D'var Torah: Parsha Va'era
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My three-year-old niece likes to stick her foot in her mouth. Not metaphorically, which is something I do all the time, but she actually likes to grab hold of her foot, right or left it doesn't matter, and stick it in her mouth. I discovered this while we sat together on the sofa after Thanksgiving dinner. She had just had a bath (her feet were very clean) and I was reading her a story. I turned to show her the picture and there she sat, munching away on her extremely cute little foot, tiny toes peeking out the sides of her mouth. I sat there totally grossed out, and in utter amazement! How did she get that foot in her mouth?

In fact, I am told that at birth, human beings are the most flexible and limber they will ever be. If you have ever watched babies as they wiggle and stretch, arms and legs are almost interchangeable. They can put a foot behind their head, they can grasp both feet with one hand -- an infant is more flexible than silly putty. But this doesn't last forever, around the age of eight the flexibility of the human body begins to decrease. And while it is possible to maintain a youthful flexibility until well into young adulthood, if children do not stretch and tumble at least 20 minutes a day they will begin to lose some of that flexibility. By age 16, if they fail to maintain a daily regimen of stretching, their youthful limberness will be lost forever. The body will just never be able to bend and contort as it once could. No matter how much tai-chi, yoga, isometrics, or aerobics my niece does, as she grows, her ability to stick her foot in her mouth will be gone forever, though like her uncle, she will have a lifetime to do it metaphorically.

In medical terms it is known as the "use it or lose it" rule. Through lack of practice the body loses the ability to do something that it was designed to do since birth. This same degeneration of flexibility happens to Pharaoh in this week's Torah Portion. In Pharaoh's case, it is not a physical rigidity and firming up, but an immoral hardening of his heart that only solidifies every time he refuses Moses' plea to free the Israelites from bondage.

Moses was hesitant to confront Pharaoh, because he feared the Pharaoh would not listen to him. Indeed, his fears were well founded. We see the Pharaoh heart harden

time and again. In Chapter 7, verse 13 of the Book of Exodus, after Moses and Aaron approach the Pharaoh the first time, we read - "Pharaoh's heart stiffened and he did not heed them, as the Lord had said."

The story continues as Moses confronts Pharaoh over and over again - and still his heart stiffens to the pleas of the Israelites. And even after the Lord set plagues upon Egypt, the heart of the Pharaoh becomes ever more like concrete.

Every time, in the face of each plague's overwhelming force and destruction, Pharaoh is tempted to free the Israelites, and every time, at the last possible moment, he is unable to bend his own will -- he is so stubborn, so set in his ways and unable to channel his energy to make a change in outlook and approach. And his obstinacy becomes worse after each plague.

Nachum Sarna, a modern Biblical scholar, sees this process as degenerative too -- the hardening builds upon itself, with each successive plague Pharaoh hardens his heart to a still greater degree of inflexibility and stubbornness. Before the first hardening, Moses and Aaron came before him with great signs and wonders. They turn the Nile into blood, they cause a staff to become a serpent, but still Pharaoh thinks his own powers can match those of God. He hardens his heart and will not concede.

When frogs fill the land, Pharaoh is shaken. He pleads with Moses to remove them, but when they are gone, Pharaoh shows no remorse, or compassion and chooses to do nothing. Again he hardens his heart to the Israelites and they remain in bondage.

And so it goes, with each new and debilitating punishment Pharaoh is tempted to free the Israelites, but time and again, he tunes out the plagues, the cries, the great destruction. He is unable to be moved by such experiences. Pharaoh is so consumed with his own inability to weather God's divine storm that he has lost the ability he once had to compromise, to cut his losses, to bend. In Sarna's words, "Pharaoh's character has become his destiny."

