

EKEV 2020 DRASH

How often do we harden our hearts? And when do we need to open up our hearts and make them vulnerable?

There's an extraordinary line in this week's Torah reading. Moses is outlining how the people must live in order to prosper once they enter the Promised Land. And he says - circumcise the foreskin of your heart and stiffen your necks no more. We know that the people are often called stiff-necked - stubborn, inflexible, likely to dig their heels in. But what does it mean to circumcise the foreskin of your heart? It is of course a metaphor - of the shells that we put around our hearts that stop us from feeling too much. Because to follow God's teaching, to follow Jewish practice, we need to be open-hearted. It's a metaphor that's often used in the Torah - the heart and the mind were considered pretty much one unit in biblical times, so to have a heart covered over, also means to be close-minded, to be narrowly focussed, to have already made your mind up.

The Jewish mystics, the Kabbalists, had a similar idea. They talked about klipot, which are shells, or husks, that act as metaphysical barriers against divine light and so keep us from being happy or fulfilled. In Kabbalah, people are full of light, but it's covered by these shells, so we can't see it. We need to remove the shells around our heart and open up to the world around us, we need to stay loving and open.

The context of all this is Moses preparing the people for life as settled citizens in Eretz Yisrael. The promise of the land is completely conditional on their being good citizens and in particular on the social obligations of upholding the cause of the orphan, the widow and the stranger, made as we are in the image of a God, as it says, who is a judge who takes no bribes and shows no favours. The Book of Deuteronomy continually demands legal protection for the vulnerable.

Why? **Because** we were strangers in the land of Egypt, as we are told this week, we must not only uphold the cause of the vulnerable but befriend the stranger. We know what it was like, we were strangers in a strange land, so we know that we can't treat other people badly - that is in fact the whole basis of Judaism. We use empathy to try to understand what it must be like for those still oppressed, and to try to make a difference.

That is why, when we see any evidence of genocide, the Jewish community is always on the frontline of any response, because we know what it's like, we've walked in those shoes. This year we marked the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. Every year we remember and we say this must never be allowed to happen again. But it is happening again. It's happening now. Right now in China and because we are told to love the stranger and because we

were strangers in the land of Egypt and persecuted across Europe, it is our moral duty as Jews to act.

More than a million Uyghurs, a predominantly Muslim ethnic minority from a region in north-west China, are being detained in re-education camps. Drone footage has shown men with shaved heads, blindfolded and being led onto trains. Thirteen tons of human hair originating from the Uyghur province has been seized at American customs. There is evidence of forced sterilisation and birth control programmes, the removal of children and forced labour in prison camps, factories and farms.

We too were slaves in Egypt. It all sounds far too familiar. It's time to focus some of our energy to support an oppressed minority who have none of the freedoms we have. The Jewish voice on human rights, Rene Cassin, has a list of specific actions we can take, including writing to your MP, and joining a weekly Jewish protest outside the Chinese Embassy in Hampstead, every Tuesday at 6pm. The more attention the Uyghurs get in the UK, the more likely it is that the British Government to continue to speak out. When, in our community prayers we talk about being good citizens at home AND abroad this is what we are talking about.

It is so easy to think about this as something happening a long way away to a people we've hardly heard of in a region we can't pronounce. That is of course exactly how people responded to

reports of genocide in Eastern Europe in the 1930s and 40s. We are all a little exhausted I think, keeping ourselves, our loved ones and our community alive and well over the past five months. And I know that uncertainty is draining. And when times are difficult, it is tempting to burrow down, put up the barricades and protect our own hearts.

But we are told this week to remove the shells from our hearts. Now more than ever is the time to be as open-hearted as possible. Open-hearted to each other, to the refugees we have welcomed into the neighbourhood, to the street homeless whose temporary accommodation during the pandemic is in danger of ending – and most of all, to the million Uyghurs, whom we have never met, whose names we do not know, but who are being persecuted for the crime of being different and of having their own cultural and religious identity.

Now is the time to open our hearts because, in the words of Rabbi Hillel, if I am not for myself, then who will be for me? But if I am only for myself then who on earth am I? And if not now, really, if we don't take action now, then when?

I'm going to leave you with that thought – do check out the Rene Cassin website after Shabbat – and we'll turn to the Torah reading.

DEUTERONOMY 10:1-22, Soncino p1042

First aliyah: 10:1-5...Moses retells the story of when he was given the second set of stone tablets on which were carved the Ten Commandments, having just smashed the first set when he saw the Israelites worshipping the Golden Calf. He tells how he made an ark of acacia wood and put the stone tablets in them.

Andrew Farleigh – Avraham ben Shlomo

Second aliyah: 10:6-11

Moses tells how the Israelites travel on, how his brother Aaron died and Aaron's son, Elazar, became the High Priest. The Levites were instructed to carry the Ark with the Ten Commandments in, the Ark of the Covenant, to serve God in the Sanctuary and to bless the people. Moses was on Mount Sinai for 40 days and persuaded God not to destroy the people.

Need to get aliyah

Third aliyah 10:12-22 – Moses outlines what the people need to do to thrive, once they enter the Land. To love and serve God, keep the laws. We get the phrase circumcise the foreskin of your hearts, God as the impartial judge, who upholds the rights of the poor and marginalised and loves the stranger, providing food and clothing, so we must too, because we were strangers in the land of Egypt. And it ends with a reminder that when our ancestors went down to Egypt,

there were seventy of us, now we are as numerous as the stars of the heaven.

Michael Collins – Michal ben Za'ev Ha'Cohen.