

DEBAR TORAH by RABBI ROHDE

Cutting Through the Layers to Reveal the Love In Memory of Rev. Hazzan Philip L. Sherman, Mohel

Deuteronomy 30:6 states: "Then the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the hearts of your offspring to love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul, in order that you may live." This "circumcising your heart" is hard to understand, as is indeed, perhaps surprisingly, the very term "circumcision" itself. The death of my colleague, Rev. Philip Sherman, over this summer has caused me to reflect upon the hard-to-pinpoint symbolism of circumcision. There are a number of similar passages in the Torah and Jeremiah, such as Deut. 10:16 "Circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and stiffen your nape [of the neck] no more."

I remember colleagues mentioning there actually being a "pericardium," or a membrane "around the heart," and that some training methods for mohalim traditionally included practicing on the pericardium of butchered chicken's hearts, literally fulfilling "circumcising the heart." Whether the original Torah and Jeremiah passages were metaphorically referring to the pericardium per se is anybody's guess. Stimulating my thinking on this was reading the New JPS translation of our verse: "Then the Lord your God will open up your heart and the hearts of your offspring to love the Lord Your God." This translation of the term for circumcision as meaning "open up" is unique, yet it does capture the sense of "opening up your heart to love." A heart or membrum encased by membrane poses barriers to love. The cutting of the layers opens and reveals the organ of love which lies beneath.

At the same time, the term clearly has the sense of a "cut," and a cut involves pain. Idiomatically, covenants and deals are "cut." The root "מלל" or "מור" has many seemingly-unrelated meanings, but it often refers to grain which is cut or harvested. Cutting of grain or harvesting and not leaving it in its natural state is necessary for grain to be used by man (although the stalks may also shed their grain by "withering" by themselves). Another meaning of the root is to indicate a "word" or "speech," perhaps having to do with speech requiring "articulation" or "cutting off" the intonation of vowels by consonants which delimit and define syllables and words.

Ibn Ezra ascribes the "circumcision of the heart" to God's Grace. But in context, "circumcision of the heart" is the result of the "cutting" discipline which God imposes upon Israel through the preceding punishments. Through experiencing the terrible Divine Retribution, as well as the following Repentance and Reconciliation, Israel's heart will be "cut down"- disciplined and chastened once and for all. This is also in accord with the "Reproof" at the end of Leviticus (26:41) "When I, in turn, have been contrary to them and have removed them into the land of their enemies, then at last shall their uncircumcised heart be lowered, and they shall atone for their iniquity." In our Parashah the Septuagint translates "circumcision" as "perikathariei" which is translated as "purge," or more literally, "purify all-around." This resonates with the term for "foreskin" being synonymous with the "unclean lips" of Moses or the "impure lips" of Isaiah (which also are unable to properly "articulate words"). God will purify the people's hearts, although purifying and purging require a severe smelting and refining process. Divine retribution will be severe, but will not utterly wipe them out; in the end will come a refining purification which will keep them from sinning again.

Circumcision is old but odd and baffling. Does it cut away destructively, or does it enhance? Does it discipline and purify the body, its urges and procreation, or does it celebrate and even glorify them? Or perhaps a combination of both? Is there a message that severe masculine discipline is necessary to reveal the potent strength of the pure heart hidden beneath?

My friend Phil, during the 45-or-so years I knew him, was quite a masculine type. I remember his love of motorcycle jamborees! He was someone I looked up to as a mentor of men. Even if a new father was nervous and apprehensive, by the end, Phil knew how to make a dad feel he grew a shirt size and want to give out cigars! Ultimately, the Covenant is shrouded in the enigmatic riddle of the blood-brotherhood of our Tribe. But we owe my friend Rev. Phil credit for helping cut back the layers shrouding our love and initiating so many future Jewish men into the mysterious chain of God's great Covenant.



CONGREGATION SHEARITH ISRAEL
The Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue

Shabbat Nitsabim-Vayelevk

September 8-9, 2023 | 23 Elul 5783

Consecration Anniversary of 19th St. Synagogue (1860)

SHABBAT SCHEDULE

Kaplan: p. 1010 | Haftarah: p. 1242

Hertz: p. 878 | Haftarah: p. 883

Candle Lighting | 6:59 pm

Friday Evening Services | 7:00 pm | Main Sanctuary

Zemiroth | 8:15 am / **Shahrit** | 9:00 am | Main Sanctuary

Tot Shabbat | 10:00 am | Fidanque Youth Room | Led by Liz Rios

Jr. Congregation | 10:30 am | Small Synagogue | Led by Matea & Reuben Frieber

Kiddush | following services | Paved Paradise | *Sponsored in honor of the restoration of the West 11th Street Cemetery. See inside for full sponsor listings.*

