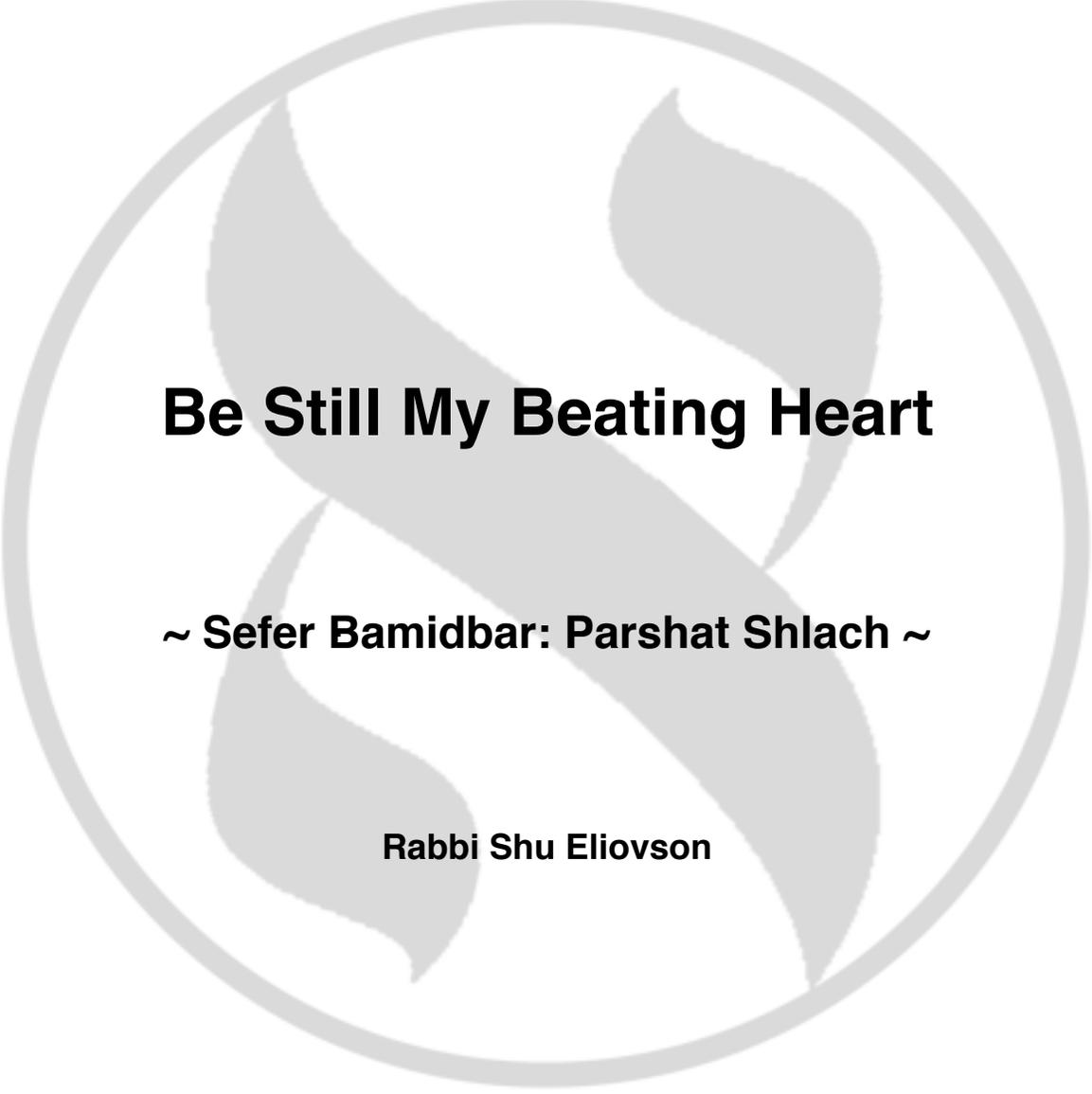


שיחות מעיני הישועה

ספר במדבר



Be Still My Beating Heart

~ Sefer Bamidbar: Parshat Shlach ~

Rabbi Shu Eliovson

Transcribed from audio by Josh Fleet

Have you ever had one of those situations when you say something, and maybe you weren't so careful about what you said, and all of a sudden you're caught in a half-truth? Perhaps you were in some kind of argument or confrontation, or perhaps you were telling a story, and suddenly someone questioned you, and then all of a sudden you had to make that choice of whether to let go and admit that you made a mistake, or to dig in...

