

Episode 14

Va'era

Have you ever thought about the heart? I mean really thought about it? I have been thinking about the heart a lot over the last several years. Not to sound too much like Jerry Seinfeld, but, really, what's the deal with the heart? Or put in more academic terms, why has the heart become such a predominant literary symbol? At its core—and excuse here the pun on the French word for “heart”—*coeur*—the heart is just an organ in our body. Every day, it pumps gallons and gallons of blood through our veins, giving us life.

Yet, somehow, over the millennia, the heart has taken on a wave of symbolic, poetic, and literary implications. The heart means love. The heart means passion. The heart means kindness. The word “heart” is simply everywhere in figurative language. English has perhaps hundreds of trite expressions around the heart. *I love you with all my heart. My heart goes out to you. I know it in my heart of hearts.* It can also be used outside of romance or emotion. It can mean the center or the main thing. For example, the heart of the city, or the heart of the matter.

What the f*ck is going on with heart? Why the f*ck has the human race decided to make the heart its premier literary symbol?

It is not just the English language which devotes so much loving attention to the heart. As already mentioned, the French word for heart is “*coeur*,” from which we get the English word “core”—the heart is our “core” organ, it is the core of our body. The Hebrew word for heart is “*lev*.” The phrase in Hebrew for “to pay attention” is “*sim lev*” or literally “put a heart” or “place a heart.”

To summon once again Jerry Seinfeld: what's the deal with the heart? We have the word *heartfelt*, which we all immediately understand. Why don't we have words for other organs? Why don't we say *kidneyfelt* or *brainfelt* or *liverfelt* or *gallbladderfelt*? [laugh track]. We need only curve our fingers into a certain shape to immediately indicate the symbol of love. I can make this shape with my fingers and show it to perhaps anyone in the world and they will understand what I mean. Yet, no one is making the shape of a liver—which, by the way, is a very important organ—with their fingers. Finally, as if were even necessary at this point to mention, the actual *shape* of the heart looks scarcely like the Valentine's Day heart we have all become so fond of.

The heart is, in fact, all over this week's parsha of Va'era. Over and over again, we hear that either God hardened the heart of the Pharaoh or that Pharaoh himself hardened his heart. This phrase is used at least a dozen times in the reading. Now, before we get into this in more detail, we need to correct a common misconception about the story of the Exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt.

It is typically thought that Moses requests the Pharaoh to free the Hebrews from slavery and that Pharaoh keeps saying “No.” After each plague, Pharaoh again changes his mind. But actually, Moses is not requesting freedom for the Hebrews. All he is asking for is that they be allowed to go for three days into the desert to pray to the Hebrew God. That's all he's asking for—three days in the desert. Ultimately, of course, the Hebrews get complete freedom. They cross the Red Sea and leave Egypt and their lives as slaves behind. But this was not the original request.

This is an extremely important detail, which is often overlooked. When we celebrate the Passover Seder, the narrative we tell is that the Pharaoh stubbornly refused, even after each of the horrific ten plagues, to let Moshe's people go into absolute freedom, as it were. But actually,

this freedom kind of happened by accident. What *really* happened is that Pharaoh's continual denial of this request for three days brought things in Egypt to a fever pitch between the Hebrews and the Egyptians. The tension escalated and escalated until, finally, the request naturally evolves from praying for three days into the desert to exodus itself from Egypt. We might say that the situation escalates to a point of "irreconcilability" in which further negotiation between the two sides is impossible.

This is an important point because the question is often asked, why is God the one who is *hardening* the heart of the Pharaoh. Whose side is God on? Why would he make Pharaoh harden his heart and refuse Moshe's request? Now we have our answer. Because God wanted to bring matters to a fever pitch. Each time Pharaoh hardened his heart, he, counterintuitively, made it *more likely* that the Hebrews would get one-thousand times more than Moshe's original request. Or put another way, by trying to crack down on the Hebrews, Pharaoh was actually, little by little, setting them free.

