

Shabbat 02 02 18 Sermon

It's not uncommon in the Ingber home to be biblical. And I don't just mean me reading the Bible or the Torah, you know. When you have three boys under the age of eight, it gets biblical fast. I promise you, this conversation happened this morning.

One of you is the older one. I think you shouldn't react when he says those names to you. Says the older one, but Abba, it's really hard not to react. Says Abba, I know. It's hard, but when you overcome your natural inclination, your reaction, you build a muscle. It becomes second nature. Which my son said, I only need one nature. So one of the things that's really, really hard to do.

One of the things that's really, really hard to do, for me, maybe for you, one of the most difficult things to do, and this is where Torah really gets interesting, because Torah as a book of laws, as a book of history, is really interesting too, but really where it's interesting, where the rubber meets the road, is where the Torah meets the road, as it were. Where Torah meets our life and says to us, how do you develop a skill that will make your life better, make your life more meaningful, more enriching? Where does Torah become a blueprint, not just for becoming a good Jew, but becoming a great human being? That's really the interesting place for me. That's the nexus.

And not just for me, but for all the Hasidic teachers, all of the teachers who have been mystics, it's really where does Torah become a blueprint for better living? And certainly it could be used as a manual for all kinds of external systems to make life better, but really that's not the Torah's work. The Torah really wants to know how to make the inner world better. How to establish features and traits of an awakened heart, an open heart, and attuned mind. That's what Torah wants. Bechol durach echad de'ehu, in all of your ways, know God means, in all of your ways, not just be an obedient individual, but be an illuminated individual. Someone who's on fire for transformation. Someone who's living the talk, not just walking it, but living it.

So of course, one of the most difficult things to do is to live those values. And so I want to talk about a couple of those values, maybe one of them in two different ways. But one of the things that is the most difficult thing in the world for me to do, or maybe for you, is this thing called envy and jealousy.

I'm not going to ask for a show of hands to just prove the point, but just, it's not easy. It's not easy to see something that someone else has and not want it. It's not easy to see someone else's joy and not feel like you're lacking. It's not easy, as the Torah will go on tomorrow morning, to say, to not covet. We covet. Descartes got it wrong. It's, we covet, therefore we are. Coveto ergo sum, or something like that. We covet. We're built that way. We see what somebody else has and we say, I wish I had it.

In fact, the Torah is so deeply steeped in this question of what it is, what's jealousy, what is envy, that it actually makes a radical claim in the beginning of the Torah. A radical claim in the beginning of the Torah is this, is that the conflict that exists in the world is rooted in one moment between two brothers, Cain and Hevel. And Cain, and Hevel, and Hevel, and Cain,

and Cain, and Abel, and Abel, and Cain. That whole myth, that whole story, is a story about what happens when someone feels that someone else got what I deserve. I want it. I run around the house these days going, there's enough room for both of you, both of you, both of you, there's enough room for both of you, there's enough room. But the Torah recognizes that there is an innate human desire to say me, me, me, me. Not you, you, you, and not just only me, but me and not you.

There's a story that the great Yiddishist, I think his name is Michael Weck, is that his name, Michael Weck? He was invited by a friend of mine who wrote a book that we'll get to in a moment called *Forginen*, I'll get to that in a second, but he asked him about this word, and in order to explain this Yiddish word that we're going to get to in a moment called *Forginen*, he told this joke, he said, you know, an angel appears to a man walking down the street, and he says to him, this is your lucky day, the angel says, you can have anything you want in unlimited quantities. The thing is, whatever you get, your neighbor gets, twice as much. It's maddening, thinks the man, and then, he has a solution. I want to lose sight in one eye. It's a very deep Yiddish story, come on.

So here, the term begins with this story of Cain and Abel, each and every one of us is a Cain and Abel, each and every one of us will have a million Cains and Abels in our lives. It won't end when we're four, five, six, because we won't outgrow envy. We won't outgrow grasping. We won't outgrow it naturally. In fact, the entire school of Freudian psychology is rooted in the notion that there will be conflict, not only between the generations, brothers, but fathers and sons, or parents and children, where a parent will actually feel what the Talmud says is impossible to feel.