Or maybe you were in a situation where somebody said something that embarrassed you, and then you felt a need to defend your honor, and you got a little bit ahead of yourself. You started to maybe get a little bit too aggressive, or you started to weave a story in such a way as to make yourself look better, and the next thing you know, you were caught in a fabrication of sorts...

Or back to that argument with someone, perhaps you just didn't want to give in. You knew you were wrong. But you thought to yourself, "Yeah, I know I'm wrong, but I'm not going to give the other person the satisfaction of being right!" "She doesn't deserve it." "He doesn't deserve that."

And so we convince ourselves that somehow we're righteous while completely bending the truth. Or we're righteous in trying to be right, so to speak, rather than doing what's correct or saying what's true. And it's OK in our mind that we've bent the truth, because we see our behavior as a reflection of the other person, and we feel that not giving the other person the victory was more important than the truth.

Our ego gets tangled up in it. Our heart, our passion gets caught in it. We allow our emotions rule us. And we get into trouble.

And it can happen just in terms of running after things that we want, and not thinking about the consequences carefully enough, as we say whatever we need to say in order to achieve our goal. It happens in spontaneous twists and turns we sometimes make without really thinking about whether what we're doing is the best thing for us or not.

People say very often, "You should follow your heart. You've got to follow your heart."

But that's dangerous advice. Really dangerous advice.

And we see a perfect illustration of how dangerous this can be in this week's Torah portion, where following our hearts that got the entire Jewish nation into so much trouble, so much irreparable trouble.

Here's the scene: We've got the Nation of Israel on the cusp of entering the Land of Israel. And while it's not 100% clear in this week's Torah portion, we find out in the next book of the Torah, in Devarim, that the Children of Israel *requested* to send in some spies to check out the land and prepare for the conquest. It wasn't something that God said they needed to do; rather, they wanted to and God

allowed it. And so, God advises Moses to pick certain officers or princes from each tribe to go in to scout out the land.

And these princely spies go into the land, and then they return with their report. They start to share what they have learned about the land, and they say, “Oh, you know, it’s a beautiful land, an incredible land. But there are giants there, and it’s a little bit intimidating. Their cities are strong.”

Now, if we look at their report it seems to be a balanced report. They’re giving the lay of the land. There’s nothing in their report that is inherently saying “Yay” or “Nay,” “go into the land” or “don’t go”. They’re just reflecting on what they’ve seen. And Moses even said this before the Spies set out on their mission. He said: “They’re going to find out if this land is good or bad, if the inhabitants are strong or weak.” He gave them instructions: “Tell us black or white, left or right, strong or weak.” So they’re reporting based exactly on Moses’ instruction.

They start out saying some positive things, and then they say, “But here are some concerns.” And they list out the concerns, and really is there anything wrong with that?

But then look what happens next. All of a sudden, Kalev speaks up. He is the scout from the Tribe of Judah, the tribe that always says “Let’s go!”, the tribe that knows how to get up from even the hardest things and just move forward. And Kalev says, “No, no, no. Listen. We can do this! We can! Don’t be discouraged!”

And this is that pivoting moment – the moment when the other spies will have to decide whether to dig in and defend their egos, or pivot to focus on their higher values. Because in Kalev’s reaction, it suddenly paints the other 10 scouts in a negative light. His *positivity attitude* makes it seem like they were being unnecessarily negative. And they feel, it seems, suddenly defensive. Like they have to justify their exposed negativity. Because Kalev’s enthusiasm, his euphoria, his “We-can-do-it! Rah! Let’s go!” attitude suddenly made them look bad.

