



Shabbat Vayikra 5777 /March 31, 2017

Dear Shir Tikvah:

In a powerful Talmudic text (Tosefta, Sota 7:12, 2nd c CE, Land of Israel), we learn, "If one should say, 'Since Beit Shammai renders impure and Beit Hillel renders pure, this one forbids and this one permits, why should I learn Torah?' They said, 'so too should you make for yourself a heart of many rooms, and enter into it the words of Beit Shammai and the words of Beit Hillel, the words of those who declare a matter impure, and those who declare it pure.'"

Amidst a great debate about the nature of purity and a political assertion as to which rabbinic school of thought to follow, the ancient sages encourage us to cultivate a "heart of many rooms."

A heart of many rooms.

We know that the human heart is a muscle-arguably the most vital muscle in our bodies. Without its persistent determination to beat and send blood coursing through our bodies, we die.

The heart has symbolically come to hold our emotional lives.

We speak in popular culture of having a "full heart," of protecting our hearts, of being "heart broken."

But this Talmudic text invites us to cultivate a "heart of many rooms." What does that mean for us spiritually?

I imagine that it is to cultivate a heart-an emotional and spiritual life-strong enough to hold competing ideas and value systems; a heart bold enough to have a room for love and a room for pain and a room for hope and a room for grief; a heart tender enough to weep at sunrise and brave enough to risk vulnerability; heart whole enough to know when it is breaking, loving enough to seek possibility, and wise enough to tremble in fear; a heart full enough to hold justice and compassion, righteousness and mercy all in the same place.

We are living in a moment of history that does not value complexity; that seems to privilege simplistic ideas over nuanced debate, angry Tweets over reasoned argument, political gamesmanship over practical solutions for vexing problems. That's what makes this very ideal of a "heart of many rooms" so utterly vital, spiritually necessary, and morally hopeful. When we find ourselves pulled to pick one thing over the other, I invite us to try to live the words of our sages-to cultivate a heart of many rooms, to embrace the complexity and nuance of our lives, to reject either/or thinking as we grasp the ever effusive but necessary holy challenge of both/and. It doesn't mean we abandon our deeply cherished values or stop seeking justice and human dignity-chas v'shalom! (God forbid!). It means that we embrace spiritual sophistication and the capacity to empathize even with those with whom we disagree.

On Shabbat, as we open to the words of Vayikra (Leviticus), I pray that in our search to live as holy, loving, righteous people, we pause to breathe and create in each of our bodies and our souls, a heart of many rooms.

Shabbat Shalom,

Michael