Our world is still confronted with many plagues, some natural and some man made - but our world is filled with them. As we spent these last months reviewing the last 100 years, the last 1000 years and the last 2000 years, we see the many wonders that have been created as well as the many tragedies that have befallen us. But let us reflect for a moment just on the past ten years. In the 1990s, we witnessed millions of people facing hunger in Somalia and Rwanda, war in Bosnia, war in Chechnya, war in the

Middle East, hurricanes in South and Central America, destructive tornadoes in our own town, floods, fire, airplane crashes, high school shootings, tragedies of all sorts - the list could on and on and on. One after another, after another. Listen to the headlines from today's paper alone: Feeling Sick; The End is Near, Maybe; Cyber-Terrorism; Ethnic Nigerian Fighting is Deadly. These articles are too much to read, especially in the morning. To be honest with you, I can barely stand to watch the evening news anymore as well - it is too depressing, I feel so helpless - so I turn the channel. And here is the problem that I wonder about aloud tonight, if every time I change the channel, or if every time I skip over the newspaper article about this one thousand people being murdered by their dictator, or this hurricane's thirty thousand victims or this man or woman's plight, if every time I tune out, I wonder is my heart, just like the Pharaoh's, becoming hard? I wonder. It is clear to me that in today's world, we suffer from compassion fatigue - it becomes almost too difficult to watch the tragedies of every day life, and yet the Israelites still cry out from their ancient bondage for us to listen - but our compassion is certainly fatigued.

This happens for a number of reasons. Many times our practical way of thinking engages before our emotional response is realized. We harden our hearts so that we can endure what we see before us and in doing so we build up a wall around our true emotions that prevents compassion or outrage from prompting us to action. We bury our heads in the sand, change the channel, close our eyes, our ears and pretend that we didn't see, that we didn't hear. We rightly worry of whether or not to send our troops to the troubled places in the world. We justifiably are uneasy about increased immigration, for example, which causes more money to be taken out of our pockets. It is fair and understandable that we are concerned with how situations will affect us. However, before we reach the point of asking the legitimate question, "How is this going to affect me?" this weeks torah portion reminds us to find some room in our hearts for pure and uninhibited compassion, even when we feel we have no more left to give. Compassion is defined by Webster's Dictionary as the "consciousness of others' distress with a desire to alleviate it." The second part of the definition causes us great unease when we attempt to alleviate the world's unsolvable problems. I am simply addressing the first part of the definition tonight - that we have consciousness of other's distress in the world. For that acknowledgment teaches us that we are partners with

God in the work of creation, that it is our sacred task to engage in tikkun olam, to help repair the World.

When we look at our troubled surroundings, we often have difficulty finding solutions to the great problems of the day. Because of our experiences as a people though, we have a unique responsibility to be sensitive to the anguished souls in our world. Our Torah teaches us chesed-mercy, rachamim-compassion, tzdakah-righteousness - it teaches us to be aware and present to the dispossessed in our midst. Our compassion for others cannot cease or waiver, it cannot become fatigued. It cannot come and go with the headlines. In our prayers and in our thoughts, we remember those who stand where we have stood and who suffer today as we have suffered in past. Pharaoh may not have heard our pleas, but let the crying of others not fall on deaf ears in this new Century.

"Use it or lose it" does not only apply to muscles and joints but to the heart's ability to feel compassion as well. As strenuous as it must be to teach the body to bend in ways it has forgotten to bend, how much the more so, to teach the mind and heart to feel and care. We must tune into the pain and suffering in the world, not tune out. This Torah portion is our reminder that we need to bend or soon our bodies and our hearts will forget how.

To bend our feelings to those we may not know, but who suffer nonetheless.

To bend our schedules to accommodate those who do not necessarily demand, but still deserve our time and attention.

To bend our routines, to find creative ways to respond.

To bend our minds, to new ideas and opinions.

To bend our hearts to embrace those from whom we have grown distant - even our brothers and sisters in far away lands.

The Torah is our best exercise manual for lifting us out of our compassion fatigue. It helps us see that we must act, in whatever way we can to alleviate the pain of others, and at the very least, to be aware of their plight, to hear the cry. Too often we are concerned only with events in our own back yard - we must see beyond.

My niece will stop growing physically in approximately 15 years, but I pray that her heart never stop growing in compassion and love, consideration and kindness. Indeed, the Psalmist taught - "Teach us to number our days, so that we may gain a heart of wisdom." Pharaoh did not understand these words and instead stiffened his heart, v'hihazayk lev. But let us listen to these words and heed them, so that each day we will gain a lev chadash, a new heart, with boundless energy; a new heart open to change. A new heart willing to bend so that others might feel our love and our compassion. Kein yehi ratzon, may it happen in our day.