

Sermon Shabbat 08 31 18

So, if you've been in Romemu before, or maybe you've listened, maybe you might have heard me speak of the Torah, of course, of the children. My own children, I often put myself in a very precarious position in terms of their future by quoting them at various moments. But it's hard not to, because it's really profound.

Our children, a friend of mine has a Pirkei Yiladim, you know, that we have an ethics of the fathers in our tradition, and he kept an ethics of his children. Kind of created a workbook of all the things his kids taught him. So, some of you heard Torah from Behr, and some of you heard Torah from Tal. Tonight there's a Torah from, second Torah of the night from Ur, our 27-month-old little boy. He's now want to do things, and when he does them, he lets us know that he did them. And not only does he tell us that he did them, but he also tells us that he liked what he did.

It's not an uncommon occurrence in our house, for Ur to come over to us in the morning and say, I did it. I really did it. About a whole manner of things. Or when he likes something, saying, I like it. I do like it. As if the repetition is to confirm that maybe we weren't sure when he said it the first time, or maybe he's discovering what it is to name a moment of power, a moment of achievement, a moment of something that was with his name. I did it. I really did do it. That moment is a profoundly important moment in his own self-discovery, in his own autonomy, in his own sense of his own agency.

I did it. That sense of accomplishment, a sense of being proud of himself, being able to enumerate all of the things that he did. And of course, on the outside, any of us who would be sitting in the room, after the first ten times would be like, okay, that was cute, but now it's a little bit bordering on craziness. Do you really need to give us a list of all the things that you've done in the last five minutes? I did this, I did that, I did this, I did, I did, I did, I did. Who but a parent would actually find that enjoyable? It's kind of the verbal analog of having somebody rip out their iPhone now and go through every vacation picture until they find the one that, you know, where they're like waiting, you know, wait, I'm getting there. But look at this, isn't that cute, wasn't that? And look at that smile.

So, it's a big deal. It's a big deal on some level to be able to say, I did it. And yet, many of us find that kind of bordering on boasting. If we were to be adults and we were to walk around and be like, oh, I did it. Did you see I did it? I did it. That was me. Oh, I opened the door to that cab, did you see that? I did it. Me.

And yet, in tomorrow morning's wisdom of the week, our weekly wisdom, the portion tomorrow is Ki Tavo. When you'll come into the land, the Torah tells us, you ought to bring what's called Bikurim, first fruits. The ancient rite of first fruits was a profoundly religious moment. The pilgrim would come with a special basket called a Teneh, very strange word, Teneh, T-E-N-E-H. A Teneh, bring this basket. And the Teneh would be placed before the priest. And then we have in the Torah tomorrow morning one of the oldest rites, R-I-T-E-S, one of the oldest rites in ancient wisdom literature, what the proclamation of the first fruits would look like. This proclamation, this actual rite that was to be read. A read rite. And here it is, the actual words.

First fruits, you'll come to the priest, and you will tell him this whole piece. Come to God, to the holy place and say, I burned all the holy things that needed to be cleaned out. I've also given my tithes to the Levite.

In other words, I'm taxed well. I didn't avoid taxes this year. I've given to the almana, to the widow, and to the orphan, and to the stranger. And then this great line.

All of the things you God, you sacred law, you priest, you Levite, all of the rules. I did everything you asked of me.

Everything. Everything. I'm yelling because it's hot and people are falling asleep, and I just want to wake you up.

I do know what I'm going to say next, I do. I did everything you asked. I cleaned the house, I brought the first fruits, I placed the mirror on the altar, and then I'm going to tell you that I did it. I did it. Like everything you told me to do, I did it. And I didn't forget. The text says, you have to say, Like, just stop for a moment, parenthesis on the sermon. Really? I have to tell God, I didn't forget? Of course you didn't forget, you're standing here. I remembered, clearly.

