

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 9/21/18

Shabbat Shuvah 2018

Right beneath your nose, just above your upper lip, is something called the philtrum. The origins and purpose of that small indentation are, for most of us, a mystery. And while we don't spend much time thinking about our philtrums (or to be more precise, philtra), you may be interested to learn that the Talmud actually explains how we all received this seemingly functionless facial feature.

According to legend, before we are born, a divine light shines from one end of the universe to the other, and that that light actually reaches the fetus in utero infusing the soon to be baby with knowledge of all the Torah. At the moment we enter the world, an angel reaches out and raps us on the upper lip, creating the indentation and causing us to forget all our Torah. The hard drive, as it were, is wiped clean. With all of our Torah gone, the rabbis explain that the educational trajectory of our lives is the process of relearning the Torah that we actually once knew.

It is a lovely and fanciful tale. No one takes it literally, but still I wonder, what is the point of the story? One way of looking at it is to say that the purpose of the story is to democratize knowledge. It teaches us that we are all equally capable of learning Torah since, at one time, each of us possessed it in its entirety. You may have had a strong formal Jewish education or not; you may be blessed with a keen intellect or not; you may be young or you may be old. Torah is equally accessible to all since it is simply about starting to relearn what you knew already. The essential message seems to be that the process of learning in our lifetime, at least Jewishly, is not primarily the act of acquiring new knowledge, but rather reclaiming that which we once knew. Just as the groove above our lip is a part of us, so each of us once possessed the Torah. The learning we do in our lives is a process of remembering - remembering the past, the Torah that was once ours.

And this brings me to T'shuvah, to the act of repentance. This is the time of year that we are supposed to be focused on making things right and making a better future for ourselves. Sometimes that means going to the people you know you have wronged and apologizing. But T'shuvah is also about your shortcomings in the eyes of Gd. In your conscience you know there are things that you can do better. You know that there are things that you want to change. Maybe it is a bad habit. Checking your phone too often, biting your nails, worrying too much. Maybe it's your bad eating habits, your lack of exercise, too much smoking or drinking. Or maybe it's a cynicism that you have about certain people, or all people. Maybe it's an attitude that you are carrying around that you just want to get rid of. And maybe it's a combination of several of the above, a combination that is so complex that you don't even know where to begin...

I think that's where the story of the philtrum can be most helpful. Realize that sometimes we cannot see our own problems because we are so deeply immersed in them. The eye cannot see itself, the knife cannot cut itself. The Jewish People could not imagine freedom from Egyptian oppression because they were so mired in it. But the Torah starts long before that. The story of the Jewish People starts with freedom and dignity for Abraham, Isaac and Jacob so that when Moses comes to the Jewish People he can paint a picture for them of a better, happier time that they had already experienced. And maybe that's the point of the philtrum story, too. It peeks the imagination. Imagine a time when you knew all that you need to know. It was there, and it IS there. And perhaps that is why this Shabbat when we

focus on T'shuvah, repentance, is called Shabbat Shuvah, the Shabbat of Return. It's about returning to a better state of being, one that you already have experienced but may have long forgotten.

Perhaps an important part of your T'shuvah is envisioning a time in your mind when the problems you are facing were not as big an issue. By conjuring up an image, and more importantly, by letting go of the feelings that keep you from focusing on it, you can call to mind a time that was less full of worry; a time when you were not as cynical; a time when you felt healthier. Perhaps you have suppressed how good that once felt. This is the time, the Ten Days of reflection, to remember what you once knew, to feel the way you once felt, and to think about what it might be like to feel that way again. The mind is an incredibly powerful tool. We can use it to envision a better future by recalling a better past. So when you have challenging issues before you, it may well help to reflect back on what it looked like and felt like to be free of the baggage you are carrying now. A lighter, freer you is yours to return to since it's already there.