

Romemu Sermon 10 13 17

I want to dedicate tonight's Torah to the memory of my uncle, Yosef Sholom ben Alexander Vedina Rachel. And I want to say a little bit about him as a way of talking a little bit about where we are in the cycle of the year. As we're about to begin the Torah tomorrow morning, it's really hard to start over. Starting over isn't easy. Starting over is fraught with problems and with questions. People who start over regularly know what it is to face the uncertainty of whether or not the next time will be just like the last time.

Whenever we speak of our own individual improvement, whenever we speak about a community's improvement, whenever we speak about evolution in general, whenever we speak about progress, we inevitably come up on the question of whether progress is itself possible. Or are we perpetually like Sisyphus pushing up a very steep mountain, a boulder that refuses to budge. We despair often even after the Chagim, even after we've had high, high, high holiday services. Even if there's been a lot of awe and awe, awe, awe, awe in our days of awe. We still come back to the question of not awe but ought. Whether we can make our awe is somehow aligned with our ought. Because as Rabbi Zalman used to say, the ethical and moral improvement is predicated on that fundamental belief that we have an ought and then we have an is. And would that they would come together. Man, I ought to be, but here I am.

And so the entirety of progress, whether it's again individuals, all of us here, this community, this city, this country, the larger world, has to move with the assumption of the next time could be better than the last time and that the last time was the last time. But it's contentious at best. It's full of contingency and doubt and I'm not sure.

To be someone who is what is called a balchuvah, somebody who masters returning, says Rav Nachman of Breslev, is to be someone who is baki b'ratzo vashov. It is somebody who is a baki who has expertise in walking, he says, in halacha. And by halacha, Jewish law, he doesn't mean Jewish law, he means halicha, knowing that one foot forward and one foot back is the way of it. We go forward, we go back. Progress is siraitim, it's kind of like tacking in the wind. But wow, balchuvah, people who are masters of returning are extolled by the tradition because they know what it is to pick themselves up off of the ground after yet another failure, after another disappointment, another I ought to have but there I is again.

Man, it's tough to do chuvah. And even if we think, wow, we had a great holiday period, it was high, high, high and aw, aw, aw. We still haven't made that phone call yet, knowing full well that Yom Kippur has nothing to do with the chuvah, the repentance and repair that happens horizontally, it's all vertical. And here we are, we've danced with the Torah, we feel clean as a whistle and we have a whole list of oughts that we haven't even begun yet. I think about this every year, every day of my life because this is the structure of what it is to be human. That if we are to believe on some level that we have within us the capacity to grow, we have to be those who know how to start again.

And what are those impediments, what are the things that get in the way of being able to pick ourselves back up again and say, okay, let me start again. I had a horrible relationship, I'm not loving again. Okay, I get that. Had a horrible job, not gonna work again, doesn't work

that well, does it? Man, my parents were hell. Last thing I'm gonna do is bring a kid into the world. Well, I tried to make amends but they weren't open to it. I went to a synagogue, 30 of them and they all disappointed me. Church, mosque, therapists, you name it. Are there a shortage of disappointments available to us now in our life? We could just give up on the whole democratic process at this point. We could just throw in the towel and say, you know what, it's gonna be like this for a while. We tried to break the glass ceiling. But we got pulled back by the gravity of thousands of years of patriarchy and pain.

I guess we're on the wrong side of history, on the back end of the spiral. It happens at every level, it happens in every field, it happens in every apartment, it happens on every block, in every city, in every village, in every continent, in every country. It is a galactic phenomenon. Evolution is predicated on it. And so what's at stake is big. But there's something that we have to remember. R.I.P.

In the beginning of God's creation of heaven and earth, there was one book in Jewish history that was devoted exclusively to the six letters that formed the first word of the Torah. A full book with 72 interpretations of those six letters in various forms. Those six letters in the beginning, B-R-E-S-H-I-T, spelled B-R-E-S-H-I-T, but also B-E-R-E. The Tikkun Ezoar writes, the word B-R-E-S-H-I-T can be broken into two words. Bet, R-E-S-H-I-T. B-R-E-S-H-I-T in the beginning can be two words. Bet, which is how much? Two. R-E-S-H-I-T, two beginnings.

