

Shabbat 08 11 17 sermon

So the last couple of weeks we've been talking here about up, about going up, about elevating, about changing our altitude in our lives, using that phrase up. Two weeks ago we spoke about the power of lifting each other up. And then last week there was a little bit of a ruckus about straightening up, about straighten up.

I certainly didn't mean it in any sexual way. I wasn't meant to say that everybody should be more straight. Certainly not the case. And I certainly didn't mean, as some understood it, in my sermon that I was making a sweeping generalization about capitalism in general, that all landlords are, by definition, not straight, in the ethical and moral sense, God forbid. I certainly didn't mean, and if you haven't heard this, it might be incentive for you to go back and listen what happened when I say, I certainly didn't mean to oversimplify real estate in New York City by implying that the owner of the building in which the West Side Judaica, the great Judaica store of the Upper West Side, was in some way, shape, or form not acting morally or ethically, God forbid. I don't know the full story, it's much more complex. But certainly I stand by what I said, that there is a principle in Torah that is called v'asitah hayashar v'etov, that within a body of literature that has no less than 613 you shalt and thou shalt not's, there is an extra principle called do the right thing.

As if to say that even if you read the book and knew it backwards and forwards, even if you knew the letter of the law, you could still not be on the right side of things. I stand by that. Because I know it in my own person. I know it in my own experience. I know how often I have forgotten about what needs to happen because of what I'm expected to do or feel or say, and not what the moment demands of me. So tonight, I want to begin with this good old neck ache that I had the whole week. And about how that prompted me all week as I sat with why is my neck hurting me so much. And of course, whenever you get an aching pain, I don't know about you guys, I'm definitely not a hypochondriac, but I certainly start to put together symptoms. Nervous. Meningitis. Read about it and go, oh, I got that. Then you read, I got something else. But when your neck hurts, it's very debilitating. Not only is it debilitating, it reminds you, it reminds one, it reminded me of how important it is in directing us. It's hard to listen when you can't turn to face the person who is speaking. Not only that, it's really hard to change direction. If your neck is really hurting you and you want to turn around, it's very nice that you move from the hips like you're some salsa dancer there, that little merengue there. But the neck, it's kind of all connected there, right? It's this thing here.

And it's so interesting because in the Torah, I don't know about you, but maybe you've had that experience before. Maybe you've had that experience about how the body is connected or the metaphors of the body. But forget about the body for a moment.

It had me thinking about other things too, about what it means to change direction, what needs to happen to change direction. What needs to happen for me to turn something around or to do something differently or to have a course correction in my life, yeah? That little thing in my body was so seasonal because here we are, as I said earlier, 40 days from the great turning, the great high holiday period which in our tradition is the great reflection,

introspection, taking account, cheshbon ha-nefesh, where am I? Have I been going on the right direction? Do I need to make a turn? How do I make that turn? And not that it's only a seasonal question. I think about this all the time.

I don't know about you. I think about regret, about choices. We make thousands of choices every single day. I think about choices I've made 20 years ago. I think about choices I will make in a week. And I wonder, is there any wisdom that might help me know if I'm on the right path, if I'm on the right course? What do I need to ask myself so that I make the right decisions? Or if I've made a wrong decision, what do I need to ask myself so I can course correct? It's kind of a... I don't know about you.

I think about that all the time. I imagine a lot of us do. Yeah? So Torah has something to say about that, of course, tomorrow morning. Because the book of Deuteronomy, which is fresh, we've just begun the book of Deuteronomy, just to give you a little context for said book. Deuteronomy, Devarim, is the second book. So called because much of it repeats things that happened before, but not historically, but in a retold way that this is the first history book, as it were.

Moses will revision history, will retell the story over. Many of the incidents in the book of Deuteronomy will be retold. Sometimes it's called Mishneh Torah, the second Torah. The stories are not always the same and the places where they differ are absolutely important. But one thing is clear, that Moshe is the first interpreter of his own text. And Moshe interprets the Torah in the book of Deuteronomy.

We've just begun and the beginning of the book of Deuteronomy is Moshe as a good teacher saying, now listen, kinderlach, listen, kids. Let me tell you what happened over here. And then you did this. And then you did that. And then you did this. But it's not just a retelling. Moshe also adds exhorting. Love that word, exhorting. Moshe wags a finger at them. He says, and here's where you sinned. And here's where you resisted. Here's where you're obstinate.