So, as you've probably guessed, there is something deeper going on here. This parsha seems to be a commentary on what makes an effective ruler. We might say that this parsha serves as a kind of challenge to Machiavelli's *The Prince*. In *The Prince*, written during the Italian Renaissance, Machiavelli explained the qualities necessary to be a successful ruler. All of the lessons Machiavelli provides can not be covered in this short lecture. Suffice it to say, Machiavelli contended that a ruler who will keep his post must, at times, be ruthless. Machiavelli famously, or perhaps infamously, wrote that it is better for a ruler to be feared than to be loved. Yet, what is often forgotten is that Machiavelli also stressed that, ideally, a ruler will be both feared and loved.

It has been the trend in recent years to praise the toughness and almost ruthlessness of leaders. This is a trope that never seems to get old, it would seem. Last week, we talked about the ruler Ned Stark of the northern kingdom of Winterfell. Ned Stark's downfall came about because, essentially, he was too naïve, too gullible. We might say: his heart was too big. Cynically, *Game of Thrones* makes it quite clear that Ned Stark's kindness and honor were dangerous qualities in a ruler. We need not go through the numerous world leaders today who have been elected for being "strong" or "tough" to know that people continue to believe that mercilessness can be a ruler's most important quality.

Friedrich Nietzsche was apparently just as seduced and mesmerized by a fierce and iron-fisted ruler. Nietzsche grew up in the Prussian Empire. He grew up when Otto von Bismarck, known as the "iron chancellor," was running the show in Germany. It was Bismarck who once said that: "Not through speeches or majority decisions will the great questions of the day be decided, but rather through iron and blood." "Nicht durch Reden oder Majoritätsbeschlüsse werden die großen Fragen der Zeit entscheiden—sonder durch Eisen und Blut." The *ethos* of Prussian militarism was the *Zeitgeist* of Nietzsche's time. In his works, Nietzsche praised, we must say, ruthless leaders like Napoleon as being an example of an Übermensch. Nietzsche himself served in the Prussian army during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, and the influence of strict militarism and discipline is everywhere in his works.

In one particularly notorious passage from *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche heaps praise upon the Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm I. This was the father of the famous Enlightened Despot, Frederick the Great, or Friedrich der Große, whose statues and castles and name is all over Berlin and Potsdam. Frederick the Great became one of Prussia's great military rulers, expanding Prussia's territory and putting Prussia "on the map" as it were. But he was not always this way. As a child, Frederick was effeminate, an aesthete. He had long curly hair, loved

everything French, and even had a very close male friend who many believe was Frederick's lover. Frederick's father, Friedrich Wilhelm, was ten times more ruthless than his son would ever be. It is said that he would attend church services and the choir would sometimes sing. If he didn't like the voice of a particular singer, he would walk over to him in the middle of the service and violently slap him across the face before returning to his chair. But this was, in fact, nothing special or out-of-the-ordinary at the time. This was just Prussia.

When King Friedrich Wilhelm saw the behavior of his effeminate son Frederick, whom he knew would later become king, we can only guess his reaction. One evening, Frederick and his possible male lover, Hans Hermann von Katte, tried to flee Prussia for France to escape his wrathful father. Unfortunately, they were caught. King Friedrich Wilhelm sentenced von Katte to be hanged, and moreover, the young Frederick was forced to watch the execution. The king actually originally wanted to have his son, too, executed, but was later talked out of it.

After this incident, the young Frederick never went back to his effeminate ways. He married, but it is said he never saw his wife or ever had sexual relations with her. It is said that the only creatures in the world he had any fondness for were his hunting dogs. This was Frederick the Great.

Nietzsche discusses this incident in chapter 209 of *Beyond Good and Evil*. Here is what Nietzsche has to say about it:

The questionable and mad father of Frederick the Great - in one respect himself had the grip and lucky claw of genius. He knew what Germany then needed, a lack which was a hundred times more worrisome and more urgent than some deficiency in culture and social style. His aversion to the young Frederick emerged from the anxiety of a profound instinct. *What was missing was men*. And he suspected to his most bitter annoyance that his own son might not be man enough. On that point he was deceived, but who in his place would not have been deceived? He saw his son decline into atheism, *esprit*, the luxurious frivolousness of witty Frenchmen: - he saw in the background the great blood sucker, the spider of scepticism. He suspected the incurable misery of a heart that is no longer hard enough for evil and for good, of a fractured will, which no longer commands, no longer *can* command.