And now, because they don’t want to look bad, they start to justify the more negative aspects of their report.

They say, “No, no, no! Listen! We’re not being negative. This land *is not conquerable!* We can’t do it! This is not possible!”

And that’s where the trouble starts coming. Because that was *not* their initial report. And the decision to go forward with the Divine mission to conquer the land was not a call for them to make. Entering the land had already been instructed by God...

So now, in the emotional spin to defend their egos, they’re suddenly questioning God. Now, they’re questioning whether they’ve been led to the “Promised Land”—in the most literal sense, and therefore, if things will work out okay despite the risks? They begin to attack the Divine destiny and the gift and

the future that God promised the people, and they begin to question whether it is a promise that will really be kept.

They've just kind of tripped over themselves. And they continue to spin it without brakes: "No, we can't! We can't do this! They're giants and we were like grasshoppers in our own eyes as we stood before them, and they also looked at us like grasshoppers!!" They move to fantastic imagery, painting it in this wild light of: "Whoah! It's crazy!"

And the next thing you know, the Jewish people—the whole nation—starts going into a panic! The negative spies have gotten to them. They're talking about titans and grasshoppers and giants! The people start to freak out, and they start to cry, "We're going to die, we're going to die, we're going to die! We have to run back to Egypt. RUN BACK TO EGYPT!!!"

They people cry out, "We need a new leader!! We gotta get back to Egypt!!" And Moses and Aaron humbly fall on their faces, showing this is not about leadership, there's no conspiracy here.

And now, Joshua, another one of the scouts, tears his clothes in horror and mourning of the events unfolding around him. And Joshua and Kalev further confront the 10 other scouts who have whipped everyone into a frenzy – simply due to an emotional drive to be "right" – and they say, "We can do it! Come on! Think about this: If God says we're going to succeed, we're going to succeed! What do we have to worry about? We've got the greatest shield – God! There's nothing to worry about here. Remember? God? Ten Plagues? Splitting Sea. Mount Sinai. Hello?"

Checkmate on the other ten spies fabrications. Kalev and Joshua's logic has taken the high-ground. There's not even an argument to say against them.

But unable to back down anymore, so wound up in their own defense, the other spies and people pick up stones to try to kill Joshua and Kalev!

And in that moment—*A BURST OF LIGHT!* —God's glory appears in front of the entire nation.

END OF SCENE.

CUT.

Whooooaaaah...

So look at this scenario. Look what happened. Look at the spiral.

We went from an objective report to suddenly a group feeling embarrassed, like they were being made to look bad, and therefore embellishing their story to make themselves look better, thereby crossing a

certain line in of honesty in doing so. And yes, they won over their audience. But at what cost? At what cost...

In our tragic scenario of placing ego above values, those who were initially espousing the truth ultimately became the enemies of truth. Because it wasn't about truth anymore. *The truth was being consumed by the need to be right at all costs.* And the next thing you know, they're ready to kill their own friends. The next thing we see, it's no holds barred violence. All bets are off.

So let's bring this back to our present day world. I was telling a story at a party, and you embarrassed me when you corrected me when, and and the next thing you know I'm not going to talk to you anymore. And not because you did anything wrong, but simply because you made me *feel bad about me.* You made me feel stupid. And now I don't want to talk to you *ever again.*

But the breakdown in our relationship is my own fault, isn't it? Because I wasn't approaching our relationship from a point of view of intellectual integrity and humbleness. I was approaching it from the point of view of my passion and my ego, and I was letting my heart, with all of its vulnerabilities and insecurities, control me. I was led by my passion, rather than processing my decisions through my head and through my inner spiritual filter.

So what are we supposed to do? After all, we are all human, and we all have powerful emotions.

