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“Circumcise Your Heart: Rediscovering Our Oneness”

It was 5 am on a Thursday morning. I roused my husband and three-month-old daughter, as the three of us prepared for our first flight as a family: a six-hour voyage to Miami. We hurried downstairs, more than four hours before our flight, with an obscene amount of luggage for two adults and a tiny human on a week-long trip. As a first-time parent, my mind nervously skimmed over all the potential complications that could scuttle our journey:

- Did we forget to pack anything? Seemed unlikely, but you never know.
- Was it a bad idea to wake up Shifra so early? Everyone says never wake a sleeping baby....
- Would she cry throughout the flight?
- Would she get sick from all the germs on the plane?
- Would we be able to secure her infant car seat into the uber?
- Was it safe to let someone else drive our child?

On and on my mind raced until the uber driver pulled up to take us to the airport, at which point, I launched an interrogation more rigorous than Robert Mueller’s – questioning his driving record, the safety of his car, the efficacy of his chosen route... reminding him, again and again, that he was transporting our precious daughter. Finally, after several minutes, I paused to ask what I thought was a fairly innocuous question: “So, what brought you to Los Angeles?”

With his eyes still glued to the road, our driver quietly replied, “My son died a month ago. So, I picked up everything and drove across country... I’m sorry for unloading this on you. But you asked, and it just feels too hard to lie.”

In an instant, our uber driver, whose sole purpose, at least in *my* mind, had been to transport my family safely and quickly to the airport... became Frank... a New Yorker far from home... a loving husband... and a grieving father, deserving of my compassion and curiosity.

Of course, I realized just as quickly how easily we could have made it to the airport without ever really “meeting” Frank, at all. I had been so preoccupied with my own concerns, it had taken half a car ride to even ask about him. But I could still feel his presence, his loss, and his displacement long after we parted with him. I can still feel it now.

Our journey that morning with Frank... and my continuing journey with him ever since... reminded me of a very simple, but essential truth that has become a little too easy to forget: That we’re all connected. Not just in that we breathe the same oxygen or clog up the same freeway. But truly connected – in that way that makes us human. Whether we’re uber drivers or rabbis, infants or adults, immigrants or native Angelinos, wealthy or poor... we’re all made of the same stuff. Or, as my mom would say, we all put our pants on one leg at a time. And we’re all engaged in some version of the same pursuit, trying to survive and live purposefully in a breathtakingly beautiful yet equally frightening world.

Such an idyllic interpretation of human existence – with all of us swimming in the same current – may seem awfully out of touch in the 21st Century, when three swipes of your finger can reveal a stockpile of sexism, bigotry, exploitation, and opportunism; but, in many ways, all the rancor and surface divisions of the world in which we live today are but a distraction from the greater truth that our souls know at heart – we are inescapably one.

The great twentieth century Jewish thinker, Emanuel Levinas, teaches that when we encounter other human beings... when we truly **see** their faces... the experience kindles in us a sense of obligation. We are drawn to **look deeply** into their hearts and souls and cannot help but become connected to—actually, **bound up** with them.

If that feels like a rabbinic platitude to you – just think for a moment about every time you pull off the freeway, and a homeless man or woman or child is sitting there. Think about the contortions you’ll often put yourself through in order NOT to look them in the face, in the eye. Looking away is our acknowledgment of just how right Levinas has it. To look into the eye of another person is to become obligated to her.

Levinas understands a truth that we seem to be trying to distance ourselves from more and more – that we are inextricably tied to one another. The very nature of our human experience is that we are all interconnected, whether we want to be or not. If our planet disintegrates due to global warming... if an earthquake shakes the foundations of our homes... if a hurricane or a brush fire or a tornado emerges from the conditions in which we live – the threat won’t distinguish between rich and poor, between Republicans and Democrats, between white and black and brown. All of us will be at risk.

In fact, one of the chief purposes of Yom Kippur is to remind us, as Levinas suggests, that, for all that separates us, we are little more than blood and guts. No matter how big our jobs may be or how much money we have, who we know or what access we possess, we are all fragile, we are all fallible, and we are all human.

And so... we fast. We dress in white. We separate ourselves from all the usual trappings that help us maintain the façade of our invincibility. Stripped of our comforts, we approach God together as a community – and as a community of communities around the world – armed with the best tool we have on this Day of Judgment – each other. For what makes us resilient to forces greater than ourselves is our strength in one another. By seeing the faces of others... by acknowledging and nurturing our foundational bonds with each other and with all living things, we rediscover the power inherent in our species and defy the limitations of the human condition.

