

Lech Lecha 5784: Segulot in a Time of War

The Oculocardiac Reflex

Here's a little-known medical fact:

Chazal observed a biological connection between our eyes and our hearts, saying that “the nerves of the eye are linked to the pericardium.” In 1975, Dr. Yaakov Levi suggested that this gemara could be describing a phenomenon known as the Oculocardiac Reflex. When pressure is applied to a person's eyeball or to muscles around the eye, the heart rate drops.¹ So as Chazal noticed, the eyes influence the heart.²

But in our parshah, and the entire story of Avraham, it's the other way around; the heart drives the eyes.

Raising Their Eyes

Avraham and Lot have a falling out; too much cattle, not enough real estate. Avraham offers Lot a blank check – you choose a direction, I'll go the other way. In one of the all-time worst feats of real estate speculation, וישא לוט את עיניו וירא, Lot raises his eyes, sees the shores of the Jordan River, and says, “Sdom, that looks like nice, waterfront property.”

But Lot is not the only member of the family to raise his eyes; in next week's parshah, Avraham will raise his eyes not once, but three times, as the Torah describes with that same language:

- וישא עיניו וירא והנה שלשה אנשים – Avraham raises his eyes, and sees three malachim arriving
- וישא אברהם את עיניו וירא את המקום – Avraham raises his eyes and sees Har haMoriah, the place of the Akeidah
- וישא אברהם את עיניו וירא והנה איל – Avraham raises his eyes and sees a ram, to bring as a korban to Hashem.

Very different visions, but the same language as Lot. The wording is so obviously parallel that the Torah must be trying to tell us something!

Visual Avraham and Lot

I believe the Torah is demonstrating for us a lesson which is also found in a Sifri.³ When Hashem warns us not to stray after our hearts or after our eyes, Chazal note the order – heart and then eyes - and they comment, מגיד שהעינים הולכות, אחר הלב, the eyes follow the heart. This is what's behind the language of our parshah as well – Avraham and Lot perform the same action of raising their eyes and seeing, but their eyes follow their different hearts.

Avraham's heart is true from the time he discovers Hashem; Hashem calls him אברהם אוהבי, Avraham who loves Me,⁴ and that heart directs Avraham's eyes the right way.

Hashem shows those eyes wonderful things; Hashem's language with Avraham is consistently visual:

- At the start of our parshah, Hashem summons Avraham אל הארץ אשר אראך, to the land that I will make you see
- Hashem promises Avraham to give his children אתה רואה, the land that you see
- In our parshah we are told וירא ד' אל אברהם, Hashem appeared in Avraham's field of vision, twice.⁵ And of course, again in next week's parshah, וירא אליו ד', Hashem appeared in his field of vision.
- And Avraham's eyes are lucid. Worth noting: Yitzchak's eyes are fooled by Esav and Yaakov; Yaakov's eyes are fooled by Lavan, Rachel and his sons. Avraham is the only one of the Avot whose eyes are never fooled; he always sees the truth.

And so when Avraham raises his eyes, he sees Malachim. He sees Har haMoriah, future site of the Beit HaMikdash. He sees a korban.

¹ See Avodah Zarah 28b, and Dr. Yaakov Levi, שורייני דעינא באובנתא דליבא תליא, HaMaayan 15:4 (<http://www.hebrewbooks.org/29679>)

² We could also discuss a connection that goes the other way, with diabetic retinopathy.

³ Sifri Shlach 115. See also Yerushalmi Berachot 1:5 on the eyes and heart as סרטורי עבירה. And see Berachot 12b and elsewhere re ולא תתורו אחרי לבבכם ואחרי עיניכם.

⁴ Yeshayahu 41:8

⁵ Bereishit 12:7, 17:1

Lot is a man of a very different heart. As Chazal teach, Lot's raising of his eyes was על שם עבירה, for the sake of finding opportunities for sin.⁶ And so with the same action as Avraham, Lot sees Sdom.⁷

Mezuzah

To return to our beginning, this is a spiritual inversion of the oculocardiac reflex; the heart drives the eyes.⁸ And just like the oculocardiac reflex can be harnessed, so that manipulating the eyes influences the heart, so we can manipulate our hearts to influence our eyes, our vision.