Does all this mean we should never follow our hearts? Does this mean we should not go after our dreams, which are so often driven and fueled by passion? Because isn't it all about fulfilling dreams when we say, "Follow your heart!"?

Interestingly, we find the hints of an answer towards the end of the Torah portion. It ends with our suddenly being given the mitzvah, the spiritual gift, of wearing the *tzitzit*. The *tzitzit* are four tassels that are tied together with a blue thread and attached to four-cornered garments (like *bahas*) that Jews have traditionally worn for millennia. There's a lot of symbolic meaning in the way they're tied, in the number of strings used, and the styles of knots, but that's its own discussion.

Now, regarding our questions about heart and passion, we're told that there's a meaning to the blue thread there. The Torah says that when we see the blue threads that bind the *tzitzit*, they will remind us of the mitzvot, our spiritual pathway of life, and we'll walk steadily upon that path. We will do things the right way.

And it says in this paragraph about the tzitzit, that one the reason we're being given them is: "*Lo taturu acharei levavchem v'acharei eineichem — don't follow after your heart and your eyes — asher atem zonim achareichem — for you will stray after them.*"

That's a nice way of putting it. But the Hebrew word "*Zonim*" comes from the Hebrew word "*Zona*", which means "prostitute". Meaning, "that you will *prostitute yourselves*" after what your heart and eyes are ignited by. We are being warned of the danger of prostituting ourselves in pursuit of the sparked passion of our hearts, and what our wandering eyes see.

Now, you can argue philosophically and go back and forth here, but we're getting a consistent message. This issue is about *passion*. The issue is about the danger of letting our passion take over, and just kind of running after what we want without thinking about it.

But we still wonder, "So, should I follow my heart?"

The fact is, there are a lot of sources that say we should! We have a prayer we say on the Shabbat, "*Adonai yimaleh kol mishalot libcha l'tovah.*" We bless the congregation "that God should fulfill *all the wishes of their heart* for good"! And every day when we conclude the silent meditation (the 'Shmoneh Esrei') in our prayers, we say, "*P'tach libi b'toratecha*" — "open my heart to your Torah." And we say, even in the holy Aleinu prayer, we say, "*V'yadata hayom v'hashevot el levavecha...*" — "Know today and bring to your heart that HaShem is God. In the heaven above to the earth below, there's nothing else!"

"Bring it to my heart..." "Fulfill the wishes of our hearts..."

What does it mean? What is the message here? Is the heart our enemy? Is the heart our friend? Is the heart something to be suspicious of and mistrust? Or is the voice of the heart something to honor?

There is no doubt that this week's Torah portion is warning us of the dangers of being lead by our hearts. And when God intervenes, His choice of language and the things He says are very poetic and illustrative.

God says something very, very powerful. "*V'Ulam chai ani v'yimaleh Adonai kol haaretz.*" He says, "As I am life, My glory fills the entire land." It's a powerful, powerful statement. It's a beautiful statement. God is teaching us: "Everything here is Me. You never actually have anything to worry about other than your own self, and the danger of getting out of alignment with what you're meant to be doing in the world, *with who you're meant to be.*" Because God is life and life is God. And God's glory fills every aspect of existence. There is never anything to worry about other than the fact that you have allowed yourself to get worried.

There is never anything to worry about other than the fact that you have allowed yourself to get worried.

But the heart blinds us sometimes...

So God assigns a consequence to the spies and the people who joined into the hysteria. He says: I will give you exactly what your irrational heart has demanded. You won't go into the land! But nor will you be punished by returning to the bondage of Egypt. You will simply live out your lives here in the wilderness, where I will continue to feed and protect you!

You made a choice. You went in there. You asked to go in and spy things out for yourself, to make your own assessment. You went in for 40 days, and your conclusion is, "We don't want to go"?

OK, says God. So one day for one year, measure for measure, you'll live out your life here in the Wilderness.

