

Shabbat 080417 sermon

So this week, and I guess beginning last week and maybe the week before that, we talked a little bit about, about the energy of moving up. The energy of moving up, the energy of Hem-am-klavi-yakum, that after Tisha B'Av, which is a day of falling down, of breaking down, of walls being destroyed, we talked about the energy of moving up. And even last Friday night when we spoke here, the message was to lift each other up. Lift each other up. Right? Echa Esa Levadi, Moses said, How can I carry each of you by myself? We need to lift each other up. And I want to talk about another kind of up this evening.

And it's very much related to something that happened on Tisha B'Av, of Erev Tisha B'Av on Monday as I walked out of my apartment here on the Upper West Side. I saw someone in my building and we began to talk about, you know, current events here on the Upper West Side, things that are happening, and we kind of both casually mentioned that maybe some of you have heard this, that the West Side Judaica, the lone Judaica store on the Upper West Side, one of only two Judaica stores in Manhattan that are left, will be closing at some point. Probably in January, there was another increase in their rent, and they made the papers, and there was a lot of, a lot of concerned people who really love the West Side Judaica. It's a staple of the community. It's a place where you can walk in, and even though those who run it are Hasidic, they treat every single person that comes in with equal value and curiosity. It's an amazing place.

It's an amazing focal point of so many things that are happening on the Upper West Side that are beautiful, and so I was walking with my friend who also was lamenting this on the day of Tisha B'Av, of the ninth day of Av, the saddest day of the year, and as we walked, we began inevitably to talk about real estate. What else in New York City? Real estate and the responsibility of the landlords, because, of course, I naively said, well, how silly is it that this is going to happen? And he said, well, you know, it's not that silly. Of course, I'm lamenting. He said, but you know, that's kind of the way capitalism works.

It's the Internet. All kinds of things are happening, so they can't sell as much Judaica. You can always get it on Amazon or some such thing. It's just the way it goes. It's kind of, kind of Darwinian. It's kind of, that's the way it goes. And I said, no, I think that there's something wrong here. I said, I think that there's some responsibility that the landlord has towards the West Side Judaica. I mean, it is a staple of our community. It's part of the warp and woof of who we are here. It's like it's, and you could say that about a million other shops on the Upper West Side and other neighborhoods around.

And he said, no, no. And then he said to me, but you know, the guy who bought the building, I don't know if this is true, bought it for \$47 million in cash. At which point I said, does he really need the rent? He said, well, that's not the way it works, David.

That's not the way it works. And it really bothered me. It really bothered me. I said to myself, is there some place where what is right and what is good are not necessarily right? They don't always line up. Or I would say definitely what is just and what is legal and what is moral and right are not always the same thing. And I think about that. And not only because

of this unique instance with the West Side Judaica, but it happens every day in my family. Inevitably my two little boys, one just turned eight and the other one almost six, will have a conversation like this. It'll be something like, will one of you please pick up that thing? And I'll say, well, it's not mine. Why should I pick it up? And I'll say, well, you're right. It's not yours, but you should pick it up. Straighten up, I say.

Straighten up. Straighten up. The connotation of straighten up usually is let me tidy up, let me straighten up. But straighten up also means something else. And some of you might have this experience what it means to be straight. We often use this geometric figure of what it is to be straight, and not only in the, obviously in the sexual orientation, but what it means to be straight when it comes to ethics and morality. And we say someone is crooked. We have this image. And it's not only us.

It actually appears in the Torah this week. In tomorrow morning's Parsha, Vaetchanan, which is chock full of all kinds of amazing things, the Shema, all manner of commandments, Moses speaks to the people and he says to them, not once, not twice, not three times, over and over again, make sure that you keep all of the commandments, you observe them. God will reward you over and over again. And then he says something really interesting, really strange. He says, Watch over, keep, observe all of these commandments, all of these edicts, all of these laws. So that you will do what is straight and what is good in the eyes of God.

Yashar, the word Yashar, Yosher. Can you all say that? Yosher. Say it again. Yosher. One more time. Yosher means to be straight. Yashar. God says, Moses says in God's name, You know what? It's possible. But here are all of the things that you have to do. Here are all the things I'm telling you, be a good girl and boy. Here are the list of all of the expectations, all of the obligations, all of the things that are, quote-unquote, what is expected of you. And then he comes along with this sentence that, of course, perplexes the rabbis.

What could it possibly mean, do what is Yashar? What does it mean to do what is Yashar, what is straight? We've already been told explicitly, do this, this, this, in a very minute detail. What could be added, say the rabbis, by this term Yashar? And not just Yashar, which means straight, but it says, Yashar v'tov, straight and good. And it is translated in the JPS Tanakh, Yashar is translated as, do what is right.

