

“The Weight of our Hearts”; Series: Loving the Lord in the Land

Deuteronomy 6:1-9

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Rev. Heidi S. De Jonge

Every morning of our middle eastern experience, we would bring our luggage to the bus and then gather around Rabbi George. We gathered around as close as possible for many reasons – so that we could practice staying together as a group when going through very crowded spaces... so that George would not have to waste his projecting voice straight away in the morning... so that we could experience the oneness that we experienced when together we said the words that People of the Book have been saying together for generations:

*Sh'ma Yis-ra-eil, A-do-nai E-lo-hei-nu, A-do-nai E-chad.
V'a-hav-ta eit A-do-nai E-lo-he-cha,
B'chawl l'va-v'cha,
u-v'chawl naf-sh'cha,
u-v'chawl m'o-de-cha.*

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.
Love the Lord your God
with all your heart and
with all your soul
and with all your strength.

THE VERY WORDS OF GOD.

And then George would pray and we would be on our way. This is the great command. Love the Lord your God with all your heart – *b'chawl l'vav'cha*. In ancient Israel, the heart was the seat of the intellect, it was with your heart that you thought... (some translators translate heart as mind). The Lord called Israel to love the Lord with their whole heart or (one could say) their whole mind – from the deepest place of their understanding and knowing.

When the Israelites heard this call in Deuteronomy 6, they were about to enter the promised land. They had wandered in the wilderness for 40 years... It had been 40 years since they left Egypt... Now those 40 years may sound like a long time, but before those 40 years, Israel had spent 400 years plus in Egypt under the rule of Pharaoh. And it is to Pharaoh that I would now like to turn for a bit.

If you look up the word 'heart' in the Old Testament, you will find it show up a lot in the book of Exodus – and most of those references to the word 'heart' are to the heart of Pharaoh – the heart of the king of Egypt. When God told Moses that through him, God was going to let the people go – out from under of the oppression they were experiencing in Egypt, he also told Moses that it wasn't going to be easy. The Lord told Moses that Pharaoh's *heart* was going to harden against the Israelites/against Moses/against the Lord... and this is exactly what happened, over and over again. Moses would command Pharaoh to let God's people go, and Pharaoh's heart would get hard and he would refuse to let the people go.

There are two words used to refer to the hardness of Pharaoh's heart in Exodus... both translated 'harden'. One is *hzq* – it means strengthen... like, I will strengthen his resolve not to let you go. The other is *cbd* – which can mean a lot of things, actually, but it carries with it the sense of heaviness. This hardening is like the sluggish hardening – a sitting down heavily in resistance. Pharaoh's heart was strong in its resistance to the movement of YHWH. Pharaoh's heart was thick and heavy and sluggish in its resistance to the movement of YHWH.

Now, this becomes extra-fascinating when we put the heavy heart of the ruler of Egypt in the context of the Egyptian religion of the time. The heart was believed to be the most important organ of a person... When a person died, their internal organs were placed in what were called 'canopic jars' – four jars: one for the liver, one for the intestines, one for the lungs and one for the stomach. There was no jar for the heart. The heart stayed in the body for burial because the heart had to go with them to the afterlife... the heart was the organ that was to be judged.

We learn about this belief from The Book of the Dead, which is an ancient Egyptian funerary text developed right around the time of Moses. The texts were written in hieroglyphics... they were detailed descriptions/pictures of what would happen to the person after they died. We saw the stories all over the place in the museum we visited in Cairo, but we saw the most stunning depiction of one part of the Book of the Dead in a temple in the Valley of the Workers. The valley of the workers was a little city of dwellings where the labourers lived who built the monumental tombs for the kings of Egypt. And one day, we walked in the near-50 degree heat past these dwelling places to this Temple of Deir El-Medina... built in the 3rd-2nd

century BCE. We walked through the entrance, the hypostyle hall, the vestibule, and then in smaller groups, we shifted through the smaller chapels. Small rooms. Hot. Dark. With lights shining on the hieroglyphics.

There is so much going on here, but I want to draw your attention to the part that most fascinated me.



An individual is presenting themselves to the goddess, Ma'at – the goddess of harmony, order, justice. In this presentation, their heart (that they have, of course, been carrying with them in their long journey of death) is placed on the scale of Ma'at. On the other side of the scale is the 'feather of Ma'at'. If their heart is as light as or lighter than the feather of Ma'at, they could move forward in the afterlife. If, however, their heart were HEAVIER than the feather of Ma'at, their heart would be immediately devoured by the Goddess, Ammit – a combination of a hippopotamus, a lion, and a crocodile – and they would be gone forever.

