



OR HALEV

Center for Jewish Spirituality & Meditation

On Softness -- Week One

“Softness is what brings us in contact with divinity. It enables sacredness and sanctity to come to this world.”

Texts- Hebrew followed by English

תענית כ"א, ב

תנו רבנן לעולם יהא אדם רך כקנה ואל יהא קשה כארז מעשה שבא רבי אלעזר (בן ר') שמעון ממגדל גדור מבית רבו והיה רכוב על החמור ומטייל על שפת נהר ושחם שמחה גדולה והיתה דעתו גסה עליו מפני שלמד תורה הרבה

נזדמן לו אדם אחד שהיה מכוער ביותר אמר לו שלום עליך רבי ולא החזיר לו אמר לו ריקה כמה מכוער אותו האיש שמא כל בני עירך מכוערין כמותך אמר לו איני יודע אלא לך ואמור לאומן שעשאני כמה מכוער כלי זה שעשית כיון שידע בעצמו שחטא ירד מן החמור ונשתטח לפניו ואמר לו נענית לך מחול לי אמר לו איני מוחל לך עד שתלך לאומן שעשאני ואמור לו כמה מכוער כלי זה שעשית

היה מטייל אחריו עד שהגיע לעירו יצאו בני עירו לקראתו והיו אומרים לו שלום עליך רבי מורי מורי אמר להם למי אתם קורין רבי רבי אמרו לו לזה שמטייל אחריו אמר להם אם זה רבי אל ירבו כמותו בישראל אמרו לו מפני מה אמר להם כך וכך עשה לי אמרו לו אעפ"כ מחול לו שאדם גדול בתורה הוא

אמר להם בשבילכם הריני מוחל לו ובלבד שלא יהא רגיל לעשות כן מיד נכנס רבי אלעזר בן רבי שמעון ודרש לעולם יהא אדם רך כקנה ואל יהא קשה כארז ולפיכך זכה קנה ליטול הימנה קולמוס לכתוב בו ספר תורה תפילין ומזוזות

Ta'anit 20b

The Sages taught: A person should always be soft like a reed, and one should not be stiff like a cedar. An incident in which Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, came from Migdal Gedor, from his rabbi's house, and he was riding on a donkey and strolling on the bank of the river. And he was very happy, and his head was swollen with pride/his consciousness was vulgar/his mind was thick because he had studied much Torah.

He happened upon an exceedingly ugly person, who said to him: Greetings to you, my rabbi, but Rabbi Elazar did not return his greeting. Instead, Rabbi Elazar said to him: Worthless/Empty! How ugly is that man. Are all the people of your city as ugly as you? The man said to him: I do not know, but you should go and tell the Craftsman who made me: How ugly is the vessel you made. When Rabbi Elazar realized that he had sinned, he descended from his donkey and prostrated himself before him, and he said to him: I have sinned against you; forgive me. The man said to him: I will not forgive you go until you go to the Craftsman who made me and say: How ugly is the vessel you made.

He walked behind him until they reached Rabbi Elazar's city. The people of his city came out to greet him, saying to him: Greetings to you, my rabbi, my rabbi, my master, my master. The man



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said to them: Who are you calling my rabbi, my rabbi? They said to him: To this man, who is walking behind you. He said to them: If this is a rabbi, may there not be many like him among Israel. They asked him: For what reason? He said to them: He did such and such to me. They said to him: Even so, forgive him, as he is a great Torah scholar.

He said to them: For your sakes I forgive him, provided that not to become accustomed to behaving like this. Immediately, Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, entered the study hall and taught: A person should always be soft like a reed and should not be stiff like a cedar. And therefore, the reed merited that a quill is taken from it to write with it a Torah scroll, phylacteries, and *mezuzot*.

Trans Miriam Margles

Questions for Reflection

- Do you have a felt sense of what “softness” means and feels like in your practice and internal life?
- What is and where do you find the quality of softness in your life currently?
- What would it look like for you to take on an internal practice of softening?
- When do you get lost in hardness?

Practice Prompts

- Observe the qualities of softness and hardness in your practice and in your body. Get to know what those terms are as lived out by you.
- If you notice hardness in your sitting practice, ask the hardness what it needs to soften. For example, what would your inner critic’s harsh voice need to soften?
- Explore what it would take to soften in your practice

Questions and Practice Prompts by Genevieve Greinetz, Rabbinic Intern