

Romemu Shabbat March 03, 2017 Sermon

So it's a big weekend. This song that we just sang is kind of why it's a big weekend. Because it's the weekend of that famous verse. Now make for me a sanctuary, and they will make for me a sanctuary that I may dwell within them. Make a sanctuary. It's Sanctuary Shabbat.

It is the parasha of the sanctuary of the beginning of the building of the tabernacle of the mishkan, the sacred, portable, amazing mobile app that the Jews had, the Israelites had in the desert for their logon. It was a great Wi-Fi hotspot. And so I want to talk about the mishkan. I want to talk about this amazing technology that the Jews or the Israelites had in the Bible. I want to talk about it, but first I want to talk as usual about my kids. Because if you've ever been around a kid, have one, you know, nieces, nephews, cousins, whatever it is, young kids do something really interesting.

Just sitting with one of my boys this weekend, we were playing and he said to me, Abba, I love you. And then I did something wrong. He said, Abba, I hate you. How about that for an approval rating? Just like that. Especially children split objects into good objects and bad objects. Melanie Klein in her school talked about the good breast and the bad breast, the pleasure and the pain. And the children have a hard time unifying these things. In one place, they don't seem to go together, they split. It's too much, and when it's too much as a defense or as some kind of structure of the mind, we split. And movies and novels and things that are easy and childish break the world into, this is a good guy and this is a bad guy. The good guys have white hats and the bad guys have black hats. People who are clearly marked as the enemy and those who are clearly marked as the friend. In a world of splitting and for children, it makes sense. Too much complication can be overwhelming.

The same mother who is the source of all of my sense of identity and pleasure can also be the source of pain. And in order to sustain the organism, to maintain a sense of integrity, we have to split. Get out the back, Jack. No need to be coy, Roy, just split. Just listen to me. When the going gets tough, when it's too much, we split. And split becomes, of course, in the phrase. As I'm using it now, it becomes a way to say, I couldn't handle it, so I split. I took off. It's too much. Bringing things together that are usually split in order to be healthy is very, very difficult. The Torah goes so far as to say in the rabbinic tradition that, Oseh shalom bimramah, may the one who makes peace above... We all sing that song, right? Oseh shalom bimramah.

The rabbis say, why is that an interesting notion? The one who makes peace, bimramah, in the upper places. May that one also bring peace here. Oseh shalom aleinu via kol Yisrael.

Let that peace above be peace below. What kind of peace above? Did anybody ever hear of there not being peace above? Is there like a war up in... What's going on up there that there's... The one who makes peace up there. You know, the angels who are the red angels are fighting with the blue angels. There's like a super bowl of angels. They're fighting. You know, I want attention from God. No, I want attention from God. No, no. There's peace.

The one who makes peace above, peace below, say the rabbis, because above is made of fire and water in their ancient cosmology. There were elements that were irreconcilable.

There were elements that couldn't come together. May the one who brought together elements that normally can't be in the same place bring together pieces here below that clearly can't be in the same place. Oseh shalom bim romav. May the one who makes even fire and water find a way to be together, bring us together here below. It's not an easy task.

Maybe it's Herculean, maybe it's divine to be able to bring things together that don't usually reconcile. And children have that consciousness. And we would presume that as we get older to some degree we would actually grow in our capacity to hold pieces that would otherwise split us apart. That the mind and the heart might be big enough and strong enough to be able to hold something a little bit more sophisticated than black and white between it's clearly this or it's clearly that.

And I want to use splitting as a way to understand a mechloket, a difference of opinion that every year on this parshat I visit over and over again. And maybe some of you might remember this, maybe you might not. Maybe it'll be new for you, maybe you know. But if you've studied, you know that tomorrow morning we move from the Exodus narrative to the Mount Sinai narrative already. And tomorrow morning we're moving from the Mount Sinai narrative in Exodus to what? The tabernacle.

