

Shabbat Sermon 10 27 17

So we began the year, and I am kind of feeling this a lot, we began the year with a conversation that, in a way, is a kind of public, year-long eulogy to my Uncle Joe, who passed away a couple of weeks ago. And it's almost, it's a celebration, in a way. You know, there is a custom in the Jewish tradition of learning Torah for the sake of the soul of the person who's passed away. And so I want to learn Torah for as long as possible about my Uncle and share it with you. And I was talking to my first cousin before Shabbat, and we were laughing about how much he would hate that I'm doing this, but wherever you are, Joe, you can't stop me.

So we started in the first chapter, the first parasha, the first learning of Torah, was about in the beginning. And if you remember, or if you listened to it, we talked about two beginnings, bet reshit, two beginnings, start again. And essentially, that was a sermon. It was a message about persevering and having grit. And last week's parasha, we talked a little bit about what it is to be with someone in silence and in speech, and the two different kinds of silence is speech, a silence that is full and a silence that is absent, a speech that is full, a speech that is absent. And we're working our way around certain themes, I think, that are core to what it means to be holy, what it is to be Jewish, what it is to be a spiritual practitioner in any one of the religious traditions universally. These are core themes, having resilience, knowing the power of silence.

And then what I want to talk about a little bit tonight, about tests, because I'm thinking a lot these days about tshuva, what it means to change. And one of the things that was so profound about my Uncle Joe, and one of the things that came out over and over again in the eulogies, and what people said, the shiva was, there was one thing about Yosef Sholem, Joe Ingber, was that he went through many different lifetimes in one lifetime. He changed a lot. He was fluid. There was a way that was mysterious about him. People looked at him with admiration and kind of looked up and said, how could it be that he kept starting all over again? And not only did he start over again, which is perseverance and grit, but he also had the capacity, right, to withstand all kinds of moments of difficulty and vicissitudes, obstacles, all kinds of stuff.

How do you find that? What is that? How do you change? How do you withstand the test and then move on to showing that you've actually grown? Because change and growth, all of those things are part and parcel of what this time of the year is, which is shuva and repentance. And so I'm thinking a lot about that because it's a mystery, isn't it? It's a mystery because we spend hours and hours of our lives thinking about the things that we want to change, and the more things change, the more they... And so then we wind up back where we were, and there's a moment, and there's a moment, and you say, wait a second, is this Groundhog's Day?

One of the most profound teachings about shuva, about repentance, is from the Rama Maimonides. He's a great thinker, maybe the greatest philosopher of Jewish history. And he wrote that if you want to know whether or not you have done shuva, whether you've really repented for a thing that you regret doing in your life, be back in the same situation and don't do it. But here's the problem with that formulation. Everybody follow this.

The problem with that formulation is, what if I'm never back in that situation again? Does that mean that I can never do shuva? I can never really repent, really ask for forgiveness? So what's really clear from Maimonides, from the Rama, is this. We believe shuva is possible, and if shuva is possible, guess what? It's almost guaranteed that what? You will be back in the same situation again. And how do I know that? Because I'm a human being. And so are you, and so are you, and so are you. We all know that the reason why full repentance is even possible in a just system is because there's an almost absolute certainty guarantee you could put all, bet it all on this. If you did it once, and if you were in that situation once before, you will probably be in that situation again. If you've been there once before, you will probably be there again. It didn't take Freud to tell us about the repetition compulsion. We already knew it because we were smart.

People who had lived a long time ago said, you know what, things that happen early on, then set a template for what happens later on. And so the question is, when we get to that moment, that moment where we say, here I am again, what do we call forth? How do we know whether or not we can really change and really effectuate what it is to come back to the place and know it for the first time, or to do it differently, to make sure that next time is not like last time, or maybe that next time isn't last time, or that last time was last time.

So tomorrow morning in shuls around the world, again, I said this year in and year out for over 10 years. God willing, next year you guys will hold me to this promise. We should spend all of the year on Friday night on one book called the book of Genesis. And if people want to come to hear about the relevant parasha of that Shabbat, they'll come Shabbat morning. But only spend a year on Genesis. Because guess what, everybody, tomorrow morning we're going to, in shuls around the world where they read the whole parasha, it's going to be 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18. All of those chapters in the book of Genesis will be read. How is it even possible to go deep in there? I don't even know. But we're going to have to spend a year on it. But here's just one point from all of those chapters.