Sound overstated to you? Think again. In his book, *Sapiens*, world historian Yuval Noah Harari explains that, despite what we may think, humans are actually an extremely limited species except for one immensely powerful attribute – our ability to create what he calls, “mass cooperation networks” in which “thousands and millions of complete strangers can work together toward common goals.”¹

While other species collaborate with their immediate neighbors in flocks, herds, packs, and prides, humans transcend the boundaries of proximity to create networks of concern that span both space and time.

Drop any one of us in the savannah without tools, food, or water, and our chances of survival would be slim. We are neither fierce like the lion, nor cunning like the coyote, nor swift like the gazelle, nor industrious like the ant.

But our capacity for mass interconnectedness provides us with a competitive advantage no other species can match, one that has enabled human beings to become this planet’s dominant creature. Only by striving **together** over **generations** did humans discover how to defeat the mastodon, how to domesticate wheat, how to wield fire, how to cherish beauty, and, more importantly, how to preserve these innovations for our descendants to replicate and improve. Our understanding of how to be a collective is the gift of our species and the key to our thriving and survival.

And it is a gift that our children, at least in infancy, instinctively appreciate and understand. Human unity is the default position for our species. We start there. Only as we grow do we stray from that innate impulse.

In her book, *The Spiritual Child*, Dr. Lisa Miller illustrates clinically something that we’ve all observed anecdotally – how young children express their natural affinity towards the universe: “They see a lone duckling in the park and wonder where its mother is, perhaps worrying that the duckling is lost or separated from its family. They put a crumb of bread down for the ants filing across the sidewalk. They fuss at us for trying to rid the kitchen of mice: ‘don’t kill the mice – they’re only trying to eat!’ They hand a crying baby a toy if they can. They often try to comfort us when they’re worried we’re not okay; they pick up on our tension or the fear or sadness we thought we’d hidden.”²

¹ Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (New York: Harper, 2015).

² Lisa Miller, *The Spiritual Child: The NEW SCIENCE on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving* (New York: Picador, 2015), 171.

Young children possess a deep, spiritual understanding of their oneness with the world – with the larger community they are part of. They’re in awe of natural beauty and full of wonder at life’s creations. They internalize their connection not only to other people, but to all sentient beings. As Miller explains, their “Natural spirituality is a direct sense of listening to the heartbeat of the living universe, of being one with that seen and unseen world, open and at ease in that connection.”³ Of course they cry or act out from hunger or exhaustion or frustration, but generally, young children relate to others with an open, curious, and loving heart – their instinct is to respond from the heart.⁴

Why, then, does this instinctual understanding of our oneness with others diminish as we grow older?

Perhaps, because sometimes, our life’s experiences can cause a kind of build up around our hearts – like the plaque that accumulates around our teeth or the scabs that develop around a wound. This build up envelops our hearts like a callous so that we don’t have to walk around feeling so vulnerable and inadequate all the time.

Most of us know far too well that being in relationship is not always easy – it can be messy, and complicated, and painful. When we truly see the face of those around us, loved ones and strangers alike, we may fear it will compromise the fulfillment of our own needs, or worse, be simply too much for us to bear. But once we begin to close off our hearts from one another, we lose our natural acuity to lead from the heart, the source of our compassion and empathy... the place that locates the immeasurable ways in which we are all bound together through our mere existence.

And when we fall out of touch with that sense of oneness, it can create devastating consequences for ourselves and for our world.

In 2013, economists set out to measure the significance of human connectedness. By measuring the effects of changes in social connections upon brain activity, they were able to put a price tag on our relationships... describing in financial terms the impact that a socially rich or deprived life has upon our well-being:

“If we volunteer at least once a week, the increase to our happiness is like moving from a yearly income of \$20,000 to \$75,000. If we have a friend that we see on most days, it’s like earning \$100,000 more each year. Simply seeing our neighbors on a regular basis gets us \$60,000 a year more. On the other hand, when we break a critical social tie – it’s like suffering a \$90,000 per year decrease in our income.”⁵

Clearly, our relationships matter. And as Rabbi Chasen and Rabbi Ross so beautifully illustrated on Rosh Hashanah, it is not only our individual health that is at risk when we neglect our sense of connectedness to those around us, but also the welfare of our fellow human beings.

³ Miller, 25.

⁴ Miller, 27.

⁵ Emily Esfahani Smith, “Social Connection Makes a Better Brain,” *The Atlantic*, October 29, 2013.

So many of us felt this sense of peril most acutely this past April when we discovered the crimes committed in our name against migrants seeking immigration or asylum in the United States.

From a government that cynically launched a public smear campaign against migrants fleeing oppression... to border patrolmen who lied to parents about taking their children to bathe... to detention officers who mocked the inconsolable cries of children calling for their parents... to the federal immigration agent who tore a baby from her mother's breast... we witnessed a new extreme in the price that can be paid when society conspires to neglect our innate unity with humankind, and the public outcry in response demonstrated that the price was too steep. Now, more than ever, we must find a way to open up our hearts... to get back in touch with that sense of oneness that came so easily to us as children.

