

PARASHAT EKEV
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This week's parashah, Ekev, has sandwich-like structure. The beginning (Deut. 7:12-9:7) and end (Deut. 10:12-11:25) consist of Moshe's injunctions to the people regarding how and what to behave, think, feel, believe, remember and forget in the land they are about to enter. Between these exhortations, Moshe reminds the people of the sin of the Golden Calf and its aftermath, focusing specifically on the smashing of the first set of Tablets and the creation of the second ones.

Within this structure, two key words recur. In the outer sections, the word "heart" (לבב or לב) is repeated frequently (six times in the beginning section, five times in the end). In the center -- the "heart" of the parashah -- the word "tablets" (לוחות) appears at least fourteen times.

This structure suggests a relationship, even a functional equivalence, between the tablets and human heart. Indeed, the tablets inscribed by God's hand function as a kind of communal "heart", the intellectual and emotional center which keeps the corporate body alive, just as the human heart does for the individual (remember that in Biblical Hebrew the word heart refers to the seat of intellect as well as emotion). And like the tablets, the heart too is created to bear the words of the Divine.

But how should those words of God be borne? When the Torah first relates the story of the Golden Calf and smashing of the tablets, the tablets are said to be *in* Moshe's hands (see Exod. 32:15, בידו, and Exod. 32:19 מידו). Here, however, when Moshe retells those events for the purpose of instructing the people, he speaks instead of the tablets being *on* (in Hebrew על, על) his hands (see Deut. 9:15, 17), an unusual formulation.

Strikingly, Torah speaks of the heart bearing words of Torah in the same way. True, the Torah uses the word בלבבך ("in your heart") four times at the beginning of our parashah, but each time in the negative (i.e., what we should *not* say "in our hearts"). In contrast, the Torah speaks positively about putting the words of Torah *on* our hearts (see Deut. 11:18, על לבבכם, as well as the first paragraph of the Shma, Deut. 6). Indeed, at the end of the parasha, after Moshe reminds of the sin of the Golden Calf, the expression "in your heart" is not used at all.

But why would God command us to put the words of the Torah "on" our hearts? Don't we need them "in" our hearts?

Perhaps not. The command to keep the words of Torah "on" our hearts is directly connected to the sin of the Golden Calf, where we attempted to concretize -- or fully grasp -- the Divine. That is the essence of idolatry. We similarly risk idolatry whenever we attempt to concretize -- or fully grasp -- that which cannot be concretized and fully grasped, even (or especially) the word of God.

Moshe understands this when he recharacterizes the tablets as being "on" rather than "in" his hands. Here, after the Golden Calf and after forty years of wandering, Moshe wants to strip away any illusion that a human being can ever have a hold on God's word, that we can ever fully grasp it, such that we can be said to have the Torah "in" our hands. Rather, we ought to see the tablets -- the Torah, God's word -- as resting lightly upon our open hands.

Ultimately, Moshe does again speak of tablets being "in" his hands (בידי). He uses that

language to refer to the second set of tablets, which he himself has carved (Deut. 10:3). Tellingly, however, he speaks of them being “in his hands” only when they are blank, *before* being inscribed upon by God. In other words, the fact of the covenant, and the fact of God’s communication to us -- symbolized by the raw blank tablets, the medium for that communication -- we hold “in” our hands. But once we purport to articulate the specific content and words of that communication -- symbolized by the inscribed tablets, they can only sit provisionally “on” our hands.

So too with the heart. What the heart is able to take “in” is always a mere approximation of the Divine: “something *like* all the words” that God speaks (see Deut. 9:10, ככל הדברים). There is always both the opportunity and need to refine and expand our understanding, growing ever closer to but never attaining complete comprehension. It is in that sense that we lay the words of the Torah *on* rather than *in* our hearts -- we hold what we think we know lightly and somewhat provisionally, on an open heart, with the understanding that the tablets of our heart-knowledge may be periodically smashed and rewritten, as our understanding deepens and grows.