

Shabbat Sermon 12 15 17

There are so many parallels between the Joseph narrative in the Bible and the holiday of Hanukkah. And given that the Joseph narrative is one of the most beautiful literary pieces the Bible offers, Western literature, and given that Yosef and the story of Yosef makes its way into the holiday of Purim very clearly, and given that it's my favorite, favorite story, it also makes its way into the Hanukkah story, and Hanukkah is also my favorite, favorite holiday. And so as I said, the parallels between Joseph and the narrative of Joseph and the Hanukkah story are many.

You could think of a few yourself right now as we're, you know, just standing here on Shabbat Hanukkah. But how does this sound? There's a lost one that isn't revealed, and so people come looking for it, and then finally it shows up. And that that one then is able to feed the many who had lost the one. You could go on and on.

There's an even deeper structural parallel in the way that we light Hanukkah candles and the way the story of Joseph unfolds, which is this. The Joseph narrative essentially is about recognition. Who sees whom? The ten brothers don't see Joseph. They don't see him. Or when they see him, they try not to see him. And so as it is, Joseph becomes invisible to them, only to then decide to reveal himself to them. He sees them. They don't see him. The act of being able to see clearly, to have eyes that can see what is right before you, even if it doesn't look the way it did 22 years ago as the brothers can't be blamed.

My children love to watch Undercover Boss. Anybody see that, Undercover Boss? Undercover Boss is a great show about bosses that go undercover. They're completely incognito, and it's really, really good how they become completely other to whom they were. And they go into their businesses to find out what's really happening behind the scenes. It's as if Joseph becomes unrecognizable to the brothers and unrecognizable to the book of Genesis so that he can reveal what really goes on behind the scenes in Genesis.

He's the undercover boss of Genesis. He can't become who he is until he's hidden, like an outlier in a family who has to hide, like his father Jacob who had to hide in his brother Esau and his uncle Esau's skins. Joseph hides in full view, wearing the garb of the Egyptian viceroy, and only there does he become what in the restaurant parlance would be called a spotter. Someone who comes into the restaurant, you don't know that he works for the restaurant, you think he's a customer, and she just basically brings information back. They're a spy. How ironic, of course, that Joseph accuses the brothers of being spies. He, after all, is the spy. The Egyptians think, well, not the top ones, but everyone thinks he's an Egyptian, including the brothers. But I digress.

The entire story of Joseph is about eyes. What we do with our eyes, where we place our eyes, how we surmise with our eyes, how we realize with our eyes what is before us and what befalls us, when what before us becomes an object and not a person. When the one before us becomes a thing to be manipulated, an object to be used, something to be compared to or against. When the one before us wears a multicolored coat that becomes a symbol of their greatness as a thing.

The great Martin Buber's division of ocular health between eye-eating and eye-you. Is the one before you a one, unique, solitary, in whose depths there is infinity, or is the one before us two-dimensional, an object that we rate, that we like or don't. When we use instrumentally towards our ends, they are just an instrument. Hanukkah has one way of speaking to this issue. And it's a short little prayer that is elided over often, but in my Orthodox upbringing, we could not leave the table before we had sung this. Many of you also sing it, but I'm just saying.

In the Ingber home, there's a unique way of singing it, I think. How does the melody go? I have the other one, one second. These candles that we light tonight, last night, the night before, tomorrow night, are holy. These candles are Kodesh. They are sanctified, made into something special. And then this great line. We are not allowed to make use of them. And what does that mean? Well, it means you can't use the candles for anything but the light that they emit.

Thus was born the great institution of the Shamash. Every box of candles got an extra eight candles. They went from 36 to 44 just for that extra candle. That extra candle that was instrumentalized for the sake of the non-instrumentalized eight others. The one it amongst many individual 36 use. Remarkable. We can only look at them. This means that reading by the light of the Chanukiah, uh-uh. It means cooking by the light of the Chanukiah. It means looking for Chametz, even if it's not yet Passover time, by the light of the Chanukiah is not okay. It means doing your taxes by the light of the Chanukiah. It means doing your homework. It means that the lights are there for their own sake. Not to be used as a means towards an end, as a part of a sequence that leads to something greater than the first step in the sequence. Each step along the way, which could be why we only light one candle extra every night, because each stage is its own value.

This truth, this truth of how we live our lives with eyes that are real eyes, came home very deeply to me when I sat on Wednesday afternoon, morning afternoon, at the UJ Federation of New York in a first ever training of synagogues and other Jewish institutions for sexual harassment training. And as we sat in the room, the 20 some odd institutions, synagogues and schools and other places around the Jewish world, listening in to the experts speak to the core of sexual harassment in the workplace. The workplace where each and every one of us to some degree by definition is instrumentalized. A space, a container where we are judged and measured by our outputs. A place that is rife for dynamics of power and privilege. We listened in to how we as human beings feel when we are added.