And that word obstinate appears importantly tomorrow morning where Moshe uses an interesting term for what it means to be obstinate. Moses tells the people tomorrow morning, you were in the desert and you didn't listen because you are an amik she'oref. You are a stiff-necked people. You are a stiff-necked people. I was telling you to go this way. You said, no, we're going. I said, turn around. You said, no, we're going. I told you to go forward. You said, we're going back. Stiff-necked. I couldn't lead you. You refused to be led by me. Stiff-necked. And after Moshe finishes telling how stiff-necked they are and giving them criticism and critique and rebuke and reminders of how bad they were, of how difficult it was to lead them, how resistant they were to hear the word of love, the direction of compassion, the inheritance of expansion, he changes on a dime.

Chapter 10 of the book of Devarim of Deuteronomy begins, ואתה ישראל. Now Israel. מה אדוני? שואל? What does G-d, your G-d, יוד הוה, what does that Presence, שואל? What does that Presence ask of you? אוֹתוֹ, just walk in G-d's ways, love G-d, serve G-d, fear G-d, with all of your heart, with all of your soul, I hope I'm not getting anybody's G-d allergies going here, like if the G-d language just... I'll get to that in a moment.

לשמור את מצוות אדוני ואת חוקותיו, אשר אנחנו מצבכים היום לטוב לך. To observe and keep these practices, these commandments that I have given you today and then these two great words, לטוב לך, for your own good. Two verses that Nechama Leibowitz, the great commentator from Israel says, these two verses encapsulate the entirety of the Torah. Just these two verses. And it begins with this great word, עתה ישראל, and now Israel. You can almost hear the teacher going, like, okay, okay, okay, now.

Ever get that, now? Anybody ever do that, now? What happens there? It brings you fully present. It's a transition point. Moshe says, over there, that was the past. Let's talk about forward, now. Get here. I know that you slept over there, you made mistakes. It's okay. I gave you all kinds of rebuke. I gave you all kinds of mirroring and reflection. I told you all the things you did wrong. עתה זה means with an ayin and now. I'm a great leader.

I want you to change. I want you to transition. I want you to be elevated.

I want you to rise up. I want you to be the best you can be. I want you to evolve.

What do I need you to do? I need you to get here. Because if you're over there, you're going to keep doing it. Get here.

מה אדוני אלוהיך שואל. What does, and now for the God allergy, what does love ask of you? But to serve love. To surrender to love. To build love. To frame love. Love in action. Love in quiescence. Love in surrender. Love sitting down. Love standing up. Love walking out. Love working. Love familying. Love praying. Love politicking. Love resisting in Charlottesville. Love! אדוני אלוהיך, God your God. What does love ask of you? It's as if Moshe at this moment after exhorting the people and telling them all of the stuff that they have done wrong here, here.

All the things they did wrong, now Moshe wants to say, here, this is it. Here's the thing. Here's the clue for moving forward. Because you're going to go into the land and you're going to do the same things you did back there. Because don't get me wrong, Moshe says, you think that it was bad in Egypt? You had your own suffering and servitude in Egypt? It was narrow there? You think it's going to be great when you go to the promised land? There are going to be things in the promised land too. You're going to get to the promised land, Moshe says in this week's parasha tomorrow.

He says, let's contrast. You were slaves here because of destitution and degrading behavior and undignified labor. You're going to be over here and you're going to build homes. And you'll forget about truth and love. The suffering of Egypt will give way to the apathy of the promised land. There will be many things in the promised land. Your trials and tribulations, your vicissitudes will not end just because your geographic GPS marker is going to be different, Moshe says. So let me give you a little clue, Moshe says. Here are these two little verses. Nehemah Leibowitz says, these are the essence of the Torah. These two little verses, chapter 10. And now as we'll get present, here's your marching orders.

What does God ask of you? Says the great Hasidic Rebbe Elimelech of Lezhniz, in Noam, Elimelech, the word to ask of you also means to borrow from you in Hebrew. And this great 18th century Hasidic master said, what does God borrow from you? What does God borrow from you? And says Elimelech of Lezhniz, what do you mean what does God borrow from

you? You. God borrows you for God's work. Love borrows you for love's work. Each and every one of us says, the great Elimelech of Lezhenz is a klee, is a vessel. And God says, hey, do you mind if I borrow you? I got work to do in the world.

Here, come with me, let's go do the work together. I need to borrow you. I need to borrow you.