Notice that Nietzsche, too, uses the metaphor of the heart. He says that the heart of a leader must be "*hard* enough" for evil and for good.

However, before we jump all over Nietzsche for being pro-tyrant, I would like to point out a couple of things. First, Nietzsche absolutely reveled in being a *provocateur*. In many ways, Nietzsche's philosophical mission, much like Socrates thousands of years before, was to prod people, to shake people up, to make them aware of how *little* they actually know. So much of what Nietzsche says needs to be taken with a grain of salt.

Moreover, shortly before Nietzsche would go officially insane, he was walking around town when he saw a horse being cruelly beaten in the town square. Nietzsche rushed over to the horse and hugged the horse and begged the horse's owner to stop beating it.

My own feeling about Nietzsche is that he worked off the assumption that all of his initial instincts and tendencies were wrong. That he should do and think the opposite of that which he had been taught. I believe Nietzsche was actually a very kind-hearted and compassionate person. And therefore, Nietzsche felt it was his duty to *doubt* and *question* the worth of his kind-heartedness and compassion. Nietzsche's philosophical strategy was to advocate the *opposite* of everything which his first impulse told him to do.

It's honestly not a bad strategy. You might try it sometime.

In another passage from *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche gives us a different image of the heart. In aphorism 267, Nietzsche writes that Chinese mothers teach their children the following phrase: "Make your heart small!" Now, given what Nietzsche said about Frederick the Great's father and his heartlessness, we would expect that Nietzsche would be fond of this teaching among the Chinese. But actually, here Nietzsche comes to the opposite conclusion. He writes that making your heart small is "the essential and basic tendency of late civilizations." Nietzsche writes that ancient Greeks would notice this "self-diminution in us contemporary Europeans as well – and for that reason alone we would already go *against his taste*."

What is Nietzsche saying here? When you hear words like "late civilizations" from Nietzsche, you almost always know it's something very negative. Late civilizations are decaying, decadent, nihilistic societies. Nietzsche saw small-heartedness as telltale sign of a society which has become pathetic and narrow-minded. In Episode 4, I talked about how Abraham was far more than a "nice guy." If anything, Abraham was big-hearted. He was overflowing with generosity and kindness. He did not make his heart small. He was not living in a decadent and nihilistic age.

Nietzsche, then, gives us two images of the heart. These images seem to contradict each other. Nietzsche believed that sometimes a ruler should have a big heart, and sometimes a ruler should be cold-hearted.

The Egyptian Pharaoh, of course, was cold-hearted. We read again and again that the Pharaoh hardened his heart and wouldn't concede to Moshe's demands. But the Torah doesn't tell us that the Pharaoh was always cold-hearted. Rather, the Torah tells us, again and again, that the Pharaoh *chose* or God *chose* to make the Pharaoh's heart *hard*.

However, in fact, if we read the original Hebrew of the Torah, it does not read that the Pharaoh *hardened* his heart. Actually, the Torah alternates between two words which are loaded with meaning and connotation.

One word the Torah uses is "strengthens" his heart. Or in Hebrew *lihachzik*. The root for this word is the word for "strength" – *chazak*. The second word the Torah uses quite often is that the Pharaoh made his heart *heavy*. *Lihachbid*. This comes from the root for "heavy" – *chaved*. Yet, the word "chaved," meaning heavy, is just a single letter away from the Hebrew word for *dignified* or *honorable*, *cavod*. If this seems a bit strange, consider that we have the same connection in English as well. We often speak of *heavy* ideas, or of *heavy* matters, or *heavy* philosophy. In English, *heavy* can mean weighty, important, significant. The word *honor* shares this same idea of greatness and magnitude.

In Hebrew, then, that which is *heavy* or *weighty* is, in a sense, also *dignified* or *honorable*.

The Torah, then, seems to almost be having fun *punning on* the Pharaoh's behavior. The Torah is not saying that the Pharaoh *hardened* his heart. Rather, the Torah is saying that the Pharaoh strengthened his heart and made his heart heavy or honorable. The Torah is having a grand old time with this punning game.

We typically view strength and so-called *honor* as great qualities in a ruler. No doubt, when Pharaoh rejected Moshe's demands, the Pharaoh was telling himself: look at me. I am being *strong*. I am being *honorable*. I am being an ideal ruler.

