



# Lev: "Heart"

STUDY NOTES

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SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

00:00 – 00:30

For thousands of years every morning and evening, Jewish people have prayed these well known words as a way of expressing their devotion to God. They're called the Shema.

Hear O Israel the LORD is our God the LORD is one, and as for you, you shall love the LORD your God with all of your heart, with all of your soul, and with all of your strength.<sup>1</sup>

We're going to look at the fourth keyword<sup>2</sup> in this prayer: "heart," which in Hebrew is sometimes pronounced "levav" or more often in a short form "lev."<sup>3</sup>

1. This is found in Deuteronomy 6:4-5.

3. In Hebrew it's written: לֵב or לֵבָב

2. Our Shema series covers six keywords:

*shema*: "to hear"

*YHWH*: "the divine name"

*ahavah*: "love"

*lev*: "heart"

*nephesh*: "soul"

*me'od*: "strength"

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## SECTION 2: WHAT A HEART DOES

Now, different cultures throughout history have had different conceptions of how the human body works, and this is also true of the ancient Israelite writers of the Bible. They knew the heart was an organ in the chest that sustains life; there's even a heart attack mentioned in the Bible, like Nabal "whose heart died inside him, and he became like a stone."<sup>4</sup>

4. Read more about this concept in 1 Samuel 25:37.
  5. Deuteronomy 8:5 says, "you know with your *levav* that as a man disciplines his son, so the LORD your God disciplines you."
  6. Job 17:4a says, "you have closed their *lev* to understanding; therefore you will not let them triumph."
  7. See more of this understanding in Proverbs 14:33.
  8. See where Solomon asks God for wisdom in 1 Kings 3:9.

So the heart is where you think and make sense of the world, but it does more. In the Bible, the heart is also where you feel emotions. You feel pain in your heart, like Hannah did when she couldn't have children.<sup>9</sup> In fact, the phrase "a broken heart" comes from biblical Hebrew.<sup>10</sup> You also experience fear in your heart; it can actually melt<sup>11</sup> or be distressed.<sup>12</sup> Your heart can even be depressed.<sup>13</sup>

But on the flip-side, your heart is where you experience joy. In Hebrew to be happy is to be "good of heart"<sup>14</sup> or to have a "heart of joy."<sup>15</sup>

So the heart is the generator of physical life and also your intellectual and emotional life, but there's more. In biblical Hebrew the heart is where you make choices motivated by your desires. David "had it in his heart to build a temple for God."<sup>16</sup> Your heart is where your affections are centered; they're called "the desires of your heart,"<sup>17</sup> and if you really want something, you'll go after it. As Nathan says to David, "whatever is in your heart, go and do it."<sup>18</sup>

So then, in the Bible, the heart is the center of all parts of human existence. As in the Proverb, "guard your heart, because from it flows your whole life."<sup>19</sup>

9. Read more in 1 Samuel 1:8.

10. Isaiah 57:15b says, "...to revive the *lev* of the contrite."

11. You can see more of this in Joshua 2:11.

12. See Psalm 25:17 for more.

13. Ecclesiastes 2:20a says, "so my *lev* dispaired the fruit of my labor..."

14. Judges 16:25a says, "when they were in good *lev* they said 'call for Samson that he may amuse us.'"

15. Jeremiah 15:16a says, "your words became for me the joy and delight of my *levav*..."

16. Read more in 1 Kings 8:17.

17. Read more in Psalm 37:4.

18. You can read more in 2 Samuel 7:3.

19. See Proverbs 4:23 for more.



The prophet Jeremiah believed that the human heart was fundamentally broken; “the heart of a human is deceitful above all, irreversibly sick, who can understand it.”<sup>20</sup> He watched a whole generation turn away from God and start sacrificing their children as if it were a good thing.

This is why in the imagination of the Hebrew prophets, the only hope for humanity is the total renewal of the human heart. Moses predicted that if Israel was ever going to really love their God, their *lev* would need to be “circumcised,”<sup>21</sup> a surprising metaphor of removing the evil and stubbornness from the human heart. David, after murder and adultery, pleads with God to “create in me a pure heart.”<sup>22</sup> Ezekiel hoped for a day when God would “remove the heart of stone” and give his people a “new heart of soft flesh.”<sup>23</sup> This is similar to Jeremiah’s hope that God would write the commands of the Torah on the *lev* of His people.<sup>24</sup>

Which brings us all the way back to the Shema. Every day God’s people are called to devote to God their body and mind, their feelings and desires, their future and their failures. This is what it means to Love the **LORD** your God with all your heart.

20. Read more in Jeremiah 17:9.

21. Deuteronomy 10:6 says, “moreover the LORD your God will circumcise your *levav* and the *levav* of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your *levav* and with all your soul, so that you may live.”

22. Read more starting in Psalm 51:10.

23. See Ezekiel 36:26 for more.

24. Jeremiah 17:9 and 31:33b says, “I will put my torah within them and on their *lev* I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”