Shabbat Afternoon Class | 6:05 pm | Led this week by Baruch-Lev Kelman, Rabbinic Intern | "Renaissance of Majesty: The Birth of Sefarad"

Evening Services (with Selibot) | 6:50 pm

Habdala | 7:52 pm

We commemorate the consecration of our synagogue buildings with a semi-festive service. The Ark remains open during much of the service and the Torah scrolls are dressed in festive colors. The beautiful poem Todot El (p. 342) is sung before Nishmat, and special blessings and memorial prayers are recited before the reading of the Torah.

Weekday Service Times

Mornings:

Sunday: 8:05 am | Monday-Thursday: 7:05 am

Friday (pre-Rosh HaShana *selibot*): 6:15 am

Evenings:

Sunday-Thursday: 6:30 pm

W. 11th ST. CEMETERY REDEDICATION KIDDUSH

Sponsors:

Anonymous, *in honor of Brad Finkelstein, Nathaniel Wice, and John Nason Lewis Bateman, in memory of Benjamin Bateman (Baruch b. Yitzchak Aryeh)*

Karen & Jack Daar

Jim & Mary-Ellen Rudolph, *in honor of Hazanim v'Kal-Kadash*

Contributors:

Faith Fogelman

Suzanne Stern & Sjimon den Hollander, *in memory of Rev. Philip Sherman*

Everett Weinberger, *in memory of Sylvia & Lenny Weinberger*

High Holidays 5784

Shabbat Teshuba Derasha

Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

Shabbat, September 23

Sponsor the derasha at shearithisrael.org/events/teshuba-derasha5784

High Holiday Tickets & Seating Requests

High Holiday tickets are going out by email over the next few days. If you still wish to reserve seats, please submit your seating request at shearithisrael.org/high-holidays-5784.

FOR THE COMMUNITY:

Shofar Blowing in our Outdoor Pavilion

Sunday, September 17, Rosh HaShana II | 8 West 70th St.

12:45 pm, following Morning Services &

6:20 pm, before Evening Services

It's not too late!

- Make your holiday offerings
 - Order your lulab & etrog set through the synagogue
- Go to shearithisrael.org/high-holidays-5784.*
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COMMUNITY ANNOUNCEMENTS

Mazal tob to **Marty & Judy Grumet**, upon the marriage of their daughter Alexandra to Hanokh Perez.

THIS SUNDAY

Building on the success of our recent in-person program in Newport, Congregation Shearith Israel and Congregation Ahavath Israel are pleased to present

A Pre-Rosh HaShana Talk

by Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

Senior Rabbi, Congregation Shearith Israel &

Acting Rabbi, Congregation Ahavath Israel of Newport

This Sunday, September 10 | 8:15 pm | Via Zoom

Refer to our emails for the Zoom link

A note about the re-formation of Congregation Ahavath Israel in Newport, RI
We're delighted that this newly re-formed congregation has partnered with Shearith Israel and is working together with us toward the benefit of Touro Synagogue and its worshippers. We thank Rabbi Soloveichik for assuming the role of Acting Rabbi of Congregation Ahavath Israel.

COMING UP

Shearith Israel is proud to partner in a special Landing Day Celebration hosted by Manhattan Jewish Historical Initiative, The Battery Conservancy, & New York Board of Rabbis

Landing Day Celebration

To mark the 369 years since the arrival of the first Jewish community in America

Wednesday, September 13 | 5:30 pm

Tercentenary Flagstaff at Peter Minuit Plaza

(North of the Staten Island Ferry entrance, by State & Whitehall St.)

Landing Day marks the arrival of 23 Sephardi Jews in September, 1654 in New Amsterdam (now Lower Manhattan). They were the first group of refugees fleeing persecution from the Portuguese after the conquest of Brazil. Those 23 were the start of the Jewish story in North America. The Jewish-American Tercentenary Flagstaff was dedicated to honor their memory.

Questions and RSVP to manhattanjewishhof@gmail.com.

SCHEDULE ALERTS

- This week's Young Families Picnic has been **postponed**.
- Rabbi Sjimon den Hollander's Sunday Class will resume **on October 29**.
- Shabbat Morning Services have returned to **8:15 am**.
- Morning Services & Selihot **next Friday, Sept. 15**, begin at **6:15 am**.