Five parashiot, five full chapters, the remainder of the second book of the Torah. The remainder of the second book of the Torah which is the majority of the second book of the Torah is dedicated to this portable mishkan that we were talking about. This little tabernacle, the tabernacle that went with the Jews everywhere they went. They had the tabernacle. They followed them around. They had this portable construction that was their flexible structure.

And the Torah gives us a full, almost two-thirds of one of the five books of Moses is dedicated to this tabernacle business. And the parshat is called Shuma. And the question of course is, for some reason the question is, is the Torah's description now of moving from Sinai to tabernacle in order? All of a sudden, out of nowhere, because of dates, because of chronology, Rashi, the great French exegete, the great commentator of the Torah. The French commentator Rashi says, you know, we're moving from Mount Sinai and immediately tomorrow morning in the book of Exodus we start talking about this voluntary giving to build a communal structure, a capital campaign to build a beautiful edifice in the desert. But what you don't know, Rashi says, is that chapter 32, later on, where the children of Israel sin with the golden calf, it's really in chapter 32, but it's actually, it happens earlier. It happens actually right before the instructions of the Mishkan are given. He claims that when you look at the Torah, there's ein mukdom u'ma ochar, the Torah doesn't work in chronological sequencing.

Somehow the golden calf, which is not narrated until chapter 32, I hope everybody is following this, the golden calf scenario, which is not narrated until chapter 32, is actually out of order. Why is it out of order? In other words, why does God interrupt this story to tell you about the Mishkan? Why would the Mishkan and the instructions for the building of the tabernacle come before the actual event that preceded it? Why would the Torah put the instructions for building the Mishkan before chapter 32, which Rashi claims happened, right? The golden calf happens first and then God gives them the tabernacle. So you know what? This is what Rashi says.

Rashi says that the tabernacle in the desert was actually a response to sin. The precipitous fall from Mount Sinai to worshipping a golden calf, a precipitous fall from worshipping the true abstract divinity to making a tabernacle, I'm sorry, to worshipping a golden calf, that fall is what gave us the tabernacle. The tabernacle is a response to brokenness. The tabernacle is a response to sin, to mistakes, to missing the mark, to being at the height and then being given the wrong envelope. Whoops. The tabernacle, or read, the community, because the tabernacle was built by individuals who each and every one of them bring their nidavah. They bring their voluntary gift.

The tabernacle which expresses community is something that we are given after we've fallen. And in that model of community, the essential core ingredient of community in that model, in Rashi's model, is that we need each other because we break all the time. We need each other because we're fallen. We need each other because we, each and every one of us, comes with some chisaron, something missing. And we come together and we own that piece and we stand together as one and say, my humblest moment is your humblest moment. Each and every one of us has been on their knees. Each and every one of us knows what it is to screw up, to make a mess. Each and every one of us, and that is one of the most defining features of what it is to be a human being. We are made of the earth. We all worship golden calves, sometimes 20 times a day, sometimes once a year.

It doesn't matter. We fall. And community comes and says, here you go. You need a tabernacle. But Maimonides, the great Spanish exegete who lived 100 years later said, Rashi, I don't know why you have to get so fancy. You got to tell me that what was in chapter 32 really comes before the tabernacle.

Then why did the Torah do... Rashi has an answer. But Maimonides says, no, the tabernacle doesn't come... the tabernacle doesn't come to teach us about the golden calf. No, no, no. The tabernacle comes to take with us Sinai. The golden calf isn't for a couple of weeks. And chronology is in place. The Torah is narrating something that actually took place sequentially. We don't have to get fancy. It's not a dream sequence. There was Sinai and then there's the tabernacle. And the relationship between the two of them is clear. The tabernacle is a miniature Sinai. Rashi, why did you need to tell me that the tabernacle preceded the golden calf? So said Rashi to Maimonides, you know why? Because God needed to give us the medicine before we got sick.

Two distinct models of community. One is that community comes as medicine. And one is that community comes to remind us of our highest angels, who we are in our best moments, not our worst moments. To remind us of that Yom Kippur service when we were all singing together as one voice. And we all experienced some kind of unity that we don't normally experience on the New York City subway.

