



Occasionally when visiting very old cemeteries in the New York area (eg. Mount Hebron, Machpela, or Old Montefiore) one will see old grave markers topped with a draped urn. These monuments look like a man wearing a draped tallis over his head. But the draped urn is definitely not a depiction of a pious Jew. Rather, it is a popular symbol of mourning from the Victorian era (1837-1901). The urn




symbolized death, because from antiquity to today, urns were used as receptacles for the cremated remains of the deceased. The cloth or veil symbolized the boundary between life and death. It also symbolized mourning, as is apparent for example, from the photographs of black drapery and bunting at the scenes of public mourning following the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. A person living in the Victorian era would have easily been able to decode this symbol the same way that we today decode logos or pictograms.<sup>1</sup>

**The Cloth Covered Vessel.** In antiquity vases and earthenware vessels containing precious items were often covered in cloths or skins in order to protect them (as in this picture of ancient Egyptian canopic jars), the same way we use bubble-wrap today when we pack fragile items. In the



Torah, the most evocative moment of covering and uncovering occurs with the transportation of the Ark of the Covenant, the "heart" of the Sanctuary. Only when it was covered by the *parochet*-screen that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the structure could it be moved.<sup>2</sup> To cover is to protect. To uncovering is to expose to danger, or to render something vulnerable. To cover is to conceal. To uncover is to reveal. When the vessel is covered, it is protected. When it is uncovered, it is exposed and vulnerable. It is open.

**The Heart as a Vessel.** In the Egyptian Book of the Dead the heart of the deceased is depicted as a small jug or vessel and weighed on a scale (see picture) before a divine court to determine whether or not the deceased could enter Paradise. If it was light as a feather, it was admitted. If it was heavy

with sin, it was devoured by a monster. The Egyptian hieroglyph for heart is *ib*, , which is a picture of an actual vessel. The heart-as-vessel is a common metaphor in the Bible.<sup>3</sup> While the Torah obviously rejects the Egyptian myth of weighing the heart for the afterlife, in our parasha (as well as in Deut. 10:16 and Jer. 4:4) it presents an alternate myth of the heart



The heart of the deceased placed on one of the scales and weighed against a feather.

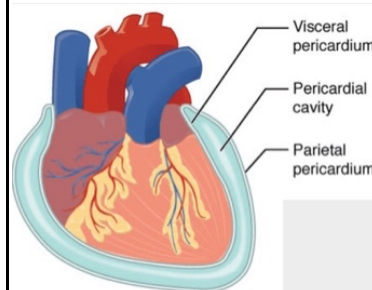
being covered by a thick barrier that must be circumcised metaphorically in order to have a covenantal relationship with God.

### **Circumcision of the Heart = Uncovering the Veil.**

אם יהיה נדחה בקצה השמים משם יקבצך ה' אלהיך ומשם יקחה. וקביצך ה' אלהיך אל הארץ אשר ירשו אבותיך וירשתה ושיטבך והרבה מאבותיך. ומל ה' אלהיך את לבבך ואת לבב זרעך לאהבה את ה' אלהיך בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך למען חייך. (דברים ל:ד-ו)

*If you be led away to the ends of the heavens, from there the Lord your God will collect you, from there he will take you, and the Lord your God will bring you to the land that your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it, he will do well by you and make you many more than your fathers. The Lord your God will **circumcise your heart and the heart of your seed**, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your being, in order that you may live. (Deut. 30:4-6)*

**Circumcision of the heart** is an audacious figure of speech. No doubt our biblical ancestors were aware of some basic cardiological anatomy, that the heart was indeed enclosed in



a protective sac (the pericardium). This gives the metaphor even greater power. **The metaphorical circumcision of the pericardium, would be construed as a spiritual act of full self-disclosure. It means simply, to be open, vulnerable, and unobstructed before God.**

**Is there any symbolic depiction of the circumcision of the heart in Judaism?** The simple answer is no. But that should not detract us from the possibility of appending

<sup>1</sup> Fun fact: Pictograms were invented by the patrilineal Jew, Otto Neurath 1882-1945 who called them *Isotypes*, an acronym for International System of Typographic Picture Education.

<sup>2</sup> וּבֹא אֶהְיֶה וּבְנֵי בְנֵי סֹסֶה הַמִּחְנֶה וְהוֹרְדוּ אֶת פֶּרֶךְ הַמִּסָּךְ וְכִסּוּ בָהּ אֶת אֶרֶץ הָעֵדֻת. וְנָתַנוּ עָלֶיהָ כִּסּוּי עוֹר תַּחַשׁ וּפָרָשׁוֹ בְּגֵד כָּלִיל תְּכֵלֶת מִלְמַעְלָה וְשִׁמּוֹ בְּדִי. (במד' ד:ו-י)

*Aharon and his sons are to come, when the camp marches forward, and are to take down the curtain of the screen, and are*

*to cover with it the Coffin of the Testimony. They are to put over it a covering of tanned-leather skin, and are to spread a cloth entirely of blue-violet on top, putting its poles [in place]. (Num. 4:5-6).*

<sup>3</sup> Take for example, Lamentations 2:19:

