Rabbi Daniel J. Moskovitz
D'var Torah: Ekev
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Consider the artichoke for a moment. It is an odd but instructive type of vegetable. Artichokes are prickly and surrounded by an armor of leaves protecting the soft center, the heart of the food. In order to eat an artichoke you must soften it up, by boiling it or steaming it in water. Cooking it in such away loosens the protective leaves, permitting you to pick them off one by one, unwrapping the delicious gift that lies inside. We know that at the center of an artichoke, behind all of its defenses, its armor like barrier is a luscious and delicious heart, soft and delectable. Each leaf that is removed from the food contains a hint, a sampling of the delicious center, but even if you combined all of the tastes provided by all of the leaves on an artichoke it would never equal the delicate green artichoke heart that lies deep in the center of the food, only by cutting or pulling away its protective layers can one get to treasure that lies with in.

In this week's Torah portion, Ekev the Israelites are instructed by Moses to circumcise their hearts in service to God. Specifically they are instructed to 'cut away the thickening around their hearts and stiffen their necks no more.' It is a powerful and direct statement made by Moses to the people. At first thought it appears horrific, Israel knows what circumcision is, you can well imagine that every male in the assembled crowd

quickly adjusted their gaze upon Moses at just the mention of the word, does Moses really have in mind so grizzly a ritual as cutting the flesh of the heart? But the Rabbis, and our common sense tell us that Moses must be speaking in a metaphorical sense, it is not an actual cutting away that God desires, though many Jews will become heart surgeons and have a very successful career. No what God has commanded upon Israel is entirely different, but truth be told no less challenging than heart surgery even to the most skilled physician.

Biblical psychology localizes feelings and emotions in the body and points to the heart as the organ of comprehension - thus an uncircumcised heart is a closed mind. The prophet Jermiah even provides and example of this concept. A farmer does not plant an untilled field that weeds have over taken and the top soil of which is hard as stone. To make the soil productive, first he plows it and rids it of weeds, loosening the dirt, he cuts away the hard protective shell. So it is with human beings; the human heart and mind must be cleared of harmful growth and made receptive. Only then can ideas strike root and grow. Much like you can't eat an artichoke till you have pealed away its hard shell, so too the Torah tells us the heart and mind cannot undertake acts of justice and mercy until the defensive layers we build around it are cut away and broken down.

Its not an easy thing to take down ones own defenses, certainly when those defenses have been built over years of confrontation and hurt feelings. You build a wall to keep things out, but it just as often has the adverse affect of keeping things in. Our lives are really not all that different from those of our biblical ancestors, life-styles might differ but the basic truths of human nature and social interaction are as true in the Torah as they are today.

People can be cruel to each other, the environment and political situation in which we live can be oppressive and at times disillusioning. Our ancestors encountered a world where they were slaves to a tyrant, we a world with our own taskmasters and pharaohs. In biblical times such a situation caused Israel to be un-trusting, stiff necked, hard of heart. Is the same not true for many of us, have we not built our defenses against character assassination, image degradation so high as to harden our hearts to anyone who has even the potential to show us ill-will? Israel did not want to accept the Torah because they didn't trust that anyone, far be it God would look with favor upon them. It took ten plagues and the parting of the Red Sea to convince the Children of Israel to open their hearts and minds to Torah, and still we had the incident with the Golden Calf and numerous other times when our ancestors appear ready and willing to return to Egypt for fear that God has abandoned them in the

desert. We are a stiff necked people and so with his dying, his farewell address that makes up the entire book of Deuteronomy Moses is compelled to remind and to caution us not to rebuild those defenses, those walls that prevented us from letting God into our lives.

When an artichoke blossoms it is the heart that grows first, the leaves come after to protect the delicate treasure. Likewise with the field that it is planted in; sure after years of planting and harvesting it becomes resistant to growth, if left dormant for a season it develops its own defense against those that would seek to assault it. But the treasure is always there, behind the leaves of the artichoke, under the stone like top soil of a field, inside the thickened walls we build around our heart lies the sweetness of our soul.

The Rabbis of the Talmud teach that of the many purposes of the covenant between God and the Jewish people is to elevate the human experience to help us find and recognize holiness in our lives and those we touch. The Talmud declares when we recognize life and our interactions with one another as a sacred gift we ascend to heaven , *im lo l'malah,* if not higher.

It is therefore our sacred task to increase holiness in the world, to reveal through the deeds of our hearts, justice, caring, honesty and love, to ourselves and one another. Anything that prevents this, the Rabbis declare must be cut away and removed.

Thus the Torah reminds us today, 'cut away the thickening about our hearts and stiffen our necks no more.' Permit the treasure that lies inside to be receptive once again, entertain a new idea, embrace an old but now distant friend, rekindle relationships long dormant with those we love and have loved, let the words of Torah, the teachings Judaism once again be a sign upon our hands, set them as a seal upon our hearts.