A unity that didn't have us checking, you know. The kind of unity that comes in a blissful moment. We say, you know what? Community is that place where I am called to experience a very blissful state of connection. Community is pleasure. Community is new friends. Community is people who come and bring food to newborn babies. Community is that knock on the door when I needed it most because my father passed away and nobody showed up for Minyan. Community is when we're showing up in our best place.

That's Maimonides. That's Mount Sinai. That's Revelation. Community is fundamentally to preserve Revelation and Mount Sinai.

But says Rashi, no, no, no, no. What about the golden calf? Community comes to support us when we're weak. Community comes to bring us together in those moments of deep vulnerability. Community is a reminder of alienation and brokenness. That communities are safe spaces, healing spaces, reminders that all of us fall, all of us make mistakes. All of us deserve love and connection in spite of our intricate ways of breaking and sabotaging our lives.

I heard Pastor Andy Stanley in Georgia. He's a pastor of a big mega church in Atlanta, North Point Churches, and he gave a whole series on something called addressing the mess or address the mess. He talks about how God lives inside of all the messes that we make. That the tabernacle come to say, I will dwell within you even after you soiled our perfect blissful moment, even after you made a mess of the whole thing. God says, community. Community as rehab. Acknowledging how many messes that we participate in and that how we are called to help clean them up. Community offers us medicine. It eases our sense of isolation, helps us get up on our feet again, and reminds us that all too often we feel alone and isolated. The Torah tells us that God is שׁוֹחֵבֵי תָם בְּתוֹךְ תּוֹמָמָתָם That God lives within us even when we are full of shmutz.

But here's the thing everybody. Not only does a community function as a response to the very human need to heal and to be forgiven. To forgive and to release the burdens of the past. To relive and re-embody the pageantry of Sinai. Not only is community both of those aspects, but community recreates both of those aspects.

And if you're falling asleep now, I want you to wake yourself up. If this is a time where you think, okay, tonight's the time I'm going to take a nap and you see somebody next to you taking a nap, wake them up. I get 20 minutes a week to talk to you guys. And I think about it all week. So hear this and hear it well, please. And if you're a guest, I really am happy you're here, but I'm speaking to my community. And sometimes, given who we are in New York City, there are a lot of people that show up, a lot of guests. But I need my community to hear this and hopefully those who are guests will take it with them too.

The split between a community is a place for bliss and pleasure and connection and a place where we heal wounds. The split between Maimonides and Rashi. The split between whether or not the Mishkan was given before the Golden Calf as medicine or actually never even connected because it's Sinai is a reflection of the expectations that we have when we come into communities. We come into communities with all kinds of stuff. Each and every one of us is first and foremost a communal being. Each and every one of us is born into a family, born into a matrix, born into a system, born into a series of interconnections and interrelationships and interdependencies that we schlep all the time into communities wherever we go. Some people come to community hoping that it's going to be the final resting place for their weary soul's journey to find belonging. And the community gets invested with all of the perfection and longing that other communities disappointed them.

People come to communities and say, you know what, I want the rabbi to be perfect. I want the pastor to be perfect. I wish that the imam would be perfect. I want to sit next to perfect

people who love me perfectly. I want to be at Mount Sinai with them feeling unity and swaying all the time. Community is the place where I bliss out, where I find myself. Community. Community. I'm terrified of it, but if it's going to be worth even coming out of my isolation, I better make sure that each and every Friday night I leave with a high.

Each and every person that I look at smiles at me and knows my name. If anybody so much as judges me even for one moment, there it is. Confirmation bias. This community is not loving. See, I told you. On the other hand, people come to communities saying, you know what, this community, I know already from the get-go it's going to be crap. That's the way communities work. They won't see me. I don't expect much from them. I'll show up and I'll leave. I won't bother anybody. I'll be happy just to make an appearance.