The Talmud says there are two people that you can never be jealous of, your children and your students. Is that true? Would that that were true? But Freud argued, not only is it true, Freud said it is fundamental to understand a human psychology. We are pre-wired, said Freud, to feel that someone is afraid of us. Someone is jealous of us. The entire Oedipal complex is rooted in that. So it comes as no surprise then to you that two of the Ten Commandments will tell us not to covet. Why would you have to command us to do something that comes naturally? And not only will the Torah tomorrow morning introduce us to the Ten Commandments which will have within it a piece about jealousy and envy, a core piece about jealousy and envy, but it will begin the conversation with an incredible moment that we have to highlight that isn't often highlighted, but it's so beautiful you have to hear it.

So tomorrow morning when we are introduced or we come close to Mount Sinai, we're going to be right at Mount Sinai and as a precursor to that great decalogue, that great revelation, the great fire and brimstone moment, the Torah will reintroduce us to a character named Yitro, Jethro. You might have forgotten who he is. He's a big player. He's essentially the father-in-law of the great leader of the Jewish people named Moses. Jethro, who the Midrash says has seven different names, Reuel, Yeter, Jethro.

The Torah will, first of all, take note of this on a week when once again foreigners and those who are other were highlighted and othered. Just briefly, parenthetically, note that the most important Torah portion arguably in the entire Torah that gives us the Ten Commandments, the cornerstone of Western civilization, begins with a non-Jew arriving at a

Jewish camp and proceeding to teach his son-in-law Torah before his son-in-law stands before God. Jethro is God before God arrives at Mount Sinai. He teaches Moses. Jethro is the first teacher of Torah in that story. So he arrives tomorrow morning.

That's just a parenthesis. Close it. Jethro arrives, and the Torah tells us he brings Zipporah, the wife of Moses, and the two children, and he comes, and he says, and it says that he meets his son-in-law after a long time, But he stopped there most of the Chodonot, כל אשר עשה אדוני לפרעו למצרים על אודות ישראל, את כל התלאה שמצאתם בדרך ואהיה צילם אדוני, verse 8 in chapter 18 says, and Moses told his father-in-law, they're sitting around, he says, Jethro, I've got to tell you all this stuff, but they clearly have a bond.

That's a big deal. When was the last time Moses had a bond with an older man? It was the guy that was running out to kill him, or the guy that abandoned him. So Jethro is his connection, his mentor. He sits and he says, listen, I've got to tell you all these things that happened. And in the normal course of things, his father-in-law, or a father in ancient literature, well, it could be that he's going to be happy for him, maybe, maybe not, but all these wonderful things happened and Moshe became elevated, became the prophet of God, and he tells him all this stuff, and then verse 9, Vayichad Yisro, and Yisro, Yitro, Jethro was happy. The Torah goes out of its way, a Torah that is more than sparse. It never tells us what's going on inside of the characters. Oh, Rebecca was longing, doesn't say that. Rachel was angry, doesn't say that.

Jethro is happy. The Parsha that will teach us the Decalogue, the Parsha that will teach us about what it is to be a good human being, will introduce us to someone who has something the Buddhists called sympathetic joy. And even though the rabbis try to take this word, Vayichad, and make it as if Jethro was still not Jewish, the rabbis say, oh, you see this word, Vayichad, it means that he had little pinpoints on his skin, he was still because he heard about what happened to the Egyptians and he identified with the Egyptians, that's only one bad reading of our rabbis.

In the more enlightened reading, Jethro comes to represent someone who can have sympathetic joy for one other person, he can be happy for another. Someone else's joy, someone else's good thing, someone else's success doesn't limit his success. What would a world like that look like? What would a world like that look like where you hear of someone else's success, there isn't even a moment, or maybe there is, but then you transform it and say, good for you.

I'm happy for you. And here's where the Yiddish word, Fargining, is perfect. Fargining, and I want you all to say this, Fargin, can you say Fargin? One more time. What does it mean? It's from the German, which means, I do not begrudge you. I do not begrudge you. We find it all over Europe and other places, in Holland and in other languages, the sense of Firgun or Farganin means to give you permission.