Many of you know that tomorrow morning chapter 12 is the call, the election where Abraham hears God's voice for the first time in the Bible. God speaks to human beings for the first time since the creation of the world, since Noah. 10 generations we're told go by before there was a call, before there's a conversation. And the first conversation isn't even a conversation. It's this very amorphous moment where God says to Abraham, God doesn't even introduce God's self. God doesn't say as he does to Moses, to Abraham, hey, nice to meet you over here, I'm God. I've been away for a while. Nice to meet you. Like the first thing God says is go.

From the moment that Abraham is introduced to us, he is a man on the move. His frenetic energy gets, he's claimed by the tradition as the energy that is always expanding. He's always moving. He's that guy. He's that Abraham guy. He's got it all going on. He's moving from the first moment that we're introduced to him even before God speaks to him. He's moving. He moves with his father who's on the way to Canaan and they stop in a place called Haran. He's moving. It's as if God knows the essence of who Abraham is, is that he's a mover and a shaker. He responds to the world with the energy of let me move.

Let me go. It's not altogether, I think, if you look at the story of Abraham, it's not altogether that hard to imagine that the first thing that God would communicate to Abraham is do what you always do, but do it now the way that I want you to do it. You go. And the thing that you do, Howard, the thing that you do, Juliet, the thing that you do, but now I'm giving you my imprimatur. Go do your thing. You do you, Abraham, but do it for me.

So Abraham must have been very moved by that, literally, figuratively. And guess what? He gets up, he goes to the land that I will show you. I'm promising you, God says, go to that land. And so Abraham goes to that land. And then this very interesting moment that will bring us back to the beginning of the message tonight, I hope, is an interesting moment because Abraham arrives in the land. He's been promised by the omnipotent, omniscient, divine One who has introduced himself to Abraham as saying, I'm making a promise to you. You go. You go, Abe. You go. And don't worry, it's going to be good. I promise you, you're going to go to a land that I will show you. And when you get there, it's going to be great. That's the promised land.

He is the first leaving and arriving in the promised land is Abraham. He arrives in the promised land. And no sooner has he arrived in the promised land, then this is the first lesson of Abraham and God's relationship. He gets to the land of Israel or then Canaan. And what happens? There's a famine. Now you would think at this moment, Abraham would say, God, I need a conversation now because I was okay over there. This is Haran. This is familiar. This is good. I'm good. This is good. I like to move. I was just going to move this way. But you told me to go this way. And so now I'm moving this way. And you told me that you were going to show me the land and you're going to make me a great nation. It's all going to be great. It's going to be amazing. And now there's a famine. And Abraham does what he always does. What does Abraham do? Well, he read Avram and Avram goes down to Egypt. Because it was really famine. He just got to the land. And now what does he do? He does what he does. But he does. There's a problem. What does Avram do? He moves. He doesn't stand still and let it be known and let the forest know him. Avram does what he always does. He keeps moving.

And the Ramban Maimonides will be built into Jewish history where we will be moving. We will go down to narrow places. And Avram will set this template in motion. What was will be what we become. But there was a moment here that Avram sinned greatly, says Maimonides, because he should have known that God wouldn't bring him to land and test him this way if he didn't want him to stand still and to know with faith, with trust that this is the place. How could you in that moment, Avram, not check your own reaction? You've always done what you've always done. But it's a new story. Don't do what you always did. Because if you do what you always did, you will be where you always have been.

Here's a new story. How many of us make pledges and promises and things are going to be different and we transform? And then the minute we find ourselves back in the same moment, we can put a foot in the door and say, I always keep moving. I always keep moving. But now's the moment to stand still. I'm going to undo what I've always done and stand in what I know. That's Teshuvah Gemura.

What a big sin, says Maimonides. Here you are. You're in a new chapter in your life, Abraham. This is not the same Avram who runs back and forth. You are a new person. You

are in a new reality. If you really want to transform, don't do what you've always done. If you were brought into this situation, the Torah tells us this lesson this morning is that you have the resources to get yourself out. Stand still and wait. Stand still and wait. Or as they say in, right, where is it? I have it over here somewhere. As it says in Romans, and not only that, but that knowing and suffering produce endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope. And hope does not disappoint us. Abraham, where was your hope? Where was your hope? And we can think about this, each and every one of us here, in our own unique ways, because each and every one of us has a moment where we expected something and it disappointed us. We expected it had been promised to us. We are arriving in a new situation. We thought, oh, it's going to be different this time. And then here we are. We've made changes. We've made promises.