Really, Pharaoh? Because each time you pretend like you are strong, you just move your vast labor force one step closer to freedom. Each time you pretend like you are a man of *honor*, you just gradually *diminish* the importance of your kingdom.

In Episode 9, I talked about how sometimes opposites are often razor-thin in differences. I believe the Torah is having fun here with this concept through its punning on the words *strong* and *heavy*, *chazak* and *caved*. The Torah is saying: the Pharaoh may look strong, but he is actually weakening himself. The Pharaoh may seem to be pronouncing but he is actually just *blustering*.

This is why, I believe, Nietzsche himself seemed to be so torn about when a ruler should be big-hearted or small-hearted. Sometimes, *coldness* and *toughness* can really just be a mask for insecurity, fear, and lack of vision. But sometimes, compassion and warmth and friendliness are also these same *masks* for insecurity, fear, and lack of vision.

By playing with the words for strong and honor, the Torah seems to be getting at this same idea: that sometimes a *strong* and *heavy* and *hard* heart is just that—but sometimes, it is the exact opposite.

But this particular Pharaoh, the Torah suggests, is a *pretender*. We know this, first, because the hard line he takes toward the Hebrews does not make them obedient slaves, but rather free people. But the Torah also gives us another *clue* that this Pharaoh is not the strong and dignified man he would like us to believe him to be. As I mentioned, the Torah goes back and forth between saying that the Pharaoh *strengthened* his heart, *lihachzik*, and made his heart heavy or dignified, *lihachbid*. This alternation occurs during the outbreak of the ten plagues. After each plague, the pharaoh relents and gives in to Moses, only to “harden” his heart and change his mind.

But before this alternation between strengthening his heart and heavying his heart, the Torah uses another word to describe the Pharaoh's heart. Way back in chapter 7, verse three of Exodus, long before the ten plagues, God says what he will do to Pharaoh's heart. God says he will make Pharaoh's heart *stubborn*: “Ani eksheh et lev paroh.” *Eksheh* from the Hebrew root *ekesh*, which translates to stubbornness, crookedness, intransigence, obstinacy, even perversion. Here, the Torah is, once again, winking at us. The Torah is saying: during the course of the ten plagues, the Pharaoh may seem to be acting with a *strong* heart or with a *honorable* heart. But actually, what you are seeing is no more than a kind of childish stubbornness. Don't be fooled.

In yoga and meditation, the heart is a very important concept. Over and over again, yoga and meditation teach us to open up our hearts. There yoga stretches called

“heart openers,” in which you somehow let your heart be open and ready to receive the world. These poses include camel pose, half moon, dancer’s pose, and countless others. Yoga also has the concept of focusing on your “heart center,” bringing your attention to the area around your heart. Yoga sees this area as a unique portal to the divine. The yogi Bhajan once noted that when we point to ourselves to identify ourselves, we always point to our heart. Walt Whitman once said that “I contain multitudes.” Yoga teaches that this “I” is located in the heart, that the heart contains the infinite.

Again, this is all rather strange to say, as the heart is, at the end of the day, just an organ. But, somehow, we have decided that the heart transcends its corporeality.

The Torah seems to ridicule this idea that to be a great ruler, you need to be cold-hearted and hard-hearted. While cold-hearted rulers may seem to be strong and dignified, they are actually often the opposite. The greatest rulers of Judaism had open, expansive, overflowing hearts. Here we can think of, first, Abraham, with his boundless generosity. Next, we may think of Moshe, who was sensitive and shy, and yet still lead the Hebrews to freedom. We may think of King David, who was a great warrior, but who also wrote poetry and was highly self-reflective.

Finally, we may think of David Ben-Gurion. He stood at perhaps five feet or 1.5 meters tall. He had hair pointing out the sides of his head. He once declared that, if he knew there would be peace in Israel, he would give up all territory immediately that the Arabs requested. And he declared that anyone who felt himself to be Jewish was, in his mind, already Jewish.

David Ben-Gurion became the unlikely founder of the modern state of Israel and is as worshiped in Israel as George Washington is in America. Ben-Gurion’s heart deserves its own chapter in Machiavelli’s treatise, *The Prince*.