We come before God in the mitzvah of bikurim, in the obligation to bring our first fruits, and part of the obligation of being proud of our first fruits, and offering them to God, is to say, Yes, these fruits belong to you, God. I'm lucky to be living in this country, I'm lucky to have all the things that I have, but I can own something. I'm not just that I can own something, I am obligated to stand before the Holy One, and in the most boastful posture, say, Yes, me. Lo avartim mi mitzvatecha ve lo shachachti. Everything you ask of me, I did it. I did it. I did do it.

The great Rav Kook, the first chief rabbi of Palestine, Rav Avram Yitzchak Cohen-Kook, the great mystic and philosopher, and humanist, and deep psychologist said, You have here a vidui, you have here a confession, but it isn't a regular confession, the kind that many of us will be taking part in, and on September 19th and 20th, when we'll stand and say, What a schlepper I was. I missed the mark. I screwed up, I misstepped. I was egotistical, I was apathetic, I was jealous, I was small, I was angry. That confession, that vidui, we know. We know the sing song. That's a typical confession, a confession that is the most common form of confession. It is the high holiday confession. It is the acknowledgement of having missed the mark.

And Rav Kook said in reading tomorrow morning's portion, Don't forget that there's a vidui mashlim. There's a confession that compliments the I missed the mark confession. And it goes something like this, Sometimes I did love. Sometimes I did be generous. Sometimes I did something that was wonderful. Sometimes I was selfless. Sometimes I didn't forget to do what was asked of me. Sometimes the vidui mashlim, the complimentary confession.

And every year, we arrive at this portion right before we enter the high holidays. To remember that it is so hard to look at yourself in the mirror and be honest when the honesty's price of that honesty is self-loathing. It is so hard to look ourselves in the mirror

and be willing to admit our mistakes if we expect ourselves to be superhuman. It is so hard to do the work of making amends when we can't even make amends with the part of us that we have loathed. We bring our first fruits to that self. We bring our first fruits to that child. To that little person. To that adult child. And say, we are going to really be honest. And if we're going to be really honest, let's talk about some of the good things you did. Because those will be what will hold you in good stead to hear and taste some of the bad medicine. Some of the painful medicine.

Hard to imagine this, but we studied this text from Rav Nachman of Breslov, the great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of the Hasidic movement. Rav Nachman said that we are required to look at each and every human being and see a good thing in them. To judge them favorably. Chayav adam. La'adun et kol adam l'chav z'chut afilo hur shagamur. Judge everyone favorably. Then Rav Nachman, in the 18th century, dealing with people who were depressed and who thought that the only way to improve themselves was to beat themselves up. Rav Nachman, in that text, makes a profound turn and says, And even you, even you find a good nikudah. Even you, even the reader, even the one who is responsible to see others in a good light, see yourself in a good light. There's no one so bereft, Rav Nachman says, that they can't walk in on the high holidays and say, you know what? I've done everything you asked. Maybe not everything. We fall short. Our first fruits are not always the best. If we were to count the number of times a day that we treat ourselves in a way that we would never allow someone else to treat a loved one. Painful.

So what would that look like in the world? What would that look like tonight? If tonight were meant to be Shomer Shabbat, to observe Shabbat would be that you would observe the number of times you give yourself the benefit of the doubt tonight. Try it for ten minutes. Ten minutes of, you know what? Maybe there was a good moment there for me.

So often we think that we will change the world outside and then it will be different. And so often our own judgments, our own shortcomings, our own self-criticism becomes the lens through which we perceive the world. Don't get me wrong, everyone. The world is difficult now. There are plenty of things to judge. There's plenty of work to do. But if we could spend a couple of minutes with ourselves over the next couple of weeks and imagine our favorite uncle, our favorite cousin, our best friend. Imagine them soothingly speaking to us about all the things that we have to finish, all the work that we have to do, all of the avodah. Maybe that's what it means, tshuva me'ahava.

That's maybe the meaning of returning through love. Returning through love. So in the name of two great human beings who were buried today, John McCain and Aretha Franklin, two human beings who, on such a profound, profound level, called us to our higher selves in many ways. Invoke their presence. Invoke the presence of tshuva me'ahava.

And let's rise.