

Shabbat 06 08 18 Sermon

I tell you, I had such an amazing, amazing weekend last weekend together with Rabbi Jessica and myself and Rabbi Mir Rivera and Rabbi Josh Buchan. We were out in L.A. for a public-facing conference for something called the Jewish Emergent Network. It's such an amazing network of seven communities across the country. Rome was part of those seven communities who are emergent. Whatever that might mean, we share something together as emergent communities, emergent. We're kind of, something creative happening, something new.

And so we got together as a group to both celebrate the two years of the first cohort. Rabbi Josh was our fellow. And to welcome in our newest rabbi, Rabbi Mir Rivera. And to participate in this public conference where people came to learn what we've discovered and to share in our insights.

But if you were to ask me what was the one word that was the word that was most often repeated around the conference, it was vision. That leaders and communities that emerge or have novelty or are creative or are renewing themselves are in some way visionary. A group of visionaries or individuals, usually a collective, that have a dream, they have an aspiration, they have an image of what things might look like. They have a chazon, as it were, they have a vision. So from that beautiful, powerful visioning that took place last weekend, I want to talk tonight a little bit about eyes, about vision. Maybe not the vision in the sense of a renewal community. Maybe not in the sense of a disruptive innovator. But a simpler form of vision that each and every one of us participates in and maybe we get it right, maybe we don't.

There's something very powerful about eyes in our tradition. There's something very powerful about the way that we see the world. And tomorrow morning, when we open up our story, when we talk about our wisdom text, we're going to begin with a story about spies.

The parasha of tomorrow morning, Shlach L'cha, this weekend, is dedicated to an episode in chapter 13 and then 14 of the book of Numbers. And in some ways, the story of the spies, of course, will connect to the end of the parasha tomorrow morning also in a very odd way and a very beautiful way. But let me begin by saying that the story of the spies, maybe some of you are familiar with it, maybe you're not.

Let me give a quick review. Out of nowhere, the Israelites are in the desert and everything is going hunky-dory. It's all great and everything is perfect. They're rebelling here and there. Things are moving along. And out of nowhere, there's a desire or some commandment from God for spies. It would seem to be that it comes from God later on in the book of Deuteronomy when Moses recounts a story, it seems to be that it was the people's desire. In either direction, there's a desire for there to be a group, a posse of people to go into the land and bring back information. Shlach L'cha Anashim.

And the story unfolds where 12 very, very important individuals, princes, the heads of the tribes are sent out into the land. They are told very specifically that Moses, that you are to

go to the land and in very specific directions, And you are to come to the land. Go tell us the land that is being settled. Is it good or is it not good? What are the cities? Are they fortified cities or not? And over and over again in Moses' instructions to the 12 spies, he uses the word ma over and over again. And go ahead and count it there in your Bibles in chapter 13. Um ma. And what? A series of questions, inquiries, interrogations. Moses asked the 12 spies to use their eyes to ask questions and to bring back information. And if you know the story, don't spoil it for the person next to you, but just a reminder.

They come back and what happens, not good. If you grew up on Kedem wine or Manischewitz, you could see the big grapes that were there. It's great, everything there is huge. It's true, it's a land that flows with milk and honey, but no, no, no, it's very dangerous there. 10 of the 12 spies come back with evil reports. And in the answer to all of the questions that Moses begins with an open inquiry, um ma, they come back with, we'll tell you ma, it's bad news. 2 of the 12 say no, it's okay. Fundamentally, of course, the story is at least about 2, maybe 3, maybe 10 things. But let's talk about 1. But first, 2 that I always bring to mind.

The story of the spies always reminds me that the nearer we get to our destination, the more we slip, slide away. That at the moment, in many people's lives, when they're about to acquire the very thing that they worked their entire lives for, they are about to take it, we get scared. Call it cold feet, call it a Jonah complex, call it whatever you will, the excitement of the thing we wanted most sometimes scares us.

A friend of mine once said the 2 great disappointments in life are not getting what you wanted and getting what you wanted. The second thing that comes to mind always when I read this story for me is when I imagine how terrifying it is when we don't know something. The fear of the unknown is the other theme that the spies always recounts for me, the scary what is on the other side of the Jordan River, what's on the other side of this job, of this relationship. It's scary. Even great leaders show cold feet when faced with uncertainty and that which is unknown. But the third theme that I'd like to raise tonight and one which is so relevant for me in my life, maybe in your life, maybe around us, is the problem of vision.

You see, the spies brought back a fearful report and where the inquiry, the ma that Moses had asked them to ask, umah ha'aretz, umah, umah, in the place of inquiry, in the place of question, of mystery. They bring back certainty. And the kind of certainty that is al ha'gavan, one Hasidic master would say, it's on the surface. Moses asked them to bring back depth and they bring back surface. Moses asked them to know the inner landscape of the land and to know their own inner landscape and they bring back big grapes. Moses asked them for depth and they bring back surface.

