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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 weeks Torah portion 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 negative 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 and be oppressive at times disillusioning. Our ancestors encountered a world where they were slaves to a tyrant, we may work in a job 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 Israel to open its hearts and minds to Torah, and even then Moses was compelled to command them again in this weeks parsha not to rebuild those defenses, those walls that prevented them from letting God into their lives.

When an artichoke blossoms it is the heart that grows first, the leaves come after to protect the delicate treasure. Similarly with the field that it is planted in; sure after years of planting and harvesting it become 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 artichoke, under the stone like top soil of a field, inside the thickened walls we build around our hearts lies the sweetness of our soul.

The purpose of the covenant between God and the Jewish people is to raise human life to levels of sacred behavior, justice, caring, honesty and love. Anything that prevents that must be 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, let the words of Torah, the teachings Judaism once again be a seal upon our hearts.