I open myself to you, I give you full permission. My friend David Zaslow sent me this week this beautiful handbook of Farginin, a Musser-based empowerment model for synagogues, churches, and other non-for-profit leaders and members, all about what it is to work with envy and jealousy, the little looks when somebody gets what you wanted at work, the small intonation that changes when you find out that somebody's been more successful than you

have in business, or in a synagogue, or in a church, your sister, your brother, your uncle, your aunt. At the core of our story, at the core of what tomorrow morning we will read, is the story of a man who was a father figure who was happy for his son-in-law.

By Yitro, he was happy for him. A world where we can imagine ourselves working hard to overcome the natural inclination to say, well, if it's not good for me, then it's not going to make me happy. In a world like that, we are impoverished because we leave out six billion joys that could become a part of our joys. That was a Dalai Lama, not me. He said, how silly to limit your joy just to your own joy. You have six billion others.

And all of it hinges on a perception of the self that ends where my skin ends. All of it begins and ends with what we call otherness. Who's Jethro other? Is Jethro other? Is Jethro an outsider? Outsider of what? He's not Jewish? The rabbis have to convert him very quickly because he seems to be very good character in the Bible, so the rabbis come along and say, oh, he converted. We're looking for it. It's still not there, but he's in there. He converted. He says out loud, now I know God is greater than all the other gods. Okay, conversion. That's a good answer.

Right there. That's the way we should run it now. So what would it be like? What would it be like right now on this weekend where we're going to be doing some deep practice on Sunday? What would it be like right now for the next two or three minutes? If you get to sit up, you know, if you fell asleep, wake up now a little bit.

I want us to do a little practice now for two or three minutes. I'll practice with you, but I'll be standing here. I'll just invite you in the next two minutes to bring into your heart, into your mind, first, for one minute, someone whose success makes you feel overjoyed. That when you think of them, you see them, hear them, feel them, you see them succeeding, whatever it might be, that it doesn't get stuck in the plumbing. It goes through. And then take another minute, really do this practice, and bring into your heart and mind someone whom you cannot feel that for.

Someone in your life or someone you know that when you think of them and you think of their success, there's a little contraction in your heart. Let's do this for the next two minutes, and if you could, with the person for whom it's difficult, try to give them some of that. Maybe say to them, may you be happy. May you be joyous. May you grow and grow and grow. May you be happy. May you be joyous. May you grow and grow and grow. Let's do that for two or three minutes now. So, I don't want you to have to work too hard on Shabbat. My friend, Rev. David Zaslow, said in his book about forgiving, he said, forgive unto others as you would have them forgive unto you, is a paraphrasing of Hillel's work.

This past Tuesday night here at Romemu, we were able to celebrate an incredible moment where we were able to lift up someone who's lifted up so many people with Maggid Yitzhak Buxbaum. And there was such forgiving happening from Chazan Basia to our dear friend Maggid Yitzhak Buxbaum. Deservedly so. But just to watch that rapport, to watch the giving of space, and to watch the openness, and that sense of what would a world look like if we gave each other that kind of permission? What would it look like if we were to ask ourselves at any given moment, what's my forgiven IQ? My forgiven Q? My FQ? How much

sympathetic joy can I allow myself to feel for another who is succeeding, expanding? That's a deep Torah, friends.

And even though a wise 8-year-old told me today that he didn't want a second nature, I would bless him and you and me and all of us with that kind of second nature. That upon hearing the good tidings from a friend, upon seeing the joy and the success of a friend, that we would treat them as if we were treating ourselves with the same joy, the same love, the same connection. Oh, what a world that would be.

So on this Shabbat of raising up, Yitro, in a way, God was forgiving Yitro by giving him the space in the parasha to say hello. The space to be present and to be seen. So would that all of us would be a little bit like that Yitro character, to find people in our lives who come to us and whom we can nourish, and whom we can feed with our own sympathetic joy.

It's a challenge. It's something that we can rise to. But we're going to keep asking you week in and week out, what's your FQ? What's your forgiven Q? God bless each and every one of us with the strength to remember that there is enough, and there's even more if we share the joy of others.

Let's rise.