

Romemu Dvar Torah August 5, 2016

The Shabbat, maybe the entire weekend here at Romemu is dedicated to leaders and to journeys. And we'll add a third theme, which is the power of the number seven, which of course is so essential to the Jewish tradition, the number seven is so vital. So let's begin with sevens.

Seven communities gathered here from across the country, from California to New York. Hey, hey, hey. Right, this shul is our shul.

This shul... The power of these communities is profound and I hope you'll all have a chance to meet various representatives and leaders from the different communities. The power of that seven is to create a new world in some ways, we hope. Another seven that's happening tonight.

We're on the liminal space between the first day of the month of Av, the fifth Hebrew month, and the month of many different flavors, in the beginning, in the middle, in the end. But for me and for my wife Ariel, tonight marks the seventh anniversary of when we became parents and for me to become an Abba in the month of Av, the month of Father. I've learned a lot about being an Abba in the last seven years, I hope, both with my first son and then Tal and now Or.

But when I think about that vital role that a father and a mother or parents play, mother as fathers in their children's life, I can't help but think of journeying, which is the other theme, journeying and leadership. Because nothing tests your parenthood like traveling with three young children. So traveling both in Israel and then in Colorado and then coming back from Aspen just this past week, parenting and the power of parenting, it's like the stories about it and the ideals, nothing is as powerful in creating that or finding that place between the ideal and the real.

So you can read a thousand parenting books, right, anybody ever read a thousand? You can read every blog from Berkeley to, you have everything in your mind, you want to be a compassionate, loving parent. And then there's that moment, when after you've done everything you're supposed to do to be a loving, compassionate, expansive, patient parent, and your child in the backseat of the car, who will remain anonymous, is waking up your newborn, who has just fallen asleep after hours of trying to get into sleep, thank you to Ariel, and after you've gently chastised your beloved wife and said to her, be more patient, be more forgiving, you hear yourself utter these words, let me handle this, and you proceed to say again out loud, please stop or I will call the police, to your four and a half year old. You know, we all fall short, I mean, come on, we all fall short of every imaginable ideal, every imaginable goal, every imaginable perfection that we have placed before ourselves, we somehow fall short, because that's the nature of the human condition, we fall short.

There is, as my Rebbe would say, a huge gap between our ought and our is, how we ought to be and who we are in the world, there's always that wiggle room, it's hard to, to close that gap sometimes, and one thing that certainly doesn't help, is when we don't talk about what's true, what's real, one thing that certainly doesn't help us move from a place of ought and is being this far apart, is by saying, oh, they're not really that far apart, are they? Some

people call that denial, it's insidious, it's ever present, in some traditions they call that being asleep, and waking up meaning looking at what's true, what's real, what's there, what's present, not skirting it, not shifting, not squirming away from what's really there. I was in Aspen and there was a panel discussion, I was telling some friends about this panel discussion, where they had, it was about Israel, so everybody kind of, it was packed, because people like to see a good fight, and so there were, people were anticipating and, and one individual who, who wants to call out what he sees are serious issues with where the Israeli government is in relation to the Palestinians, with the occupation, with all other elements that are happening in Israel. And the other gentleman was agreeing almost completely with him, but he said one thing. He said, you know, we have a value in our tradition not to rebuke people in public, and we shouldn't be rebuking Israel in public. Now, this is not an Israel-Palestine conversation, please don't come after me after the sermon, I'm not getting to that, but one thing I wanted to say to him, which I didn't get a chance to say, which I want to say to you tonight, is, this is called a Tanakh. It's a Bible.

This is the greatest rebuke of our people that was ever written. And as far as I know, it's public. Part of the beauty of our tradition, part of the power of it, is that we don't shy away from what's ugly, what's not easy.

Is that we face it head on, our characters in the Torah, notwithstanding what the rabbis of the Talmud wanted to make of them, are far from perfect. There are many backseat moments in the Bible. The Torah is full of moments where someone does something and says, did I do that? Or we say that about them.

Being able to hold both of these narratives, both the narrative of power and the inevitable fall from power. Tomorrow morning in the reading about journeying and about leadership, Moses, our teacher, offers us a very deep lesson about what it is to hold both of these, to hold the ought and the is, to hold the past and the future, to hold all of these pieces together in one place. These are the journeys, the 42 stations of the Israelites in that wilderness, from slavery to freedom, as my friend and colleague Rabbi Sharon Bras would say, from degradation to dignity, from the place of when we are completely in a place of not who we are meant to be.

42 stations. B'yad Moshe v'Aaron, chapter 32, verse 2, V'yichtov Moshe et motza'ehem limase'hem alpi Adonai. And Moses wrote down their leaving, motza'ehem, limase'hem, as they journeyed forth into mase'hem, their journeys, alpi Adonai, by the command of the Divine.