Do the right thing. But it doesn't mean right. It means that which is straight. To straighten up. To be straight. When we say straight, we say, oh, straight. And straight. And Rashi here, the great medieval exegete says, what does it mean when G-d says, not just to keep the mitzvot, but to be straightened up? This means, says Rashi, *zubshara, lifnin mishura sadin*. This means to be compromising and go beyond the letter of the law.

Rashi and Maimonides both here say that it is possible to be somebody who is punctilious, who does everything that is expected of you, and you have the law on your side. You can quote chapter and verse. You can say this is not the way capitalism works. You can say that if I were to give in and make an exception in this unique instance, then what would be of the structures, the systems? But Rashi says, this is what G-d wants in the Torah. This is a moment in the Torah that says there is something beyond what is written in the book. There is a law that supersedes the laws that are obvious, that are codified, that are canonized.

There is something else. There is another dimension. There is just be straight. Do the right thing. Be good. It is so crazy because it becomes so abstract, and of course it is so wide open and amorphous, it becomes so philosophical.

I can hear you all thinking on some level, great, but one person is Yashar, one person is straight, is another person... how do we... Is there a basic moral intuition of what is right? Tal, will you please pick up that baseball hat? It is not mine, but please pick it up.

You know, it is funny because on the day of Tisha B'Av, on the saddest day of the Jewish calendar, I traveled up to Ramah in Nayak. I went up to a day camp in Nayak to teach the teachers up there. My son happens to go to that camp, and I went up to the camp to teach about... I know about a lot of teachers. And I told him a story, just brought up one story from the Talmud. It is one of my favorite stories.

It appears in Trakhi Ta'anit, and it is called, The Rabbi and the Ugly Man. And the story goes something like this. The rabbi is coming back from having learned a lot of Torah, and he was really feeling kind of full of himself, literally. He literally was, it says in the text, He was like full of himself. He learned a lot of Torah. And the story, of course, is constructed, but it is a great image. He is on a donkey, and he is kind of strolling, He is on the lip of the Jordan River. And the Torah again says, and he was really happy that he learned a lot of Torah. He had a guy appear to him, and the text says, He was super ugly. Super ugly. So you know what this great rabbi who learned a lot of Torah did? Anybody know? He said to him, I am sorry, excuse me. The ugly man says to the rabbi, Shalom Aleichem Rabbi.

Hi, rabbi. And the rabbi doesn't say anything. He is completely silent. He doesn't say a word back. And then when he does open his mouth, you know what he says? He says, wow, you are really ugly. Is everyone in your city as ugly as you are? And you know what the response of the ugly man was? He says, I don't know.

It was a great comeback. He says, I don't know. Go tell the artist who made me that he doesn't know how to make beautiful vessels. So the rabbi has a moment in the story, right? You get this? He gets it really, like he gets it back in his face. And he is like, oh, deep. He gets off of the donkey.

He throws himself on the floor. And he says, please forgive me. Please forgive me. And the ugly man says, I will not forgive you until you go again to the artist who made me and tell him he doesn't know how to make beautiful vessels. And the end of the story is that the Talmud says that the reason why we use a reed to write a Torah is because a reed is flexible. And flexibility creates holiness. And both of these individuals were not flexible. They didn't go beyond what was expected. He should have forgiven him. He shouldn't have. A level of gemishut, a level of flexibility, a level of being able to bend, not to be rigidly straight, but to be able to be straight and flexible is a requirement for redemption.

Rabbi Yochanan said, the temple was destroyed because the Jews at the time didn't know how to bend the rules. They didn't know how to be generous. They didn't know how to just be yashar, just to be straight, just to be basically decent and good. And so I was up at this camp and this kid looks at me and he says, Rabbi, I get the story, but why did you tell it on the day of the destruction of the temple? And I said, what? Using language to demean

others and to treat them as if they were objects, to talk about them as if they were things and not infinite beings. And losing a sense of what is yashar, what is straight, what is obvious, not what is written down, but what is a basic moral intuition of what is good.

I took a cab, I went to a New York Yankees game with my boys this week. And we took an Uber and there was a Syrian refugee who had been here for two years, 24 years old, from Homs. And so that was the first city in which the Civil War began and he's been here and we were talking and he just was just a decent, decent person it seemed. Obviously I don't know him, but he seemed like a very decent person.

