

Shabbat 09 06 19 Sermon

Before I begin speaking tonight, first of all, I'm not going to speak for a very long time. I just want you to know that. So if you're looking at your watch, you'll be out of here soon. But more important than listening to what I have to say is I really want to double down, as we begin the year together, that at this moment, to be already thinking, in our open hearts, having sung through and been sung through, that there are people who are right now thinking about loved ones, that they will remember and will stand up and recite the Mourner's Kaddish for. So I want to invite all of us to stay for and through that absolutely vital moment. And if, during this year, you have a chance to schedule your dinner, schedule them a little bit later, in the coming years, so that you can stay for those who need comfort and those who come from who knows where. We'll put that on our website, too, so that those who are coming even from New Jersey can stay as well. That's good. I'm just talking about that group over there. It's just a joke.

There's no doubt, in my mind, there's no doubt, that one of the most moving, maybe the most moving thing that I get the privilege to participate in is life cycle events for people. Sad life cycle events like funerals, joyous ones like a wedding. But maybe for me the most profound is when someone is chosen of their own free will, their own volition, to join the Jewish people. And there are a lot of ways to be Jewish and do Jewish. There isn't one way. A lot of ways to participate, to identify as. But when someone sits in my office, irrespective of the motivation, because I'm really not interested. I'm honored that you want to join our people and you want to sing our songs and step into our holy places and kiss our sacred scrolls. I'm floored by the courage, by the audacity, by the pliability, by the flexibility, by the willingness to change status. With all that that might entail, again, not defining for any one person what that might mean. But certainly if someone were to say to me, would you be willing to change your religious tradition, I would find a hard time doing that.

It's an immensity. And this week I had the privilege to be with a very special woman as she went to the mikvah and stood in front of us and told us her whole life story about how she'd been Jewish her whole life, or at least from five, in what she told us, knowing all along that she belonged. And I'm so moved, along with my colleagues who were there, again, it never fails to bring me to tears and to bring me to a place of profound gratitude that I might be able to witness such a moment for someone. And underscoring why it's so moving is the sense that it isn't easy for any one of us to change course. It isn't easy for any one of us to remember, to imagine ourselves different, that all of a sudden the thing we've been doing for 50 years, 60 years, 70 years, many lifetimes maybe, that we might have the ometz lev, the courage, the belief fundamentally that we can change.

That what it is that the tradition is asking of us, especially at this time of the year, as we come close to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, is before we even ask the question, what you will change, but really, do you think it's possible? Before we get into the specifics of the lists of what we think might be better or how we might nip and tuck our personalities, the tradition asks us if we still believe. Because if we don't believe that change is possible, that it might be that we hear something and it calls us to remember a promise about who we are in the world, who we could be in the world. The whole High Holidays becomes a charade, a dress-up rehearsal for something you no longer believe in, but just go because who knows?

That also has value. Not for me. The sense that we can show up and that we believe that despite every ounce of despair or cynicism that we might have imbibed, it's still possible to immerse ourselves deeply and to change.

Torah has some good advice on how we might do that in the particulars. It will tell us tomorrow morning in a Parsha that we read every year at this time of the year, a Parsha, a portion of the Torah that is chock-full of amazingly beautiful and difficult pieces, when we'll come and siege a city. When we come, the Torah says to the Israelites, when you come and lay siege to a city, when you come to a city and lay siege on it, don't destroy, don't cut down the fruit-bearing trees. Or the trees. Clearly it's a fruit tree, you eat from it. Very strange verse. For is a tree like a man that you would lay siege against the trees to? Is a tree a man then? From this source, in tomorrow morning's reading, we learn about a general principle in Torah called don't wantonly destroy things, don't just dispose of things. And we could go in a very clear direction now towards the environmental crisis, which of course, this is very much a part of.

But I want for a moment, before we go global, which will happen maybe later on, Rosh Hashanah Yom Kippur, just for our own work today, tomorrow, this week. Because the rabbis of the Talmud don't just read environmentalism and a principle of conservationism into this law, but something deep about our own character structure. The Talmud teaches that this principle of do not destroy, and then it's later codified by the Rambam, by Maimonides, this principle of not destroying, it's not only not destroying trees. When I was growing up, everybody would say, no, you can't throw out that food. Don't throw out that food. So don't cut down and eat a tree that is a fruit-bearing tree. It did nothing to you. Do not destroy wantonly. Destroy God's creation. And the rabbinic mind is expanded. Don't destroy trees. Don't break glasses. Don't act violently. Curb your aggressive impulses.

The Rambam says that anyone who loses their temper and breaks something, they slam a tennis racket on a tennis court. Can you imagine a lion's person at the U.S. Open? That's a Baltash list right there. I'm sorry. Destroying a tennis racket? I'm sorry. You can't do that. What a waste. And not just destroying physical objects. The energy of destruction, the energy of violence, the energy of aggression. We might expand to say that whenever we are destroying someone's self-esteem, whenever we take something beautiful and we wantonly add a layer of blame or destructiveness, we are cutting down a tree.

So here's what they say. During the month of Elul, bring particular attention and mind to anger. Bring particular attention and mind to the energy within us that doesn't seek to build up but to tear down. Bring particular energy and awareness and contemplation to the power of love. The power of love which is connective and not disconnect. So I have one practice here and then we're going to rise up. We hear so frequently during this month of preparing for Rosh Hashanah Yom Kippur about what we're doing. The work we're doing on ourselves. Let's practice and I invite you to this. Choose someone you're going to pray for in Torah Shoshana. Choose one person, not more. Could be a family member. And when you have the impulse to pray, to meditate on you, bring them to mind. Practice for one month.

Bringing someone whom you know needs prayers even if you don't believe in prayers. Someone whom you know needs your love. And instead of Baal Tashrit, will become Bonim.

Those who build. And we'll build by self-transcending for the month. That when there is an energy of aggression, the self is engaged.

But this month we'll be compassionate and loving. We'll lift up someone that we know and bring them first to mind. And in that way we'll be putting someone first, which is already a tremendously powerful act of love. I can think of many people in this community that would love to know, but don't tell them that you're praying for them. I can think of many people in my own family, extended in circles of care and concern, who would love to know that I'm thinking of them and praying for them. A small practice. Or make your own. But on the way towards Rosh Hashanah Yom Kippur, bring particular awareness and attention to the ways that we waste. And to the possible pathways that we might counter that wastefulness with building. Small steps. Gentle. Gentle.

Please rise.