We were really ready to get out of the chapel. I think we all felt a heaviness there in that place. I tell you this because there is something about the heaviness of Pharaoh's heart that shows obviously in the book of Exodus how resistant he was to YHWH, but also, in his own religious story, the heaviness of his heart shows that he was living against the principles of harmony, order, and justice and that wasn't going to bode well for him.

We saw so many tombs while in Egypt... in the valley of the Kings that day... earlier, on our first day, we went into a pyramid, down, down, down into a tomb... in the museum in Cairo, we saw the worlds of treasures found buried with King Tut... and so many coffins, so many sarcophagi, so many canopic jars. And one person commented on how much focus was placed on the afterlife in Egypt. The Pharaohs lives were spent designing and building their tombs – and acquiring the treasures they would take with them there. By contrast, the world that we learn of in the Hebrew Scriptures is not about the afterlife... it is about life NOW. “These are the commands, decrees and laws the Lord your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess,² so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the Lord your God **as long as you live** by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may **enjoy long life**.³ Hear, Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you **may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey**, just as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, promised you” (Deuteronomy 6:1-3, emphasis mine).

Another strong contrast is the difference between living a life in service of Ma’at and a life lived before the face of YHWH. Ma’at – the goddess of order, harmony, justice... which are powerful concepts, but when you worship them as ends in themselves, you are sorely disappointed. Tim reflected on this when he was asked to write the first public blog post on our trip:

George pointed out that the true God doesn’t promise us Ma’at, doesn’t tell us to expect order. Instead, God promises that a relationship with the Triune God will bring shalom. Ideally, of course, shalom will include order and justice. But, our relationship with God is fundamentally about trust— trusting God in good times and in bad.

In my work as a chaplain, as a Spiritual Health Practitioner at Kingston General Hospital, I encounter people of many faiths and of no faith. I haven’t yet met anyone who worships Ma’at. But, I meet people all the time who are struggling with the chaos in their lives. People who ask what they did to deserve cancer or why God allowed them to get ALS. People who lament the death of a child or cry out in their loneliness.

Some people have the expectation that God would give them Ma’at. These people are vulnerable to a crisis of faith when chaos threatens.

Other people understand that a relationship with God doesn’t guarantee that we will be spared from chaos. These people are my inspiration as a chaplain, and I cried as I walked

among the pyramids with my wife, Heidi, and thought about people I know who suffer and still trust God.

“Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Saviour.”
Habakkuk 3:17-18

Later in the day, George told us that Habakkuk’s name means “embrace.” I love this. I tell people that God promises never to leave us or forsake us, that the Word became flesh to be with us, and that the Holy Spirit is with us wherever we go. God doesn’t promise us order and perfect justice in this life, but he gives us his shalom, his presence, and his embrace. I felt all of those things today as we walked among the pyramids.

And finally, the focus of this Egyptian journey through death is an individual journey. The Pharaohs spent their lives amassing wealth for themselves and refining themselves for their presentation of themselves to Ma’at. We, on the other hand, have a call not only to love the God who promises to be with us, but to love our neighbour as ourselves. When we recited the *shema* together, we also added the line from Leviticus 19... So it went:

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

[And then] *ve-a-hav-ta, le-re-a-cha ka-mo-cha*. And love your neighbour as yourself.

If you were to put my heart on the scale over against the feather of true justice, truth, and shalom, it would be *cbd*, heavy... But, you see – you know what *cbd* can also mean? *Cbd* means glory. The *cbd* of God, the *glory* of God is that the one who knew no sin – the one who was full of righteousness, justice and truth, God became sin for us. The *cbd* of God, the glory of God is a glory that gets on that scale and weighs it down with the sin of the whole world and takes upon himself the destruction and annihilation of death and comes out the other side having conquered death so that we might be free of fear... not just fear of judgment in the afterlife, but free of fear in this life now – free of fear of the Pharaohs in our lives who want to keep us in bondage... free of the fear of the disorder and trauma (that is bound to come our way) because we have a relationship to a god who will be with us in it.... Free of fear of those

we think to be our enemies for they are our neighbours and we are free to love them as ourselves.

“Now the Lord is the Spirit and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory are being transformed into his image with ever increasingly glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:17-18).