


Chambers of Our Heartsⁱ 
A Sermon for Second Day Rosh Hashanah 2020
By Rabbi Susan Grossman
Beth Shalom Congregation
Columbia, Maryland
www.beth-shalom.net

Shanah Tovah

Human ingenuity never ceases to amaze me. Take emojis for example. Adding a picture icon to a text message or FaceBook post allows us to add emotion, or at least a little taste of the emotion we might convey in person with a caring smile or comforting hand on a shoulder. My favorite emojis are heart emojis. There are simple hearts, happy hearts, broken hearts. My favorites are what I call reciprocal hearts: two hearts that seem to reach for and circle each other, a symbol of a two-way relationship and a promise to be there for each other.

We know, of course, that our real hearts look nothing like the red “I heart you” images we share on-line. Our flesh and blood hearts look more like upside-down pears. Though not as aesthetically pleasing, our human hearts, with their four chambers, may better represent how we relate to others.

That is the suggestion Dorice Horenstein makes in her book *Moments of the Heart*. Horenstein is a transplanted Israeli and former education director in a Conservative synagogue in Portland, Oregon. She was devastated when she learned her youngest sister, who lived in Israel and was only 38 years old, had breast cancer. Horenstein’s book follows her sister’s treatment, the courage she showed, and the lessons Horenstein learned along the way about how the four chambers of our heart can help us make meaningful life journeys, whether perilous or otherwise.

Horenstein suggests each of the four chambers of the heart represent one of four essential relationships we need to live whole heartedly: our relationship with ourselves, with others, with God, and with the Jewish People.

We start with our relationship with ourselves, not in a narcissistic way, but in a deep sense of internal appreciation and willingness to do our best and be our best, which is a prerequisite to truly loving others. What do we appreciate about

ourselves? What might need “sprucing up”? Horenstein suggests we imagine wearing a T shirt, “Look back to learn. Look forward to succeed.” What do our personal and familial histories teach us about our past in ways that ground but not limit us? Where do we want to go from there? Who do we want to become and what first few steps can we take to start getting there?ⁱⁱ

Horenstein points to a sign she saw: “Change is inevitable, growth is optional!”ⁱⁱⁱ That is certainly something COVID has shown us. Or, as Rebbe Nachman of Breslov taught, “If you won’t be better tomorrow than you were today, then what need do you have for tomorrow?”^{iv}

Isn’t that one of the questions our High Holy Days ask us in spurring us to take stock of our lives, to face not just our failings and weaknesses but how we use our strengths, our goodness, and our potential to do good in a way that so inspires us to want to be better we really give it a try?

The second chamber of the heart Horenstein explores is how we relate to others. Do we bring out our best selves when relating to others? Do we bring out the best in others? How well do we create and sustain healthy relationships that do not require us to sacrifice caring for ourselves even as we responsibly care for others?

Horenstein notes that the first love mentioned in the Bible comes from our Torah reading this morning: the love Abraham has for his son Isaac.^v Such a love is unconditional. It is not dependent upon appetite, status, or advantage. It just is. That is an important lesson for all our relationships, regardless of whether or not we have children of our own. How often do we tell the important people in our lives how much we love them?^{vi} How do we stay connected to others, an especially challenging question in these pandemic times? How well do we show our love for others we are not personally close to, by standing up courageously to defend or protect them?

Abraham was good at this kind of love, defending others. He goes to war to rescue his estranged nephew Lot. He argues with God to save perfect strangers living in Sodom and Gemorrah. He is also good at loving himself. He puts his own safety first in pawning his wife Sarah off as his sister so he won’t be killed by Pharaoh. But Abraham is not so good about loving his own immediate family, as we see in our Torah reading, when he willingly raises a knife to his son’s neck without question or debate at what he perceives is God’s command. What a strange way for Abraham to show his love for a beloved son by willingly sacrificing him!

Perhaps too many of us sacrifice our families in some way or other. Perhaps we take out on those closest to us our frustration or anxiety. Perhaps we avoid sharing the burdens that weigh upon us even though opening ourselves to such sharing makes such burdens easier to bear and brings us closer to those who share them.

