

Dear Rabbi Fried,

In reciting the Shema Yisrael, in the first paragraph it says you should not sway "after your heart". I have always wondered why there, and other places in the Torah that I have read, it refers to "thoughts of the heart", when we know that thoughts are in the brain?
Zachary B.

Dear Zachary,

For years I was perplexed by this question, and fascinated that in western civilization and earlier secular literature, emotions and thoughts are also attributed to the heart, perhaps following the Torah's lead. Scientifically, in fact, the heart, contains its own "brain". It is an autonomous organ; at the time of brain death or even when dissected for transplantation, the heart continues to beat completely on its own.

Some insight on this are that the heart, besides pumping blood, in Judaism is given a very unique role. A human is not just a soul or a body, but the union of the two. At what point do these two opposites meet?

The main place of the soul is said to be in the brain, the main organ representing physicality is the liver. The heart is the chamber where the body and soul meet and join, fusing together to make a human being. In the same way the heart pumps the oxygen-enriched blood throughout the body, providing nourishment for its cells; the heart "pumps" the connection of the soul to all the same cells. This creates an intimate connection between the soul and every fiber of the body.

This shows a profound message in the Tefillin/phylacteries worn by Jewish males. One box, comprised of four smaller boxes, is worn on the head corresponding to the four lobes of the brain. This sanctifies our thoughts. The other box, worn on the upper arm, signifies that our physical actions should be holy. The latter is supposed to be tipped towards the heart, as the heart is the place where the physical and the spiritual are combined.

Not to "sway after your heart" means not to let the body overcome the soul, as it potentially could, because the two are connected at the heart. Later the Shema says to "put these words (of Torah) upon your heart", with thoughts like that one's entire being becomes a miniature tabernacle of holiness, body and soul working in unison.

This causes us to take a new look at the common statement that it's enough to be "Jewish in the heart". (We rabbis call that a Jewish heart condition!). In truth, to be "Jewish in the heart" one would need to combine their thoughts together with their actions to Judaism and the service of G-d. Otherwise, to just think Jewish thoughts without actions would only be "Jewish in the brain", missing the heart. We should strive to be wholesome, complete Jews, meshing every area of our existence into our Jewish missions, with complete hearts.