

The Tears of Moshe - Rabbi David Ingber on Shabbat Chol Hamoed Sukkot 10 21 16

Every year for the last, I think, six years, on one of the nights that are called the Intermediate Nights of Sukkot, which is, begins with holiday, then it ends with holiday, and in between there are intermediate days called Homoed, which means literally weekday holiday, combining a quality of the holiday and a quality of the weekday. And for six years now, based on something that, as a kid, maybe a 19-year-old kid, I happened into Borough Park, into Brooklyn, during Homoed for Simchat B'Dei Shoibah, for this rejoicing of the water-pulling ceremony. I was 19 years old and didn't grow up with that, and I'm looking forward, God willing, I just want to put it out there tonight.

I've spoken with friends over at BJ, and maybe next year we'll have a Simchat B'Dei Shoibah on the Upper West Side for the first time. We'll have Hakafot, we'll have dancing during the intermediate days, which I don't think has happened here in a liberal synagogue, an egalitarian synagogue. So looking forward to that.

But I went to Borough Park and I happened upon a Hasidic court called Stalin, Karlin. It's a well-known musical Hasidic dynasty, and it's known for the beauty of their melodies and the unique way that they make use of space. They have a very small space, a sanctuary, maybe from those two pillars back here. And we were there last night with David and some friends, and essentially they move around the space in a snake-like way. It's a big circle, but they can't really make a circle, so they just snake. And they sing the same melody over and over and over again on a row.

Everything on Sukkot is about circles. The whole holiday is about circles, Hakafot. Hakafot means to circumambulate, to go around, right? Israelis, Hakafot. Hakafot. Hakafot, Hakafot. Hakafot. Sukkot is about circles. And on Sukkot, we have a unique thing that we read tomorrow morning on Shabbat of Chol Hamoed. Then on the Sabbath of Sukkot, we take out a book that almost didn't make it into the Torah called Ecclesiastes, Kohelet. And Kohelet also talks about circles in the first chapter of the book. He says, Dor olech ve-dor ba. One generation comes and another generation comes. Ve-aretz ha-olam omedet. And the earth will stay forever. Ve-zarach ha-shemesh uvah ha-shemesh. The sun will set and it will rise. Ve-el mekomo shoev, zorei ha-chusham. And it glides back to where it was. And in the end, he says, Kol ha-nechalim molchim la-yam, a-yam anein ha-malei. All of the streams will go to the sea. And the sea also will go back and forth. Everything works in cycles and cycles.

And then he says, Ve-ein chadash ta-chad ha-shemesh. And there's nothing new under the sun. And Kohelet, which our rabbis scratched their heads trying to figure out why, would replace a book that is essentially the most nihilistic book in the Bible. The book that says everything is vanity of vanities. Why would that book be placed on Sukkot? Why would we read it tomorrow morning? Sukkot is after all called Zman Simchateinu, it's the time of rejoicing. And if you read Kohelet, it's not exactly a happy book.

But it's all about circles. And maybe even the tyranny of circles. The tyranny of the circle.

The tyranny of the circle is indeed the sense that nothing changes. Nothing will be new tomorrow. What was yesterday will be again tomorrow. Every generation will show up in synagogues. Some of them will listen, some of them won't. That's youth.

That's the way it goes. The way I am the day after Yom Kippur is the day I was before. It all just happens to be part of the same tyrannical, cyclical nature of my mind, of my heart, of the way things are, and the way we were, and all of it. Nothing changes. Ein Hadash, there's nothing new. Against that narrative of nothing new, we will gather on Monday night here in the sanctuary, and we will open this ark, and we will take out the words of Moses, and we will open the scroll in a big circle, and visually, in the deepest, most obvious, most concrete way, we will actually see the last letter of the Torah and the first letter of the Torah literally almost touching in the great circle that is the scroll of our wisdom.

The last Lamed of the word Yisrael yearning to touch the first bet of B'reishith, of in the beginning, forming a word, the Lamed, the last letter, and the bet, the first letter formed the word L'ev, which means heart. The heart of our tradition is this circle that has this infinite space, this chasm that yearns to touch, but doesn't *mati velomati*. And in that great circle dance, we bring the tyranny of the circle, the tyranny of nothing is ever new, the tyranny of what was is what will be, the curse of inevitability meets Moshe. The man who is drawn from the water, whose name itself means the one from the water, the man who will not enter the land because of water that he inappropriately, he couldn't get water to come out of a rock in the right way, we find Moses in the last eight verses of the reading on Simchat Torah, being told that he's going to die. Vayal Moshe and Moshe will go up and the last eight verses will be the narrative of his own death. The Torah will actually say Moshe will die.