Certainly, there are still fundamentalists in our world literally willing to sacrifice their children for what they believe God asks of them. Suicide bombers are just the most egregious example.

Perhaps this leads us to one of the most powerful lessons of the third chamber of the heart: how we relate to God. How do we perceive our relationship to something bigger than ourselves? ^{vii}

We are so far removed from ancient idolatry we forget that most ancient religions sacrificed children, especially their first born. There is an ancient cemetery in Carthage called the Tofet, filled with the bodies of sacrificed Phoenician babies.

When God sends an angel to tell Abraham to put down the knife, God is teaching Abraham – and all of us – a fundamental lesson: fundamentalism, blind obedience even to God, is not only dangerous, it is not what God wants! Our God certainly does not want us to sacrifice our children, for our children are our future and the future of the Jewish People. What does our God want of us? According to the prophet Micah, “To act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.”^{viii} In other words, to be a conscientious force for good in all our relationships and in our society, without ego or fanfare, recognizing there is a Moral Arbitor, God, above us all Who calls us to account.

Our relationship with God can be more than that of defendant before our Celestial Judge, though, according to tradition, our deeds are being weighed carefully during this time of year. God enters a covenant with Abraham and every succeeding generation as an eternal, reciprocal relationship in which God loves us and asks us to love God.

God has shown us that love by gifting us the Torah, a collection of good rules, some of which are so advanced, we still have not been able to realize the justice they demand in our society. Others are directed specifically to us, as Abraham and Sarah’s heirs, Jewish gifts, like our holiday celebrations that help us appreciate what we have; the Sabbath, that provides a weekly time out from worry and day to day struggle; and the kosher laws, that teach us self-control and the preciousness of all life, including animal life.

The most important gift God gives us is the one we often don't credit or see: our own potential for love, goodness and kindness; our capacity for strength and courage to get through what we never imagined we could get through; and the presence of those who come to our aid as God's hands in the world, all blessings fueled by God's love for us.

God commanded Abraham to spare his son, who, as the next generation, represented the future of the Jewish People.

This leads us to our fourth chamber of the heart: our love of the Jewish People. How do we sustain the ties that bind us together with other Jews, whether across town, across the globe or across the millennia, with our own observance of Jewish ritual, celebration, congregational and communal engagement and generosity? How do we balance our incredible freedom of choice with a sense of loyalty, connection, and obligation to care for, connect with, and serve our People locally and around the world, including in our Jewish Homeland, in Israel,^{ix} even when Israel draws criticism, some of it justified, much of it not? Horenstein suggests that keeping a journal of our efforts, and the feelings they evoke in us, can help us reflect upon our progress and priorities.^x

Horenstein ends her book with a Talmudic quote and a photograph. The quote comes from the Talmud: *Ner l'ehad, ner l'meah*: "A candle for one (becomes) a candle for a hundred."^{xi} In other words, one small candle can light the way for many. Each of us can be that candle lighting up others' lives as well as our own.

The photograph is of her sister smiling with a caption that informs us she is cancer free.

I like to think, if asked, Horenstein's favorite heart emoji would also be mine, the reciprocal hearts, because her relationships to herself, to others (her family, friends and community), to God, and to the Jewish People helped her on the journey to help her sister. Maybe the reciprocal hearts are now among your favorite heart emoji's, too.

In the coming year, may we fill these four chambers of our hearts, these relationships essential to our being – our relationship to ourselves, to others, to God and the Jewish People – in ways that help us live wholeheartedly in ways that help the light of the holiness within each of us shine. And let us say, Amen.

Shanah Tovah

ⁱ © Copyright. Susan Grossman. 2020.

ⁱⁱ Horenstein, *Moments of the Heart*, (NY: Morgan James Publishing, 2020), 28.

ⁱⁱⁱ Horenstein, 26.

^{iv} Horenstein, 41.

^v Genesis 22:2.

^{vi} Horenstein, 56.

^{vii} Horenstein, 11.

^{viii} Micah 6:8.

^{ix} Horenstein, 12.

^x Horenstein, 125.

^{xi} Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 122a.