And here is one of the great problems of vision. The faultiness of our eyes to see what isn't visible. Or more accurately, that we humans are both surface and depth, seen and unseen, known and unknowable. We are comprised of both answers and questions. We are comprised of what, ma and also lama, why? When Moses asked them to bring back what is it on the inside, what is the depth, they bring back what they saw with their eyes and not what they knew in their hearts faith demanded of them. They made the cardinal sin of being led astray by eyes that only see what's in front of them and not eyes that imagine what could be.

And in this they disclose, they display a deeply human problem that I struggle with, that you struggle with, that we all struggle with, which is you never know. You never know who is before you. We never know the one who stands right next to us or behind us or across the way in our apartment building or even sleeping in our own bed. We are infinite repositories of surprise if those we are with have eyes that are real eyes and real eyes. That the one before us is unfathomably deep. And even though surfaces are important and we move through sliding surfaces in an urban reality and in a daily experience, we brush shoulders with infinity. We lean against the mystery in the subway. God incarnate makes our coffee for us. And we slide around each other and that's true.

But there's so much more. At the end of the Parsha we are told that the very thing that the spies were told to do, to go and bring back information, is a source for this odd thing called these fringes, these edges at the end of our talitot, at the end of our prayer shawls. These funny things are brought in the very Parsha tomorrow morning at the end of the Parsha. In a very beautiful wordplay the Torah says, make these pointed out strings, twisted strings, spiral strings, so that your eyes so that you not be led astray by your eyes. That you not do the spy thing. These are pointing to depths.

Remember the depths that the spies missed. Remember that at the edge of every garment there is still something that awaits. At the end of every edge and every boundary there is still something yet to be discovered. At the end of every corner there is a rounding that must take place that brings us back towards relationship, towards community, towards the mystery of each other together, that binds us and ties us. This is the optical problem, the ocularity that is a clouded, where we don't see each other in our infinite depth.

It's not hard to see how this is operative this morning when we heard about the death of Anthony Bourdain. Someone whose show was about parts unknown, about the mystery of other cultures through food. He was much bigger than that. Who didn't give off. There was no way of knowing. People said we had no idea. Kate Spade, aleihem ha-shalom, her husband saying that he would never have known. We walk around with people whose depths we don't have time to ask about. Our own depths that we have a problem disclosing. And all around us a yearning, a longing to connect.

Frank Bruneau, when he wrote this afternoon about these two tragic deaths, writes, how powerfully it speaks to the discrepancy between what we see in people on the outside and what they're experiencing on the inside. Between their public faces and their private realities. Between their visible swagger and their invisible pain. Parts unknown. That was true of Bourdain and that was true of Spade. And that's true of every one of us.

Their deaths happened in a week when there was newly released government statistics that revealed a staggering increase in suicides amongst Americans. More than 25% rising from 1999 to 2016. And here he writes, experts worry that this trajectory reflects a breakdown in social bonds and in community.

It's unclear how these two individuals fit into that picture. But I couldn't help but be shattered reading that. Knowing that last weekend with visionaries we stood on a beach with a group of rabbis and our dear friend Rabbi Amichai Alevi had us standing around in a

circle and asked us to bind our tzitziot to each other and to create a circle of prayer shawls bound by the fringes, by the place beyond the line. Beyond the place where we're willing to go. The question we're willing to ask. The depth we're willing to see.

As Rabbi Jessica said weeks ago with the listening that invites us to have someone else speak through our own powerful listening. I wonder and I worry about those who walk around in this community or around in my building or around in my office who have the invisible pain that I don't see because my eyes don't realize that we can stop with surfaces if we could only see with your eyes source. If you could give us eyes to see the beauty and the depth, the surfaces and the hidden.

What would the world look like in that way? How would we treat each other? Isn't that the goal of all spiritual and religious practice? To see with God's eyes, whatever you call God, to see with eyes that are not satisfied with just surfaces, with just screens, with two-dimensional reality when before us there was an infinity. It's a tall order everybody. They didn't bring your burger just the way you want it and so this infinity of God is going to get your complaints. We walk in that reality. We struggle with that reality but that is our aspiration postcard. That's my prayer for me, for you, for all of us.

What would it be like if I had real eyes? If instead of walking away I ask that one question, that one more moment and if I made myself available to heal the things and hear the things that others are longing to share. Every time I put on my tallit, every time I wear my prayer shawl, I remember the spies and I grab hold of these reminders that point towards depth and I say, God give me eyes to see the depths. Give me the patience to listen. Give me the wisdom to ask the questions and to remain open.

May God bless each and every one of us this Shabbat to ask one more question before closing the conversation. Show one more moment of concern, one more moment of compassion, one more softening to another. And may God bless all of us to be a community and within communities where those who are struggling with the distance between how they project themselves into the world and how they are in their own inner sanctum, that that is not the community that we live in. That we are a community that invites that closing of the gap. A courageous community that invites people to show us their true colors. True colors, they're beautiful.

Please rise.