discerns the correct way to build the tabernacle by responding to his own inner sense of right and wrong.¹ Bezalel has the *chochmat lev* to build the tabernacle correctly, *even when* receiving incorrect instructions. In addition, he can *lhorot*, instruct Israel in this endeavor, even if it means questioning Moses’ instructions.

Scholarship teaches us that that *lev* was historically thought of as the seat of both intellect and emotion.² We read in Proverbs, “More than all that you guard, guard your heart, for it is the source of life.” What does this verse mean? In the *Kuzari*, Yehudah HaLevi says, “The whole body is harmoniously arranged, but under the control of the heart, which forms the primary home of the soul...Israel amidst the nations is like the heart amidst the organs of the body; it is at one and the same time the sickest and the healthiest of them all.”³ HaLevi’s parable helps us understand the significance of the heart. He uses the heart as a powerful analogy to explain to the King Kuzar how the Jewish people are both the “sickest and healthiest” at the same time. Let us unpack how Halevi uses the parable in the *Kuzari*. In his parable of the heart, he describes the heart as analogous to the people Israel. The heart is the “healthiest” because the strong functioning of the rest of the organs depend on it. If Israel is like the heart and the other nations are like organs that surround it, then a healthy Israel supports a healthy world of nations. What does it mean, then, to say it is also the “sickest?” The heart is exposed to diseases and

¹ Torah Queries

² Encyclopedia Judaica

³ Halevi, *The Kuzari*, 104-109

deficiencies of all organs in the body. In other words, the heart remains vulnerable to that which lies outside of it at all times. Israel, especially in diaspora, remains susceptible to all the ills of the nations around it.

Halevi's parable of the heart helps us to underscore why language of the heart is applicable to leadership. The parable states that the heart is "at one and the same time the sickest and the healthiest of them all." On the one hand, a leader should strive to be the healthiest, by deeply connecting with their soul and nourishing the souls of and encouraging those around them to contribute to the overall success of the community. On the other hand, a leader cannot accomplish these tasks without being the sickest. That is, to be the one who feeds the souls of all those around them, a leader must be vulnerable. Not only in regard to putting themselves out there but also in being responsible for the system as a whole. Any crack in the system will come back to the leader, requiring that leader to be vigilant and have trust in themselves so that repairs can be made, and the system will once again be strong. Like a heart, a leader of anything should simultaneously be working to strengthen themselves while at the same time actively working on how they relate to the world outside of themselves.

In his book titled, *The Way of Man*, Martin Buber uses the principles of *Hasidut* to teach readers about living according to the heart by paying attention to both the inner and outer self. When people try to escape from their way of life, they are trying to hide themselves from God. According to Buber, this attempted escape does not hide anything from God, only from oneself. The first step to destroying one's hiding places is to answer the question, where are you? To let that question truly permeate your heart.⁴ When we answer this question truthfully, we discover our gifts. Deep, self-knowledge, is important because we decide what matters to us most. Only

⁴ Buber, *The Way of Man*, 5-6.

we can discover what is our *chochmat lev*. This is truly individual work. It is not something that a career test, nor a therapist or even a close family member or friend can answer for us. Once we have found what we believe to be that gift or skill, our heart is healthy, however, we cannot begin to hone that gift in the world until we begin to move outside of ourselves and ask, is who I am on the inside the person I want to present on the outside? In other words, am I a willing to be vulnerable by sharing my *chochmat lev* the outside world? As Buber says, “Do my thoughts, speech and action align?” Strong leadership requires that we do not stop with knowledge of the self but that we are willing to go beyond and open ourselves up to the world around us.

Looking at the profession of teaching is a great way to better understand Buber’s thinking. Consider your favorite teachers for a moment... Do they all share one teaching technique in common?... Probably not. Parker Palmer, in his book *The Courage To Teach*, explains that most good teachers have a strong sense of their inner thoughts infused in their speech and action, i.e. their teaching. In other words, “Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique, good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher.”⁵ Now, do not get me wrong. The Rhea Hirsch School of Education would not be pleased if I stood up here and told you that all of the education skills we learned in the education year are pointless. What I am saying, is these techniques are not the totality of good education. While I came into the Ed Year thinking I was going to learn skills such as how to write a lesson plan or manage a classroom, I realized by the end of the year that I was leaving with these skills, and more. Rhea Hirsh taught me how to see beyond the “skill set” and to learn more about my inner self. To be an educator that hones the skill of teaching in the world, one must first learn more about him or herself. I learned that we do this through the continuous process of reflection. Through reflection, we learn

⁵ Palmer, *The Courage To Teach*, 10.

to understand how we see ourselves in relation to the world around us. By doing so, we in turn became more comfortable embracing the vulnerabilities that coincide with being a leader of ourselves.

Opening our hearts, our innermost selves, to the world is not easy. It is a huge risk. “What if my passion is rejected?” “What if they don’t like me?” For me, these thoughts have a tendency to feel paralyzing. I try to remember, though, that the only way I can share my wisdom with the world is to take risks. Just like a skill can be considered a heart word, *chochmat lev*, so too is courage, which in modern Hebrew, is *ometz lev*. Brene Brown says that, “Courage is a heart word. The root of the word courage is *cor* - the Latin word for “heart.” In one of its earliest forms, the word courage meant "To speak one's mind by telling all of one's heart."⁶

Reflecting back on the story of the sanctuary I designed underneath my bed and the ark crafted out of a shoebox to hold my “mini Torah,” this very one that I brought with me today, I realize something new. This “mini Torah” is really a symbol of something much greater. Maybe I did indeed have a passion in my heart for building spaces, that is, specifically spaces for Torah. Rather than through the physical edifice of architecture, I wanted then and still want now to build spaces for Torah by cultivating Jewish communities, educating minds and nourishing souls of all generations. My heart was in this type of design all along. In fact, most all of us find ourselves in this room today because our hearts are in this kind of work. Let us all continue to dig deeper into our inner selves, so that we may find where exactly our hearts lie within the Jewish communities and how our wisdom can best be directed. Let us find the courage to be vulnerable so that we can hone our crafts and, like Bezalel, build Jewish community which reflects our souls as Jewish leaders and feeds the souls of those in our midst.

⁶ Brené Brown, *I Thought It Was Just Me: Women Reclaiming Power and Courage in a Culture of Shame*, xxiii