Ma'adonai sho'el mi'imach? What does God sho'el? What's the... What is God borrowing from you? What is love asking from you? Can I borrow you for a lifetime? I'll give you back. Imagine if that was our question before we did anything. Imagine if the question we asked ourselves, whether we're walking out the door and deciding what to wear, whether or not we were on our way to the work that we have chosen or has chosen us, deciding to go to sho'el, not to go to sho'el, to buy eco-friendly, not buy eco-friendly, to go to sea free to be you and me at the JCC this past Monday night or not.

Imagine if before each and every one of us and our children and our children's children was the question, is what I'm about to do, say, think, feel, behave? Does it make me a stronger vessel that God might want to borrow? Replace God with love, goddess, Shiva, Shakti, Buddha, Dharma, whatever you want, the divine, the goodness, the love in the world. Am I a vessel fit to transmit that into the world? And does this action, this activity, does it contribute to that vessel's creation or not?

I'm sitting at home this week and I kind of had time to be at home, which was unusual, and as I was going to bed one night, and it happens, maybe it never happens to you guys, but it happened. I got into a little bit of a fight with one of my kids. Anybody ever had... No, I'm not going to ask you all, because I know no one here has ever had that happen. And I could not sleep. I was so upset. I felt like I was back in the desert again with Moses saying, you know what? You did it again. Remember that golden calf we talked about? There it is. Whoops, there it is. And I was... You know what that means in Yiddish? I was like, my mind was like, oh my goodness. I woke up early the next day. I found a 24-hour pharmacy and I bought him a card, came back, put it on his bed.

And in my mind and heart, I was thinking about this Torah from Elimelech. I wondered to myself, if I had asked myself the night before, is this action, this feeling, this place, is it going to build the vessel for God to borrow from me or not? Will it shatter it? Might I have behaved differently? And I don't know. And then the next day it happened again. And right before, the same conversation, the same moment, I stopped, I took a breath, I said, okay, what will build this vessel God wants to borrow? What will build love's vessel? Havayah, compassion. In what way, shape or form will this next moment build a vessel that is worth borrowing, that God will say, I still say God, sorry, I want to borrow you, David. I want to work through you, David.

And it shifted. What would we do differently? Were we to know that truth? And what would this community and communities like it, what would the world look like if when we went to do something, we asked that question? The question that Moses is giving as a clue to the rest of the Torah. He's saying, you want to receive the land? Here is, Listen up, Ephraim.

Listen up. The next time you have a moment, don't forget that God's borrowing you. She's borrowing you. It's bothering you. It's borrowing you. That is who you are. That is your *raison d'être*. That is why you are here in the world. And everything you do matters.

You are created in the image of that absolutely irreplaceable, irreplicable image of the Divine. And every word you blog and write will either contribute to the vessel that you are to transmit that love to the world or it won't. And the greatest sin that we can ever have, the greatest mistake is the sense that what we do does not matter.

The choices we make don't matter. And you, Israel, what, my Lord, to whom you ask from Mark, wants to borrow each and every one of us for that work? Thomas Merton, the great Christian mystic, monastic, wrote this. He wrote, We do not exist for ourselves alone.

It is only when we are fully convinced of this fact that we begin to love ourselves properly and thus also love others. What do I mean by loving ourselves properly? He asked. I mean, first of all, desiring to live, accepting life as a very great gift and a great good. Not because of what it gives us but because of what it enables us to give to others. Not because of what it gives to us but what it enables us to give to others. God says, I want to borrow you to give you away to others. You will be my conduit for that energy in the world. It shifts us as we are now on the way towards Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur.

Tonight and tomorrow and the next day after, all week long, we are going to make a thousand choices. Some bigger, some smaller. Some we will completely forget a minute after we've made them and some we will never forget and neither will others. And the question for all of us is, what question you ask yourself, God bless you, what question you ask yourself? The question I ask myself before I move to change my behavior, to change my life, to relax my stiff-necked obstinacy, to change direction.

So here's my charge. You don't have to do it. No one's making you. Try it on. It won't hurt. I'm not even asking you to change what you do. I'm not even asking you to write it down or to make any commitments for one day, for half a day. Ask yourself this question. Is what I'm about to do, is what I'm about to say, is how I'm about to behave contributing to this vessel that is being borrowed by the one who created us, who loves us, and that needs our presence and our unique contribution to build a world of love, especially at this moment in time.

Please rise.