At least one of our mitzvot is designed to do just that: the Mezuzah. As the Rambam wrote,⁹ “Whenever one enters or leaves [a space], he encounters the declaration that Hashem's Name is One, and he remembers his love [of Hashem], and he awakens from his sleep and his foolish pursuit of temporary things, and he knows that the only thing which endures forever is knowledge of Hashem. Immediately, he returns to his right mind and walks a straight path.” The Mezuzah re-orientes our heart, to envision the opportunities Hashem wants us to see, as Avraham did.¹⁰

A Practical Point: Nidrei Mitzvah and Segulot

This brings me to a topic I raised in an email this past week. Many of us have received whatsapps and emails calling for us to observe the BaHaB set of fasts, or to light an extra Shabbat candle, for the hostages, for the chayalim, for the injured, in memory of the kedoshim who were murdered. Extra fasts and lighting extra Shabbat candles are not in themselves mitzvot; they do not have the same inherent value as saying Tehillim or giving tzedakah or learning Torah. So what are these messages about?

One reason people take on these extra practices is because they can catalyze extra merit; fasting can induce us to do teshuvah, candles add honor to the Shabbat table. Similarly, when Yaakov Avinu fled from Esav he declared that he would tithe everything that Hashem gave him.¹¹ When Yonah was in the water, he vowed that he would do more for Hashem. Tosafot contended that even though we normally frown on vows, in times of trouble it is appropriate to take on new practices.¹² Of course, it's wise to say that one is doing this bli neder and without a commitment to do it beyond the current crisis, but there is value.

But beyond the merit of teshuvah or the honor of the Shabbat table, these actions can be part of our inverted oculocardiac reflex, they can function like the mezuzah, to re-orient our hearts toward the right goals. An extra Shabbat candle can remind us of the holiness of the day, can sanctify our table and our meal and our conversation. A fast day can enhance our davening, our learning, our relationships bein adam lachaveiro (with other people). They are reminders, ensuring that we raise our eyes and see what Hashem wants us to see.

Not everyone should take on the same thing, or anything. When Avraham and Yitzchak arrive at Har HaMoriah, Avraham raises his eyes and sees that Hashem has chosen this place, but the two men who accompany them don't see anything.¹³ Different people perceive different things, and what's right for one is not right for the other. Each of us needs to find the reminders that enable us to lift up our eyes like Avraham, in the best of ways.

Hashem's Heart and Eyes

The essence is not in the particular added practices, but in the way they help us to raise our eyes. Our ancestors – Avraham, Rivkah, Yitzchak, Yaakov and Yosef – are all described in the Torah as raising their eyes. We will do likewise. And when we turn our hearts and our eyes to Hashem, then we will gain the fulfillment of the promise Hashem made to Shlomo regarding the Beit HaMikdash, והיו עיני ולבי שם כל הימים – “My eyes, and My heart, will be there, forever.”¹⁴

⁶ Nazir 23a-b; and see also Esther Rabbah 7:9.

⁷ In sum, as Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch writes (commentary to Bereishit 22:4), “Raising one's eyes is always an act of gazing above and around, הבטה שיש עמה כוונה, it is looking with intent.” It is searching.

⁸ It would be interesting to apply this to the other cases of raising one's eyes and seeing in chumash – Yitzchak/Rivkah, Rivkah/Yitzchak, Yaakov/Esav, Esav/family, Potifar's wife/Yosef, Yosef/Binyamin, Bilam/Jews. (There are more in Tanach, of course, such as Yehoshua, and Dovid in DHY I 21:16)

⁹ Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Tefillin, Mezuzah v'Sefer Torah 6:13

¹⁰ Ditto tzitzit and tefillin

¹¹ Bereishit 28:22

¹² Tosafot Chullin 2b אבל, and see Tosafot Nedarim 20a אלהי

¹³ Bereishit Rabbah 56:2

¹⁴ Melachim I 9:3