We split communities into the same way that Melanie Klein said children split the world. There are good communities and there are bad communities. There are communities that really, really get it and there are communities that really don't get it. We step into the doors of communities and the people that work are the ones who stand here. The rabbis, the clergy, the staff work for the community and the spiritual work is passive. We take in. We take in the sermons. We take in the songs. We take in all of the goodies because in a world of non-covenantal community, meaning it's a, we're kind of like performers or preformers, community doesn't recognize its own projections and its own film that it places over the entire experience.

And so like children often in communities, people without recognizing it are disappointed over and over and over again. They become serial community people. You can see them like Helena Beckham Carter's character in the Fight Club. They are along the circuit of rabbis and priests and other clergy. They move from one community to another. They stay long enough until somebody disappoints them and then they find another community. They stay for a year or two, something happens and they get up and leave. There's a small cadre of people here in New York and I know friends in California say, they always know. If you ask somebody how many communities they've been in the last couple of years, if they say more than three, you're in for a ride.

People come in. Rabbis become gods. As soon as the rabbi makes a mistake, see ya. Splitting. It's hard to hear difficult things. I had a review this week of my job performance. The 360 were intimate people in my community were able to give me reflection that I very sorely needed. And I'll tell you something, that was hard. Anybody here ever have a 360? How hard is that, right? Man, we don't see ourselves, do we? So in a community like Romemu or in BJ or Ajay Chesed or other synagogues around the country, a rabbi will get up and say, you know what, today I'm going to have to talk about the inner heart.

And then three days later you'll get five emails from people, why did you talk about social justice? And then you talk about social justice and three days later you get a hundred people emailing you saying, well, you know what, I thought the shul didn't mix politics with religion. And then there you are, going, oh my god, what do I talk about tonight? What's going to be? But Tzedal Adarach, he's a particular Hasidic teacher, says that the verse that we started with tonight, v'asulim negdash v'shachanti b'tocham. Now make for me a sanctuary and I will dwell within them. He says, lo amar v'shachanti b'tocho. It doesn't say the famous question, and G-d should have said, make for me a sanctuary that I may dwell within the

one, in you, b'tocho. But it says within them, plural, lehoroshe'eina shechina shora
b'mikdash machmas ha'mikdash ki'im machmas Yisrael.

The holiness of a community is because of the community. The holiness of a community is not because it is Sinai, it is not because it came after, it's because of the community. Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name. And they're always glad you came. You want to be where you can see our troubles are all the same. You want to be where everybody knows your name.

The late, great Shlomo Carlebach said, when he founded a synagogue in Berkeley, California in 1960s called the House of Love and Prayer. He was asked, what is your vision for a synagogue? He answered, here's the whole thing, simple as it is. The House of Love and Prayer is a place where when you walk in, somebody loves you, and when you walk out, somebody misses you. When you walk in, somebody loves you, and when you walk out, somebody misses you.

That's Romemu's mission. That's Romemu's mission. If you've been coming to Romemu now for a week, or two weeks, or a month, or a year, and you've been sitting next to the same person, you don't know their name, you haven't been praying, I'm sorry. If you've been coming to Romemu now for a couple of years, and you keep walking by the same single person, or you look around the room and you still know the same five people that you came to Romemu with, I'm sorry, that's not a Mishkan. If we walk into synagogues and we expect the work is happening here, and the work is not happening here, what's the work? We are in a world which is polarizing, and polarizing, and polarizing, and we have to synthesize and unify, synthesize and unify. We have to refuse, refuse to make this synagogue about healing versus celebration, to make it about social justice versus spirituality.

You see the way we split? It is about both and, both and, vav asuli mikdash, both and. This is the week before Purim, and the Rebbes say that the month in which Purim appears is called Adar. Some like to playfully say that Adar means Aleph-Dar, the month in which the Aleph resides or lives.

The Aleph is one. We are one community. We are one heart.

We are one body. I'm hoping as we finish tonight's services, as we make kiddush, as the music begins again in five minutes or so, that somebody, maybe all of you, will turn to somebody that you've never seen before and say, hey, what's your name? I'm so happy you came tonight.

Please rise.