But then God punctuates the message of this consequence with more powerful, poetic language. God uses a very powerful terminology, as He says: "You will live out your time in the wilderness until your dead bodies drop." And God repeats this phrase again and again: "Your dead bodies...your dead bodies." And we get the feeling that God's telling them that they missed out on *the opportunity to live their lives to their fullest potential*. They are already dead men and women walking.

They missed out on the opportunity to live fully, because they let their heart, they let their ego, get ahead of their values, honesty, and honor. And as a result *they sacrificed a more meaningful life on the altar of their egos*.

How often do we see this in our own lives? How often do entire societies make this mistake? Isn't this choice of pride and ego above righteousness driving so much of the trouble we see going on in the world today?

I was explaining this idea to my daughters this week: Look around the world. Look at what is going on today? Look at America and Russia meddling with the conflict in Syria. Look at China and Russia posturing against America and Western nations with Iran. What do you think motivates each country in their interference around the world?

Do you really think that for China and Russia, these giants of Communism who have been waiting for decades for an opportunity to reassert themselves, that they are motivated by concern for the interests of *the citizens of Iran*? Do you think Russia cares about the well-being of the Syrian people or those people oppressed in Iran by their ruling Mullahs?

No. Rather, they see a vulnerable, shaky America. For a long time, America looked so much better than China, shining with liberty and economic prosperity. But now China is enjoying economic prosperity and they are ascendant among the community of nations in both influence and power, while so much of the rest of the world is economically shaky and fearful. And so you have all these selfish powers between Russia and China and Iran and Turkey jockeying to say, "I'm in charge now. I'M IN CHARGE!!!"

All of them looking to assert their egos.

And America's hopeful message, on our better days, has always been: "*It's not about ego, it's about values.* It's about liberty. It's about human dignity." That's what America has always aspired to declare to the world.

It's a message that I'm proud to say Israel also aspires to declare to the world. But now I look around Israel and I see that on one side we've got Turkey, whose leader makes no secret that he envisions recreating the Ottoman Empire with Turkey as its re-established capital and him as the King. On another side we have Saudi Arabia, who has enjoyed being 'in charge' for many years, and doesn't want to lose that. Further east we have Iran, who says: "Oh yes, the greater Muslim empire is coming again. But WE will be the future leaders of the world – not Turkey or Saudi Arabia!" It's actually a known, deep belief of the Iranian Mullahs: They believe that a prophecy is being fulfilled now, in their days, *to take over the world.*

So all these Muslim and Persian nation's leaders are running after THEIR MOMENT in history. But rather than leading based upon noble values and bettering the lives *of their people*, these corrupt leaders are capitalizing on the dreams, naiveté and trust of their citizens in order to advance their own evil, egotistical and megalomaniacal visions of power.

Russian and Chinese money, power and influence. Turkish and Iranian and Syrian leaders' dreams. Not for the betterment of their societies, but for their ego and for their power.

So let's return to our Torah portion and follow our story of unchecked passion, and how it spins people out of control again and again.

In the very next scene after the emotional event of the spies' report and God's intervention, God basically says: You've made your choice. You've made your bed. Now you're going to sleep in it.

And the next thing you know the people say, "No! We're going to go into the land! We made a mistake!" They start crying. They cry out: "Let's go get the Land! We're going to go enter the Land! Let's go!"

So ask yourself: Are they being driven by values now, or are they being driven by the fact that they feel like a bunch of fools, like a bunch of idiots, because God has just very brutally told them: 'You're like a bunch of dead bodies running around. You're not living any more. You're not living meaningfully. You're just running after your frail little egos, and in doing so you have sacrificed everything that makes life truly meaningful.'

And so now when they're up and running, saying: "Let's go get the Land!" But is it really because they've understood and learned a lesson, or is it because they don't want to feel like losers now? They don't want to feel like idiots...

Sadly, it's just more ego. It's more: "I can't lose! That's not fair!" And so they go charging.