שִׁפְכִי כַּמִּים לַבַּיִת נֹכַח פְּנֵי אֲדֹנָי

*Pour out your heart like water, in the presence of the Lord!*

The heart, overflowing with emotion, pours out before God.

symbolic meaning to a common synagogue ritual<sup>4</sup> namely the **Opening of the Ark**. In the earliest synagogues, there was no such thing as an Ark. The Torah scrolls were located in a special room to the side of the main prayer space and when they were read, they would be taken out in a chest, and brought through the prayer area to a reading platform. That procession was accompanied with the recitation of the verses that we still recite today in the Torah service. Over time, as synagogue architecture evolved, synagogues were built with an apse in the front, which would house a wooden box in which the Torah scrolls would be placed. The box was now permanently fixed, and the Torahs themselves would be brought in a procession through the prayer area. That is the practice to this day. With the Ark as the dominant feature of the prayer space, the act of opening the Ark became a coveted honor. On the one hand, it served a very practical purpose which was to be able take out a Torah scroll and read it. But over the years the act took on symbolic meaning of its own **as a kind of re-enactment of the Sinai moment**, in which the Torah emerges from God and is passed to the leader of the congregation. The earliest synagogues drew on some of the features of the Jerusalem Temple, and it is quite likely that a curtain covering the Ark was incorporated very early as a way of invoking the **parochet**-screen that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the Temple. **Just like the parochet designated the area for the Ark of the Covenant in the Temple, a replica of the parochet in the form of a curtain, would demarcate the Torah Ark in the synagogue.** We find evidence of curtain coverings for Torah Arks in some of the earliest rabbinic sources such as the Jerusalem Talmud (Megillah 3:1) where the curtain is called a **כילה-kilah**. According to Lee Levine, (the preeminent scholar of ancient synagogues in the land of Israel), the floor mosaic of the Hammat Tiberias synagogue (3rd century CE), depicts a free-standing shrine (the technical term for it is an **aedicula**) covered by a curtain<sup>5</sup> (see picture below). It is safe to surmise that Torah curtains have been a consistent feature of synagogues from the earliest times. As the synagogue evolved, Ashkenazi synagogues tended to place their Ark



<sup>4</sup> Judaism constantly adds new interpretations to old rituals. Eg. the Four Species on Sukkot. The Seder is a testing ground for new

curtains on the outside the Ark, while Sephardic synagogues placed them inside the Ark. Curtains are not obligatory, and in many synagogues (such as our daily chapel) the Torah Ark consists only of wooden doors.

**Opening the Ark and Circumcising the Heart.** It is not exactly clear when opening the Ark became an honor in the synagogue service, but from the late medieval period, we begin to see customs of opening the Ark before specific prayers. I have not yet been able to find interpretations of the act of opening the Ark. Evidently, there are some in hasidic literature. However, it seems obvious that the opening of the curtain should be understood as an act that removes the veil between us and the Torah and us and God. It is quite literally an act of unveiling. **Therefore, it is not a huge leap to connect the act of opening of the Ark to the uncovering of the heart. The Ark is the heart of the synagogue. Opening the Ark is a symbolic enactment of the circumcision of the heart, that is removing the obstructions in our relationship with God.** The periodic opening of the Ark during a regular service (and the more frequent opening of the Ark at the High Holidays) becomes a public religious gesture that is intended to cultivate an internal religious response. The opening of the Ark is intended to stimulate the uncovering of the heart. When we experience the opening of the Ark we consciously (or subconsciously) recall God's desire for us to remove the barriers from our hearts and draw closer to God and Torah.

#### **The Opening of the Ark is Pregnant with Meaning.**

The Kabbalist, Rabbi Hayyim Yosef David Azulai (1724-1806), also known as the **Hida**, (from the initials, חיד"א), writes:

ומנהג העיר שמי שנכנסה אשתו בחדש הי"ט לעבורה נזהר לעשות  
החדש שהוא מצות פתיחתה היכל והוא מנהג קשה ויש לו סמך על  
דרך האמת. — מורה באצבע סימן ג אות צ

**It is the local custom that if someone's wife is in her ninth month of pregnancy he should be vigilant that month to perform the mitzva of opening the Ark which is a lovely custom and derives from the way of Truth.**

Moreh be'Etzba 3:90.

Is this a serious ritual to channel the anxiety of an expectant couple, or a kind of folk-magic? Before last Pesach, I attended a service where an expectant father (my son Yaakov!) opened the Ark at the end of his wife Gabi's pregnancy. Lo and behold! The next day, she gave birth to a beautiful baby girl! Talia Adi! So never underestimate the power of an Ark Opening!

**Shabbat Shalom!**

**This Parasha Sheet is sponsored by Leslie Fishbein and Zoltan Kemeny in honor of the Bat Mitzvah of their granddaughter, Elana Esther Izrailev. Mazel Tov!**

**We mark 715 days of captivity for the hostages this Shabbat. We pray for their return and an end to the war. May God shield Israel, protect the IDF, heal the wounded, comfort the bereaved, and spare innocents from suffering.**

rituals and new interpretations. Tikkun Leil Shavuot is a new innovation. So was Hakafot on Simchat Torah 400 years ago.

<sup>5</sup> Lee Levine, The Ancient Synagogue, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000, p. 330, 345.