Or just this week, yours truly was back in a situation that I had been in many, many times in my life. Many, many times I'd been down the same exact road. I could see the dominoes falling. Oh, there's that moment. And then I feel that. And then they say that. And then I get that way. And then I'm over here. And then you're sitting there going, how did I get here again? Here's Avraham, here's Abraham. And the Torah comes back. He's like, okay, I know what it is to keep moving. And here I am. And it's a famine. Okay, I'll do what I always do. Yeah, okay, great. It's not going to be that great.

Don't go down to Egypt. Going down to Egypt in the Torah, in the Bible is not a good idea. So in that moment when we feel ourselves being pulled back into a reaction, into a place that is old, we say to ourselves, I'm going to do 180 degrees. I'm going to do it differently. I'm going to do it exactly the other way. I'm going to fake it till I make it. If I usually react, I'm going to wait a day. If I usually don't react, I'm going to react right now. I'm going to take my cues from exactly the opposite place.

To be tested that way is to ask myself deeply about my own endurance, about my own grit, about my own capacity to change is rooted in my ability to read the situation and respond in a different way. And that, we ask ourselves, where does that come from? That has to come from a deep fundamental belief that if we change a pattern once, it will begin to accrue. Just one time, it will begin to build up one investment in change. One moment where we could have reached and we didn't, one moment we could have reacted, we didn't, will change our patterning. Our brains are plastic that way.

So here's the challenge tonight, as you leave, in honor of my dearly departed uncle, Yosef Shalom. And you can apply this anywhere. Where were the places in your life, in your relationships, in your jobs, in your schools, where you came in with high hopes, with promises, and immediately were disappointed by something? Because let me tell you another spiritual rule, everybody here, and you all know this. This is not me as Rabbi David teaching you. You all know this. You are smarter, right, than any book. You know this because you have life wisdom. You know this truth.

Rav Nachman of Breslov said this beautifully. The minute you want to make a change in your life, you know what happens? You're going to meet something right away that will say right away, there's going to be a mini, ah, he says, there's going to be an obstacle that places itself right in front of you. You're going to go, wow, maybe I should turn around. Anybody ever have that? It's the first rule. So where in your life did you go to the promised land and

immediately as you arrived in the promised land, there was a famine and you had to go down.

And where in your life will you, me, all of us in that moment say, I will do exactly the most uncomfortable thing I can imagine doing in this moment. If I feel like fighting, I'm going to take a breath. If I feel like someone did it to me, I'm going to, if I feel the opposite, I'm going to do exactly what feels like the worst possible. I can definitely not do that. I'm going to go down to Egypt. Yeah, that'll be great.

So change coming full circle. We're living now in a moment in our country and in this world. Each and every one of us knows that in order to build a better world, each and every one of us has to make a commitment to working through our own stuck places, our own shadow spots, our own reactivities, our own assumptions, our own stories, our own filters, our own, our own, our own. Because collectively, if you think about the things that we can do writ large, it can really depress you. But each and every one of us can grow in the places that we are, in the promised lands that we have been led to, in the voices we have heard, we've been led to give the voice to those moments. And in those moments, my friends, everybody here, you listen to this. That's a big deal. That's a big deal. It is a big deal to pattern interrupt your karma.

Read the New Testament, read the Bhagavad Gita, read the Sutras, read the Talmud, read the Midrash, read the Hasidic Masters. All of them can be boiled down, throw them all into a pot, and it's one teaching. You can change. For the better, for the holier, for the more compassionate, for the more loving. And you can do it in that moment, when that test arrives, and you're going to go back to where you were, and you say, let me do what's most uncomfortable, which is most unlike me, so that I can become the me that I am not yet. This is the great story of Avraham.

And I want to let you know that Avraham is alive and well inside each and every one of us. And that moment where we find Avraham, we ourselves can do tikkun, we can fix that original going down to the narrow place. So I want to bless you all tonight as you go out, to lift up the sparks of fallen faith, to lift up the sparks of despair, to lift up the sparks of cynicism, to lift up the sparks. Start tonight over dinner. Start tomorrow at lunch. And don't forget, if a promise was made, then a promise will be kept.

Please rise.