And Moses cries out, "What are you doing?! *That's not your pathway any more.* God is not with you on this path! The message God is communicating to you is not to 'go get the Land'! The message here is about *alignment*. The message that God trying to tell you is: *'I am life. And my honor fills every aspect of this world.'* *Your pathway now is one of contrition and humbleness, not trying to grab what you just lost a second ago!*" Moses warns, "You're going to get your butt kicked." And sure enough, they do.

And then the next thing you know, the Torah jumps forty years, and God is talking to the next generation about what to do when they go into the Land. Or perhaps talking to *our generation — right now.*

God has moved on.

Next.

So the question is: What's the message?

The question is: What's the lesson?

To thread all these ideas together, we find an interesting story towards the end of the Torah portion.

There's this strange scene where a man is gathering sticks during Shabbat. This mysterious man is gathering sticks, and the neighbors capture him, and it says that the entire congregation brings him to Moses and asks, "What do we do with him?"

And Moses says, "We've got to find out. We'll have to ask God."

And God says, "This person has to be put to death. By stoning."

But this presents us with a difficult question. It presents us with a serious problem. Because according to the Torah you can't punish someone for a crime if they haven't been properly warned about the behavior and the consequences. So now, if both the people who stopped this guy and

Moses himself didn't know what to do with him, then how could the guy possibly have been properly warned?

And so the Talmud says: The issue here wasn't a lack of knowledge of the crime and its consequences. The question of the people and of Moses was: What was the nature of his offense? Was it just that he made a mistake regarding how to keep Shabbat? Or was it that he was actually trying to challenge the *very nature of a Godly world*?

Because the idea of Shabbat is the idea of *pausing*. It is an example set by God Himself, that *we have to be careful not to get so caught up in the momentum of things that we forget the importance of pausing* – of taking in some perspective regarding where we are in our lives, and where we are going.

This message of that pausing – of stopping, looking, and listening – is one that Stephen Covey talks about in *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. He shares an idea what he calls the P/PC balance, which is “productivity” and “productive capability.” He explains it with an example: I have a car which I use for driving, but I also have to stop and fill it up with gas. Because no matter how great the car is or how well it's built, it can't take me anywhere if I don't stop sometimes to refill the fuel. Covey teaches that an essential part of living a meaningful life is pausing from time to time, and re-centering ourselves.

So now let's return to our Torah portion and our bad-boy collecting sticks on Shabbat. The importance of this story, the reason the Torah shares it with us, is because his actions were much more than a simple mistake. What this guy was saying to the Nation was: *'Forget getting centered. Forget checking our momentum in life and keeping an eye on where our passions are leading us. We don't need to get centered. We just need to go! We don't need to pause. Forget alignment. Forget clarity. Just do what comes naturally. Follow your impulses. Follow your heart...'*

And so his idea was: I don't need to pause now because I don't feel like pausing and we don't have to....

He was rebelling against the very essence of Jewish Spirituality. He was rebelling against the idea of taking time to center ourselves, of taking a deep breath.

Pausing. Thinking. Choosing wisely.

Based.

Upon.

Values.

And the message here in this story about a man gathering sticks on Shabbat, is that God is telling us: Part of the the life-journey, part of being productive, part of being successful in life depends upon the ability to *stop-look-listen*.

There's an amazing section of the Code of Jewish Law, the Shulchan Aruch. It's a section all unto itself, and the section is called: "To do everything we do in life for the sake of Heaven." And it says something amazing there. It says: "If you need to sleep, you should sleep. If you need to take a break, you should take a break. And if you want to engage in sexual intimacy with your spouse... It uses *this example!*

It says, "do so!"

Sleep when you need to. Be intimate when the meaningful moment arrises. But do it with a sense of: "*I'm doing this because this helps fuel me toward living a noble in life. By taking this time out it allows me to continue to move forward, meaningfully.*" Yes, I'm a Spiritual person. But I like to go to the movies once in a while! Yeah, I'm selective. I do my best not to go to movies which are Spiritually unhealthy for me, but I like to go to the movies. And I can go to the movies knowing that *taking that break helps me stay balanced, it helps me stay centered*. That part of being productive is knowing when to take time for yourself, to nurture yourself, and that's okay. Even more than 'okay', it is *essential*.