Fortunately, our tradition offers us a clear path. Towards the end of the Israelites' journey through the wilderness in Deuteronomy, the fifth of the Torah's five books, Moses assembles the people to reaffirm their special relationship with God. But instead of just celebrating their covenant with God and with one another, Moses admonishes them, stating, "Therefore, cut away, the thickening of your hearts."

Or more literally, "**Circumcise the foreskin of your hearts.**"⁶ Moses looked at the Israelites – our biblical forbears – and saw people whose hearts had become unnaturally shielded from others.

Moses' warning to those ancient Israelites offers a visceral illustration of the deep challenge our tradition places before us – to remove all the "stuff" that clogs our hearts, from our preoccupation with our own needs, which all too often causes us to regard the people we meet as a means to an end, rather than a window into the sacred...to our fear of vulnerability, which all too often leads us to treat those we know, and those we don't know, with prejudice and suspicion rather than empathy and curiosity.

And so, we must learn to circumcise our hearts – to cut away the shield we've grown over the best and most sensitive part of our souls. But, how do we do it?

In a word – practice. Opening our hearts to the world around us is a skill, one that must be exercised regularly if we expect it to succeed. It's like any of our other muscle – we must constantly be developing it, or it descends into atrophy. In order to circumcise our hearts... in order to cultivate our innate sense of unity and transcendent relationship with all of humanity, we must aggressively seek opportunities to train ourselves to look another person in the eye and experience our deeply human bond with them. Maybe it's the checkout line at the grocery store. Maybe it's our morning commute. Maybe it's a daily walk around the block. Maybe it's the driver of the car blocking your way out of our parking lot after services today. But, little by little, moment by moment, we can train our hearts to remember what they knew so instinctively when they were young – that indeed – we are one.

⁶ Deuteronomy 10:16.

In the early hours of the morning on December 27, my husband and I found ourselves keenly aware of our human vulnerabilities as we placed our very lives in the hands of someone we had never met. Walking into the delivery room, still in shock that we were *actually* going to have a baby at the end of this day (or, at least we hoped), we met Christina, the woman who would soon help us bring our child into the world.

I began to ask countless questions, eager to know and control every detail I could, but Christina patiently and tenderly answered each question, even smiling lovingly (and knowingly!) when I suggested, a tad prematurely, that contractions weren't really as bad as everyone had told me.

I don't know who she voted for in the last election. I don't know if she lives in a big house or a small one. I don't know if she believes in God or in a woman's right to choose... What I do know is that at one of the most vulnerable and important moments in our lives, Christina was a true angel, a messenger of God, who helped shepherd our daughter into a world of deep love, support, and faith.

That's an awful lot to feel happening inside one small hospital room, but those of you who have been there know what I'm talking about. I believe that my daughter's first moments of life revealed to her not only the loving embrace of her long-waiting father and mother, but a whole universe of compassion, understanding, and oneness with humanity that will impact how she sees and relates to those around her. All this, *because* of Christina, this total stranger, who entered our orbit randomly but with a kind, loving, and ready heart, played one of the most important roles in our lives, and then exited our orbit just as mysteriously as she had entered. We will probably never see Christina again.

But without a doubt in my mind, she came to remind me that I am a part of a great, expansive One. One with my husband and my daughter. One with that angel who nurtured us through that day when we glimpsed the everlasting. One with the mothers and fathers and children all over the world, who are learning how to know and love each other, as we are. One with those now gone, who have walked this path. One with those still to come, who will someday know all of the blessings and all of the vulnerabilities my daughter first sensed in that burst of world-entering light.

On this Day of Atonement, may we circumcise our hearts, attuning ourselves to the precious gift of that great, expansive One, of which we are blessed to be a part. For it is as we are taught in the Yom Kippur Machzor you are holding in your hands:

You are the One who unites all things,
Who links life to life in a sacred chain.

The forests anchored in the soil
breathe air into our lungs.

Our faces are reflected in the creatures of earth;
We carry the sea within us.

Our fate is connected to rivers and deserts,
Our family a many-branched Tree of Life.

All beings intertwine You;
All are encompassed in “*Adonai Echad.*”

Thus no man is an island;
No soul exists apart.

To say *echad* is to know this truth:
to see the world whole, humankind undivided.

Precious and holy are these words we speak:
Adonai echad – We proclaim You One.⁷

⁷ Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis, “Adonai Echad: We Proclaim You One,” *Mishkan Hanefesh: Yom Kippur Machzor for the Days of Awe* (New York: CCAR Press), 185.