How we close down, as she said, mammals that feel pain either fight, freeze or flee. And in a workplace where there is a lack of subjectivity, a lack of appreciation for the dignity that is inherent in every human being, because our eyes are not real eyes, people's work output becomes affected. People begin to shudder themselves, begin to slow down. They don't show up for work, they begin to, it comes out everywhere.

In a society that objectifies human beings and uses power to keep them as it's in their system, we need our hits all the time. We lose our energy, we lose our focus, we lose our desire to be. In a society and in a culture and in a synagogue and a church and a mosque and a family where we instrumentalize each other for each other's happiness or joy or sexual pleasure or physical pleasure or attainment, we need all of the uppers we need to keep

ourselves alive and energized. Because what keeps us connected to our aliveness is that deep candle that is not instrumentalized. It is that ignition, that place. We have no right to make use of them.

It is remarkable sitting in such a study, in such a training, to think about this community, this Romemu community, started a mere decade ago. A community dedicated and devoted to having real eyes. To seeing each and every human being with inherent dignity and with inherent worth and value. And to know that even within this community there are people who still call the Romemu office and speak to rabbis who happen to be women and sometimes say sweetie pie. Even within this community there are still people who comment or use their eyes with other congregants at a Friday evening that is full of ecstatic energy or at a Saturday morning prayer service that is full of devotional energy to instrumentalize, to see objects instead of respect subjects. Remarkable, because if it happens here, wow. Wow.

Hanukkah and Yosef. The commentators are troubled when the story tells us that the brothers stood before Yosef and they recognized him and he made himself foreign. He made reflexively, he made himself as if he were not known to them. He made himself a stranger. The commentators wonder how could Yosef allow himself such a deep lack of compassion for his father and for his brothers. Here are his brothers placing themselves before Yosef. They're starving, they've made their way down to Egypt in order to procure some kind of nourishment for themselves and there they stand before the most powerful man they know with their children and families, lives on the line and Yosef pulls away from revealing who he really is and the commentators call Yosef into question.

Where is your compassion, Yosef? Where is your love? Where is your humanity? Where is your bigness, Yosef? They call him a snake that revenges. But is it so wild to imagine that someone who had been so deeply instrumentalized refused to reveal who he really was? Maybe he couldn't figure out a way to come out of the mask he wore reflexively in front of those who continued to look at him in a particular way. And even now, 22 years later, he made himself unfamiliar in a way he always was with them.

I love the message of Hanukkah as a tikkun for Yosef. I love the message of Hanukkah as a fixing of that place. And it couldn't come at a better time here in our society, in our culture at large. Human beings can never be reduced to human doings. But lest we think that it's something that happens only in certain parts of the country or in certain parts of the world, we are reminded, even in the Hanukkiah, that one of them becomes an instrument. Even one of them becomes an instrument, the shamash.

So we dance between both of these places, and we remind ourselves as often as possible the teaching of the Baal Shem Tov, the great and holy Baal Shem Tov, who, when asked what his life's mission was, his purpose in the world, he said, was to create holy eyes.

We invite ourselves tonight to do a meditation not only on the Hanukkiah, but on the people who are sitting with us at tonight's Friday night meal or tomorrow morning's Shabbat service or Saturday evening or Sunday, to ask ourselves in any given moment, are the lights before me means to my ends or are they ends in and of themselves? What a good question to ask. Is the person driving me to work, making my breakfast, is the person who serves in some way as a shamash, as an instrument in my life, can I be the one who lifts

them up? Even if they are instrumental in some way to something in my life, might I be the one who meditates upon their being and say, you know, I cannot reduce you, I will not reduce you.

This is the challenge, I think, of Hanukkah. And maybe, and this is the last thing, we're coming for a landing. Maybe this is a deeper meaning of why we put a Hanukkah in the window. Or next to the mezuzah on the doorpost, because the connection between the Hanukkah and the exodus from Egypt is absolutely inextricably interwoven. Leaving slavery meant that no human being could ever say, I will reduce you to a slave. And we put a Hanukkah next to the mezuzah to say the same thing.

In the window, too, to say to everyone in the world, when we walk by this window, in this house, in this heart, in these eyes, there is someone with whom you are safe. There is someone with whom you are safe. I will see you as God sees you. I will see you as God sees you. That's the work. That's the work. That's the promise. That's the practice. It's something that we should aspire towards, and we as a community should demand from our members, from all those who walk through our doors, wherever they might be, and it's something that we as a country should remember is the great hope of what this country offers.

It's citizens, those who live here, you are safe. We will protect you from objectification. We will protect you from commodification. You will never be reducible to a number on a page or to a cog in the wheel. I'd be proud to be an American like that, and I pledge an allegiance to that.

Please rise.