

SICHA SUMMARY

Likkutei Sichos, Vol. 29

Nitzavim

The Context:

In his address to the Jewish people, Moshe foretells the apotheosis of our Divine service in the future: “And G-d, your G-d, will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, [so that you may] love G-d your G-d with all your heart and with all your soul, for the sake of your life. (Devarim 30:6)

The Targumim render this as “G-d will circumcise — remove the foolishness from — your heart.”

The Targum addresses the obvious textual problem in the verse — why would G-d need to circumcise the heart itself? To this the Targum responds that the verse is truncated, it indeed means to say that G-d will remove the metaphorical foreskin, the “foolishness, from your heart.

Rashi, however, does not address this basic issue, implying that the simple understanding is self-evident from the context of the verse. How so?

The Basic Explanation:

Earlier in this address, Moshe tells the Jewish people, “And you will return to G-d with all your heart and with all your soul, and you will listen to His voice according to all that I am commanding you this day you and your children.” (Ibid, 30:1)

If the person has already “returned to G-d” with “all your heart and with all your soul,” then there should be no remaining “foreskin” impeding the heart that requires G-d’s “circumcision” and intervention. Rather, the later verse must be referring to a more advanced stage in our Divine service. The earlier verse which refers to a wholehearted return to G-d may be motivated by fear, but when G-d “circumcises” the heart, it allows us serve G-d with love, as the verse continues, “so that you may love G-d your G-d with all your heart and with all your soul.”

The Questions:

G-d’s circumcision of the heart implies that He intervenes on behalf of the person who cannot achieve the task alone. Yet serving G-d with love is a commandment and expectation of every Jew. Why does the verse refer to this higher, but expected,

level of service as requiring Divine intervention?

The Explanation:

The broader context of Moshe's prophecy begins in the previous chapter, where he warns the people of the tragedies that will befall them in exile, all of which is a result of their straying after foreign desires: "For you know how we dwelled in the land of Egypt, and how we passed among the nations through which you passed. And you saw their abominations and their repugnant idols [of] wood and stone, silver and gold which were with them. Perhaps there is among you a man, woman, family, or tribe, whose heart strays this day from the Lord, our God, to go and worship the deities of those nations." (Devarim 29:15-17)

This describes the natural response of the heart to the discernment of the eyes. The heart faces two challenges: it can be spiritually compromised and desensitized, what the Torah refers to as the "foreskin" of the heart. But even if the heart is whole and has shed the "foreskin," it is still susceptible to be drawn naturally after the "eyes." Therefore, even after the Jew has "returned to G-d with all your heart" and eradicated the foreskin through strenuous effort, he is still in need of G-d's intervention to sever the subconscious bond between the eyes and heart. This "circumcision" is not removing the impediment on the heart — that has been accomplished by the individual — it is a cutting of the natural responsiveness of the heart to the eye's input.

Once this is done, then the natural love of the Jew toward G-d can be fully expressed. G-d is not manufacturing this love, He only removes the final impediment, the link between eye and heart, and allows the individual's love to surface.

The Acronyms:

The Baal Haturim notes that the words, "your heart and the heart [of your offspring]" are an acronym for the month of Elul (es livav, v'ies livav), and therefore, he concludes, Elul is an opportune time to recite selichos, penitentiary prayers. This implies that Elul is a time for repentance from negative behavior. This interpretation aligns with the Targum which renders the verse as referring to G-d removing the foreskin of the heart, meaning, an active confrontation with the negativity of the heart itself.

According to Rashi, however, the service of Elul is one of love, as we saw above. This aligns with the chassidic understanding of Elul as a time when the "king is in the field" expressing his love for the people and becoming accessible to them.

Alternatively, the Baal Haturim which is a work of allusions, not straightforward interpretation, alludes to a higher level of love. Elul is a time of self-motivated Divine service, during this time we focus on regret and repentance reflected in the selichos prayers. But the service of love is given to us in the High Holidays, a love that transcends our own abilities. Because the Baal Haturim speaks in a higher register, the love he refers to is unreachable by human action alone, unlike Rashi's more relatable, achievable love.