V'eileh mase'hem limotza'ehem. And here we will recount their mase'hem limotza'ehem, their journeys to their starting places. It wasn't lost on the rabbis of the Talmud and later commentaries that verse 2 is very confusing.

It begins by saying Moses wrote down where they came from, everybody get this, motza'ehem, can you all say that, motza'ehem. Let's say it, where they came from, limase'hem, say mase'hem. Moses began by saying here is where you came from and here is where you went.

And then the verse begins to detail their journeys and it reverses. V'eileh mase'hem limotza'ehem. And these are their journeys to their starting places.

Which is it? Is it motza'ehem or mase'hem? Is it where they started from or their journeys? It says there are many different Torah on this. And I want to share this one that's particularly pointed from the Rabbi of the Warsaw Ghetto who wrote this in 1941. How to understand this reversal of journeys with origins? Where they began or where they were going? Where they were going was where they began.

Kol ha'tzarot eilu minei chavalim hayu legalu leglot e'or ha'shem. All of the trials, all of the tzarot were birth pangs that revealed the divine light. And so it wrote motza'ehem limase'hem alpi'adonai.

From where they started to where they journeyed was alpi'adonai. It was through God's command. Rakzeh achi.

Look, this is the difference. V'yichtov Moshe. V'sha'a sheketav achrei ha'masa'ot v'ha'tzarot.

V'ra'u motza'ehem limase'hem alpi'adonai. He says, the Torah tells us that Moses writes down their journeys from where they begin to where they arrive. And it says it was alpi'adonai, it was by God's command.

By the time Moses had written it down already, he was looking back at all of those trials and tribulations and he was saying it was really God's will. Motza'ehem limase'hem, it was from where they began, their beginnings were to bring them limase'hem to where they finally arrived. And only in retrospect could Moses say, V'yichtov Moshe alpi'adonai, Moshe could say, looking back, all of your journeys were connected to where you began, even though you didn't know it when you began it.

All of your detours were destinations. But then the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto says, the Torah doesn't leave us there. The Torah says, v'elei mas'ehem limotza'ehem, but to those who were in it, in the moment when they embarked from Mitzrayim, from Egypt or from whatever place of constriction, they didn't have that awareness that they would eventually arrive.

They were scared. They were confused. They were in their best place.

And the Torah makes room for both the retrospective revisioning and reformatting. The Torah makes room for the way that we look at a story and change it and uplift it. But it also says it's not Pollyannish.

In the moment you were scared, in the moment it wasn't clear, in the moment you had ways to go, the Torah makes room for the ought and the is, where you were and where you were going. The Torah doesn't imagine that we can make anything great again until we become true again. The Torah doesn't imagine that we can arrive in the Promised Land unless we have first done the work, moving from romance to real.

It's nice to look back and say, you know, it was all great over there. But when you were over there, you weren't saying it was great because when you were over here, you were thinking, it ain't great. And Torah says, if you want to be a mature spiritual individual, you have to hold both of those realities in one place.

You have to hold the ability to reformat what was and to hold the truth that when you were there, it wasn't that way. That you don't fall into some restorative model of the way things were, the way it was. If only we could go back there.

Lemot seyhém, lemas seyhém. When you left Egypt, it wasn't great. But you arrived.

You arrived. It's so dangerous for spiritual leaders or for politicians or for anyone in a position of leadership to lie about the way things are or the way things were. It's dangerous for lovers.

It's dangerous for friends. We can't get where we need to go until we honor where we've been. We can't get to where we need to go until we honor and tell the truth about where we have been and those things that took place there.

Our country and our people, they need the courage of leaders who stand up and say, one day we'll look back and see this trial and maybe see the blessing. As the Hasidic masters say, each and every one of those 42 places was a place to extract all of the great sparks of light in all those places. But during these nine days which began today, the nine days which are the saddest days of the Jewish calendar, our spiritual asana, our posture, is to look inward and say, what was true? Where is my hand? What is it that I have to name and claim in order to be true and honest? Because transformation doesn't happen until what is, is what is.

So I want to bless each and every one of you on this amazingly powerful weekend and especially to our Gen Fellowship. May God bless each and every one of us as leaders, as individuals, wherever we are in whatever world we live. To be able to walk the tightrope between romanticizing a past that never was and praying for a future that might be.

May the source of light bless each and every one of us with the honesty to be able to chart from Motzai Hem, L'masai Hem, from our beginnings to where we arrived and to know that place for the first time and have them work together for them not to hide. After all, this is our greatest legacy and it holds Motzai Hem and L'masai Hem. The truth about who we were, the truth about where we were, and the truth about who we could become.

In the coming week, as we enter into the nine days of Av, I want to bless each and every one of us that we are able to walk into the month of Av with a recognition of how powerful even one small moment of truth can be. May the one whose sign, whose chotam, whose ring finger, as it were, is in that truth be with us from Aleph to Tav, from beginning to end.