The message of the strange story of the man gathering sticks is twofold:

No. 1: It's the challenge against saying: Do we really need to pause? Do we really need to be centered? Can't we just move based on our primitive instincts?

And No. 2, the beauty in this story of this guy is, it says, this time *the entire nation, the entire congregation—it calls them the "Eidah" — they're unified*. Not just a nation, an entity, but an "*Eidah*", a unified community brought him before Moses.

What does it mean, everyone came? Everyone? All the millions of people all brought this person together?

And the answer was: Yes.

There was something here which was bigger than just a person doing something naughty. There was a challenge. And there was a unified response. Which was: No, we've learned our lesson. We need to pause.

And in that we merited the gift of the *tzitzit*. It's interesting, the *tzitzit*. We're told in the Talmud that the blue thread reminds us of *the ocean that reflects the heaven*. Why that? Why doesn't it just say that "it

reminds us of heaven”? Why not ‘We see the thread, it reminds us of heaven, and we don’t follow after our passions and we do what’s right’?

Because we’re not meant to be Angels.

We’re meant to honor our human balance and our human equilibrium. That’s part of the beauty of *what we are*, is achieving that equilibrium. Of learning to celebrate our humanity. Not just to pursue values but to celebrate the gift of life in this beautiful world which is God’s coloring book and gift to us! Enjoying it, deriving pleasure from it, in that balanced way...

So the Talmud doesn’t say “you see the thread and *you remember heaven*”, because you’re not meant to be an Angel of Heaven. Angels are Angels. And you are a human being.

The Talmud tells us “to remember *the ocean* that reflects the Heavens”, because what you’re remembering is that *you can reflect heaven on Earth*. Our meditation is to think about the water that reflects the sky, and in that reflection, to also know that we each have the ability to reflect those Higher Values, those deeper precepts and greater truths which make life truly meaningful and beautiful and worthwhile.

That’s the gift of the tzitzit.

It’s the gift we earned when we finally understood the power of pausing and aligning. To think.

Stop.

Look.

Listen.

Yes it’s good to hear the voice of your heart. But what it says in Aleinu is different from what it warns us about in the Shema. In the gift of tzitzit we’re told: “Don’t follow after your heart and your eyes, which leads people to prostitute themselves to their passions”. That’s when you let your *heart lead your head*. The messages are going from your heart to your eyes. If you let your heart lead your head you can end up in a lot of trouble.

And in the Aleinu prayer, which is the way we close every prayer service, we say, “*V’yadata hayom v’hashevot el levavecha* — know (in your mind) today and bring it to your heart.”

Use your mind to guide your heart. Let it go from your head to your heart.

Use your head first.

But also, don’t make decisions purely intellectually.

When you're looking and you're saying, I can go right or left, here are these different things, then yes, *let your heart answer and advise you* between those two thought-out possibilities, in terms of which one is for you. But before you let your heart decide, offer your heart the gift of your intellect. Of your soul. Of your honor. Of your dignity. And filter out and consider why you're doing what you're doing, and why you're entertaining the choices in front of you, and what each one really has to offer you.

And if you get to the point where, all things equal, you're not sure what to do, where to go, what choice to make in life, then at that moment take those two discerned and thoughtful choices and possibilities and then bring them close, like a well-prepared meal, to your heart.

And then, trust your heart to answer you in the best way. *Because your heart is beautiful.* And that passion is so much of what makes life extraordinary!!

But wisdom doesn't go from the heart to the head. *It goes from the head to the heart.* We can't just run blindly after our passions. We need to always take the time to pause.

To become centered.

And to discern what the highest opportunity is.

And to look at the blue thread hanging on our *tzitzit*, and know that I'm not meant to be an Angel.

But I have the ability to reflect those highest aspirations by taking a moment to think...

About what...

I am choosing.