And my dear friend, Dr. Aaron Leib-Smokler, who did a beautiful piece this week on what it means that Moshe, did Moshe write the last eight verses of the Torah or not? So the rabbis want to figure out, is it possible that Moshe wrote about his own death? Does that make sense? In the last eight verses, who wrote the last eight verses of the Torah? Those last eight verses that lead us towards the heart, the end of the spiral, the end of the circle, I should say. Moshe could not have written those last eight verses because Moshe couldn't be writing about his own death. It doesn't make sense.

That's one opinion in the Talmud. But there's another rabbi, Rabbi Neh, who says, no, Moshe wrote the last eight verses. How did he write the last eight verses? How did Moshe write the last eight verses of the Torah, everybody? How did Moshe write the last eight verses, guys? With a pen. Like any kind of pen? A special pen. Great. That's one answer. With a feather, with a kulmus maybe, maybe a pencil in case he made a mistake. Maybe, who knows? Something, ink, ink, right, with ink. Great, he wrote it with ink.

Anybody have a different opinion? The Talmud says, yes, Abbey? Blood or tears. Says the Talmud, one of the most beautiful teachings. Moshe didn't write with ink, it's a good idea, but it's ink and also something, ink plus, okay? It's a kiddo, *dio v'mashu*? It's ink plus tears. Moses writes the last eight verses of the Torah about his own death with tears. The commingling of ink and salt, the commingling of water from the rock as he prepares to leave this world, enlightened, illuminated about his *sadva*, *tzaddik*, and tears intermingling with his pen.

And Moshe, one interpretation is found in the 17th century in Italy by Menachem Azaria Afana, who wrote, the last eight verses are of greater value than all of the rest of the Torah. For Moses did not delegate these verses to Joshua, he didn't give them to anyone else, but because he wrote them with tears, he couldn't speak those words, he could only write them. He was shedding tears, not at his own death, but at the suffering of Israel that they would have to go into exile.

The tears mixed with ink, which had been originally black as the pupil of the eye and dripped into every letter so that they shone as the heavens, had the entire Torah been written with those tears, we wouldn't be worthy of ever using it. Letters written with ink and tears. There is something in Moshe who is about to die that is absolutely radically unbreakable.

There is something in Moshe that is like the stone tablets that he receives the second time that will never break again. There is something in Moshe that even facing the ultimate reality that we will all die as we all did on Yom Kippur, there is something radically undying about Moshe. But Moshe, Moshe's vulnerability is, Moshe's vulnerability is, is that he can feel the unbearable lightness of being, the unbearable weight of what it is to be a human being.

Moshe's gravitas is that he gets what it is to be a human being. The tyranny of the circle of this Torah coming back and we start again and Moshe's heart breaks and Moshe cries and he mixes those beautiful black letters with the pain of what it is to be a human being and that's the way we start every single year by reading Ink and Tears. And Ink and Tears break the circle.

Ink and Tears break the circle because they say that even though life is unbearable, there is something inside each and every one of us that is unbreakable. Even though life is unbearable, there is something inside each and every one of us that is unbreakable. Even though life can be unbearable, there is something inside each and every one of you and me that is unbreakable.

Even though life can be unbearable. Even though we can leave Yom Kippur and the very next day, someone, I heard it from my neighbor, a 50-something year old man had a massive coronary out of nowhere. And on Simchatenu, on the holiday of our joy, we read Kohelet tomorrow morning because in the midst of our joy, life can also be unbearable.

In the midst of finishing the Torah, we're reading about our greatest prophet who's going to not make it into the land. Talk about a buzzkill. We're sitting and dancing with the Torah, saying Moshe, Moshe, Moshe, Moshe, and he's going, I'm not even getting into the land.

What are you guys dancing about? Every single year, I'm sitting around, we're reading Sukkot, I'm saying Sukkot is the holiday of joy. We just went through Yom Kippur, I fasted, I was starving, it was crazy, we were all hot. And here we are, taking Moshe's Torah, we're like making a, you know, here's a great day.

And it's like Moshe is going, I can't believe I'm not making it into the promised land. Because for Moshe, there was something that even though life disappointed him, even though he had reached the pinnacles, he was still disappointed, he could be attentive to, attenuated

to, he could hear the pain of the world even in the midst of the joy. And those tears mixed with the ink shown as brightly as stars in the firmament says Menachem Azariah Fano.

That's the way we enter the year. We enter the year with the truth of Moshe's tears. We enter the year with the truth that even though life will be unbearable, you are unbreakable.

And those tears of vulnerability allow us to live with life's inevitable ups and downs in the spiral that is not the tyranny of a circle, but the freedom and the possibility of growth, of development, even though patterns seem to be similar. So I want to bless each and every one of you as we begin this year. With tears of joy and tears of vulnerability, with tears that open gates, with tears that release fears, with tears that are from so many different places.

And may we together learn how to dance the spiral of life with acceptance, with some degree of equanimity, and always, always, always giving each other faith that even though life can feel unbearable, we are indeed unbreakable. Please rise.