So when I got to Yankee Stadium, my father-in-law said, you can't come in with your bag. There's a bag check, but you can't come in with your bag. And I had a bag full of stuff for the kids. And so I turned to this guy and I said, would you mind taking my bag back to where we came from? Yes. I don't mind. Decency. Ya sitah yashar viatov, do what's right.

And imagine a world, everybody, imagine a world where instead of only doing what was expected of us or what we thought we should be doing, we actually went beyond that. We imagine scenarios of adding holiness. We imagine scenarios where it's not just what is expected in the moment or what is assumed in the moment, but what we bring to the moment that we didn't imagine beforehand we could do.

On Tisha B'Av night, when we were all sitting in the plaza funeral home, I said to those who were gathered that a friend of mine had said, you know, I don't know if you're gonna fast this Tisha B'Av on this ninth day of Av, but one thing I do know, he said, if all you do all day is sit and fast, it's not enough. Because we live in a world where that which is expected, we have to go beyond it, we have to do what is right. And he said to me, you know what, David, you should give the amount of money that you would have used to eat on that day to somebody else.

Just go somewhere and give somebody the food, go to a food pantry, go to a... So there was a congregant in our community who wrote to me after that evening and said that as much as he thought, as I told him that, that it was slightly Pollyannish and maybe it wouldn't really work, he woke up the next morning and as he made his way towards work, he saw like a food stand. And he went over to the man in the food stand, it was a halal, kind of a... I guess kosher for Muslims, it was a halal, one of these lunch places. And he went over and he said, you know, today is a day where Jews around the world are fasting in commemoration of the destruction of the temple, which was destroyed because we didn't go beyond what was expected of us. Because we engaged in hatred that was khinam, that was free, that was baseless hatred. But today, I want to fix that with baseless love. I want to give love freely.

I want to straighten up. So here's \$20, how much will that buy for someone today in lunch? And the man looked at him, he said, it's a Jewish holiday? He said, yes. And you're buying other people lunch? He said, yes. He said, it buys three lunches, \$6 each. And then he said, I'm gonna buy three lunches with you. And we're gonna give them away. And my friend said, he wants to see peace come one halal stand at a time. But there's an ethic here. There's an ethic of generosity, there's an ethic of what is yashar.

There's an ethic. There's a story in the Talmud that I want to finish with about a certain rabbi named Rabbi Barchana. This Rabbi Barchana had hired flat rate or, I don't know, schleppers, moishies, some movers, and they broke his very expensive wine. So he took their cloaks, he took their clothing as payback. They came and they told a greater rabbi. And this rabbi said to his apprentice, you better give back their cloaks, their clothing. And this first rabbi who lost some very expensive wine said, is that really the law? Don't they owe me? He said, the law is you should give back their cloaks. And let me quote it for you. It's from Proverbs.

It says, so that you learn to be good and straight. So he gave back their clothing and then they came to him and they said, not only do we need our clothing but we're poor. You gave us our clothing but we need food as well. Please pay us for our day's work. And he thought, no way. How can I pay them for their day's work when they broke my bed, they broke my wine, they broke everything. And so he went back to his rabbi and he said, Master, is that the halakha? Is that what I'm supposed to do? Should I give them their day's wages? They don't deserve it. And so this rabbi, his master said, indeed give back, give them their daily wage.

And here's the quote. If you want to know where the law is, it is in Proverbs where it says, and the paths of the righteous shall be straight. The word Yisrael, Israel, is made up of the word Yashar El. To be an Israelite is often seen as someone who wrestles with God. But many of the mystics of the tradition say that Israelite means Yashar, one who is straight. One who can be counted upon to do what's right even if it's not the letter of the law, even if it's not obvious how capitalism will continue if we allow Judaica stores to continue to provide us with teletot and other essentials. There's a way to be standing up by being straightened up. There's a way to respond to what is expected of us in the moment by being basically decent and good. I have a fundamental belief that if we live this way the world would change. It might sound utopic, but I'm a rabbi.

I certainly can imagine a community where we went beyond the letter of the law, where we had six people over for a Friday night and we saw one more person and we said, will you please join us? Where we weren't really expected necessarily to talk to everyone on the way out, but we made it our business to talk to one person more than we talked to last week. I can certainly imagine a community that is Yashar, that does what is right, even though you're walking out, you see papers on the floor, you say, you know what, I'm going to pick it up, I'm going to pitch in. I can imagine so many levels at which becoming Yashar, being straight and doing what's right can make this community a better community, our families, more Yashar.

So as we make our way up, up, up, towards our Shoshana Yom Kippur, let's lift each other up and let's straighten up.

Please rise.