

Bringing meaning to life

Parasha with Rabbi Benji Levy

SHEMOT

VAERA

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BESHALACH

YITRO

MISHPATIM

TERUMA

TETZAVEH

KI TISA

VAYAKHEL

PEKUDEI

22

VAYAKHEL

WISDOM OF THE HEART

In general, the head is perceived to be the seat of wisdom and intellect, while the heart is the source of emotion. And yet in an intriguing piece of Torah, these polar opposites are woven together with the repetition of the phrase *chacham lev* or 'wise-heart' a total of seven times, when referencing the leaders and builders of the tabernacle.¹ The question, therefore, is what is the meaning behind this unique phrase?²

Academic pursuits are generally considered intellectual. Subjects like mathematics, philosophy and science are typically explored in the theoretical cognitive realm. Even fields of study that can have practical application on a day-to-day basis often do not actually affect the manner in which one lives or the character that one represents.

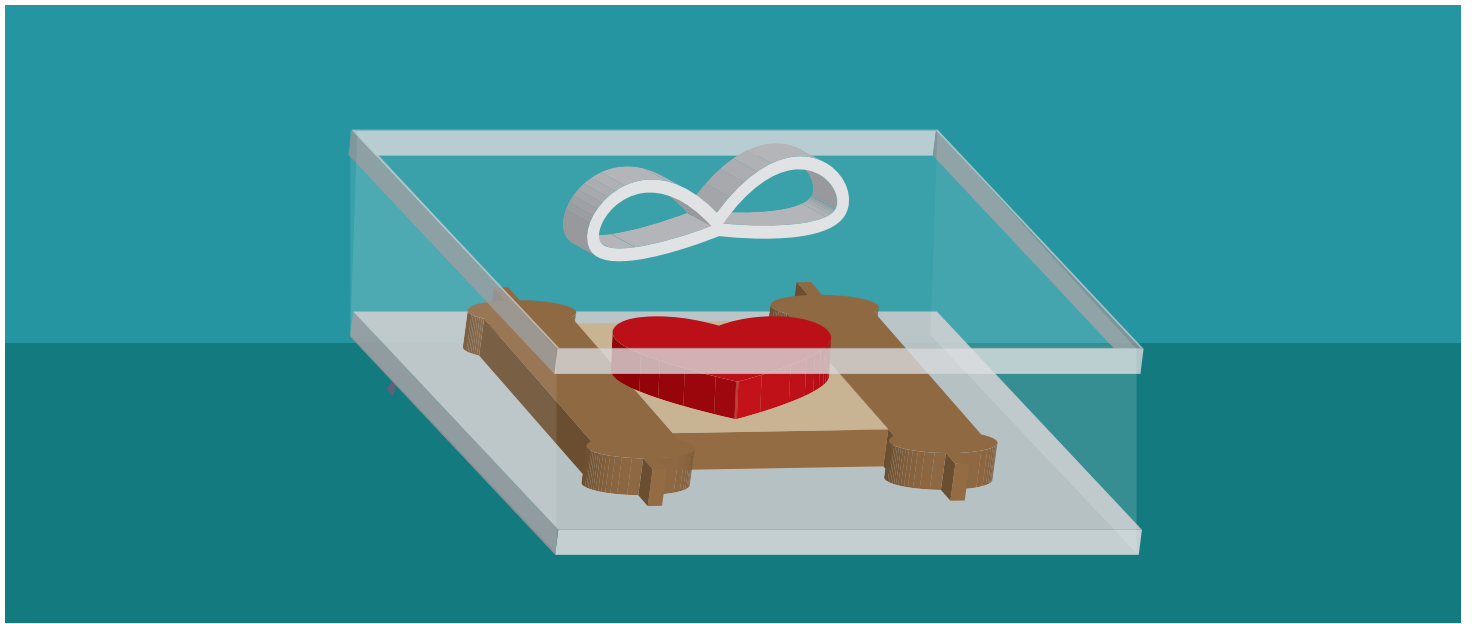
Judaism in its truest sense, however, requires a combination of cerebral, behavioural and spiritual rigour. It requires a commitment of heart, mind and practice. Whilst those endowed with great knowledge may be deemed knowledgeable, the manner in which they conduct themselves will ultimately be the yardstick that defines whether or not they are a *talmid chacham* - a scholar of wisdom. The fact that this title requires the practical application of wisdom, not just the theoretical knowledge, differentiates it from almost all other academic or intellectual pursuits and offers insights into the deeper meaning of the term '*chacham*'.

To be a *chacham lev* therefore, is to be an academic of thought and action - someone with the ability to harmonise considerations, feelings and practice.

It is not just about one's regular intelligence or IQ, but also one's emotional intelligence or EQ.

The archetypical Jewish prayer, the *Shema*, states, '[the Torah] that I command you today, should be on your heart.'³ The obvious question is why the Torah should be *on* one's heart, rather than *in* one's heart? If the Torah is of such great importance, one would assume it ought to be internalized, rather than situated outside of one's very being. This subtle difference may add depth to our understanding of the term *chacham lev*.

Every person in some shape or form is touched or moved at different moments in their life. It may be a definitive milestone with family or friends, a breath-taking view, an intense musical moment or a powerful encounter - everyone feels moved at least once. Judaism views these inspirational moments as gifts - opportunities that God, so to speak, places upon our heart. Once placed upon our heart - acceptance is up to us.



The daily declaration that the Torah is placed *on* one's heart - rather than *in* one's heart is a constant reminder of our responsibility to become an active player in the process and the need for us to recognize and internalize these unique spiritual gifts rather than letting them pass us by.

If we return, therefore, to the verses recounting the building of the Sanctuary, we can now understand the meaning behind the repetition of the description of the 'wise-hearted' people. True wisdom is not merely intellectual talent, but an emotional appreciation, not the superficial exposure to moving moments, rather the ability to notice the sacred and invite it into the day-to-day. All of us on numerous occasions are faced with both knowledge based content and experiential emotional moments.

In order to earn the title of *chacham lev* - wise-hearted, it is upon us not to simply notice or learn, but to synthesize these unique experiences simultaneously into our heads, hearts and daily lives.

It is thus our responsibility to truly live that which we learn. And perhaps this is the reason that those words of the *Shema* are written inside the *tefillin* that are worn daily during the Morning Prayer services, with one piece next to our heads and one piece next to our hearts and hands, neither of which can be worn in isolation. We are born with many blessings - a good brain, a kind heart and capable hands - but it is up to us and only us, to successfully weave together our intellect with our emotions and express it through our actions in order to earn wisdom of the heart.

Notes

¹ Exodus 35:25; 35:35; 36:1; 36:2; 36:8.

² This question is also asked by Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, *Emek Hadavar* 31.

³ Deuteronomy 6:6.

Parasha Fact:

The women donated their copper mirrors which were used for the construction of the tabernacle, because while they may appear to be used for vanity, they were used by these women for Jewish continuity - any neutral item can be used for holiness.

Next week in Pekudei:

It is generally natural to view the world through a polarized lens that draws a clear distinction between the holy and the profane. A very subtle distinction however, between the blessing Moses gives the people upon their completion of building the Tabernacle and the promise that God gives the people upon commanding them to build it, actually teaches the opposite and highlights the value in appreciating the delicate tango that exists in the world between the sacred and the secular.

שבת שלום