The Tikkun Ezoar says, and then the Hasidic master, the Yismach Yisrael, and I brought him because of Jeff and Shelly's baby, Yismach, Sinai, Yismach. This great Hasidic master writes, that I heard in the name of the Shlaha Kadosh. That on Rosh Hashanah, when we blow the Shofar, and throughout all of the Chodesh that proceeds, the month that proceeds Rosh Hashanah, we have a simple pattern where it is a Tikkiyah, a long note, and then a broken, two sections, one that goes, and then concludes with a long Tikkiyah. I heard in the name of the Shlaha Kadosh, the holy Isaiah Horowitz, who wrote that that pattern of sound, that pattern of awakening, that pattern, that auditory message of the very structure of the universe is that there is a simple beginning. Human beings, he writes, are born good. We are not born to original sin, but original blessing. We are born with a great trumpet that says, here you are, but then we start to cry, because life breaks us into pieces.

When we cry, we get broken down, like the willow branches at the end of Sukkot, we get beaten down, and we fragment. And then Shavarim gives way to Tru'ah, even worse. We start being so afraid of death, that we begin to ossify. But then along comes the last Tikkiyah, the big one that wakes us up, and says, your original goodness is not obfuscated by the crying and the brokenness, and all of the times that you fell and failed, and all of the despair, and the despondency, and all the times that you thought it's never going to get any better, because after all, you were born with one big Tikkiyah. That Tikkiyah is your original blessing. Tikkiyah, original blessing, the first Reshit, the first beginning.

The brokenness, the falling, the despair, here I am again, here's my ought, and my is, and they're out of alignment, and I need a chiropractic alignment of my chiro, ought, is, is, and then Tikkiyah. The second Reshit, the second rebirth, we are born again. This is the structure of creation, this is the structure of every Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, every six o'clock, seven o'clock, eight o'clock, it doesn't matter how many times you fail and you fall, says the

Shloh, says Yismach Yisrael, says the Tikkun Ezra, says our tradition, that we are imbued with that power to begin again, to start over. We are a start-up nation, we keep starting, we keep Reshiting, we keep trying.

My uncle, I love a Shalom, whose name was Yosef Shalom, Joseph, we joked around about him that he had many lives, at one point he was an electrical engineer, but then he was discontent with that, and decided to give up a really well-paying, good job, and go and become an artist as a photographer. He got bored with that, and then pretty soon after that he went back to law school and graduated top of his class, became a lawyer at a very famous and very lucrative position at a law firm near New York, gave that up too, and he wanted to teach. He constantly was restless, he had a discontent that was belied in his name Yosef, which means more, more. Nafal lo tosif kum, arise again, arise. He had within him always to start anew, anew, anew. And people from the outside said, oh what a restless soul, but he had something else. He knew, he knew never to give up on himself. He knew never to give up on himself, no matter how bad it got, he could begin again. He could start over. After his first marriage, he had relations, he kept loving, he kept showing up even when it didn't work out exactly as he would have imagined, or he made it not work out, for whatever reasons. Yosef, he had that desire and that innate truth about this teaching that every one of you and me, all of us should remember throughout this year, no matter what happens, start again.

Azamra lo hai b'Odi, says Rav Nachman of Breslov, I will sing to God with my ode, I sing to God with that little bit more, that ode Yosef, hai, that little bit more, I can do it, I can do it. So what, so I failed again. I got caught again, I got stuck again. So what, the same mind of fear gripped me again for an hour. For so what, start again. We are the people of Beit Reishit. At least two, at least two creation stories at every moment. I was thinking about this and I'll conclude with this.

I have a little thing with my brain about math. I like to figure out numbers and words in Hebrew and Gematria, all this numerology stuff. Some people laugh at it, some people don't think it's worth a dime. I don't think so either, but I love it anyway. So, there's a certain person who is in a very powerful position now in our world and he changes everything with 140 taps of thumbs, big handed thumbs, whatever. Still thinking about that number, 140. 140 in Gematria is the word kum, arise. The righteous one falls seven times, but if someone can change the world with 140 characters, so can we. If someone can change the world with their thumbs, so can we. We, we, we, we, we, we, we, the people this year.

Kuma, kuma, kuma, kuma. Arise, arise, arise, hearts, arise, arise, arise. When things are looking dark, start again, start again, start again. There's hope yet for all of those who are restless and who are not content with the complacency of a world that wants to go back to sleep. We must rise up, rise up, start again. For our sake, for the sake of the art of the world that we want to see and for the sake of creation. The world begins again tomorrow, and then the next day, and the next day, and the next day.

Please rise.