

Shabbat 05 31 19 Sermon

So, once in a year, Ahas Vashana, that's what the Torah says about Yom Kippur, Ahas Vashana, once a year. But that description is more apt to describe not my experience of Yom Kippur or any of the High Holidays, but what it's like when my wife and I actually have a chance to watch a movie. That once a year happened this past Saturday night, and we finally got around to watching a movie that has been all the rage since October. I don't know where we were since October, what we were doing. I remember seeing the trailer, but I didn't ever come around to seeing the movie. And then when we finally did see the movie, I remembered that I had seen the trailer and I thought I had bookmarked seeing that movie, but I was going to see it about six months ago or seven months ago.

So there it was, Saturday night. Some of you might have seen it, and if you have seen it, maybe raise your hands. A star is born. Yeah. No, not the 1976 version. The one from October, yeah, that one. Right, yeah? Okay. For those of you who never saw any of them or definitely didn't see this one, spoiler alert, I'm sorry, sorry, sorry, but you've had eight months, and unless you have three little boys like us, no excuse. For those of you who don't know the story, the movie tells the story of a country singer in this iteration named Jackson Maine. He's played by Bradley Cooper, and he meets a struggling songwriter played by Lady Gaga whose name is Ally. That's the name of the character, Ally and Jackson. They have this chance encounter one night when Jackson has just finished performing in front of literally tens of thousands of people as a musician, as a country pop singer, and he's made his way looking for more booze because he's addicted. He's popping pills, living with a deep void, and in his search for another bar to continue his drinking anesthetic, he stumbles into a bar where there is a kind of cabaret, there's an amazing thing going on, and he meets Ally. Jackson meeting Ally becomes what catapults Ally as a character into fame. And we're led to feel that there's a hopeful ending to the story, that it could all turn out all right, but of course it doesn't.

But at the center of the pivot in the movie where the energy of the movie elevates and intensifies, accelerates, where everybody jumps in is where Ally reveals to Jackson, Ally, the struggling waitress, reveals to this star descending from fame and fortune, reveals to him in an empty parking lot late in the morning, her gifts. She's just written a song, and it's a song that begins with a duet, with a conversation between Ally and Jackson. I don't know. Tell me something. I can't hear this part. Or do you need more? Is there something else you're searching for? You know this one. I'm on my way for you. All the good times I find myself Longing for a change. In the bad times I find myself. Tell me something, boy. Are you tired trying to fill that void? Or do you need more? Ain't it hard keeping it so hardcore? I'm falling. In all the bad times I fear myself Longing for a change. And in the bad times I fear myself. I'm off the deep end. Watch as I dive in. I'll never reach the ground. Crash through the surface Where they can't hurt us. We're far from the shallow now. We're far from the shallow now. Those words. We're far from the shallow now. Crash through the surface Where they can't hurt us. We're far from the shallow now. These two characters who are playing with What it is to be seen and known.

These two characters who are playing With what it is to have Into me you see. Intimacy. One of them standing in front of hundreds of thousands of people Who knows? But hiding

behind a surface as a performer But on the inside there's a void. And the other one who has been rejected because of her surface, because of how she looks And the way that the entertainment judges women Who has a gift deep on the inside that has to be surfaced. One diving deep the other rising high to break the surface they meet. And this conversation happens between the two of them. I'm falling in love. I'm falling into depth. And then this phrase Crash through the surface Where they can't hurt us. We're far from the shallow now.

I tell you, it isn't often that I hear a song and it stays with me in the way this one did. And I couldn't stop thinking about it and crying into it. And thinking about it and crying into it. And thinking why am I crying so much about this song. And why are we playing it on a loop over and over again. Over and over again. We must have listened to it my wife and I must have been a thousand times. And it is, of course, because it's a beautiful piece of art It's a work of art It's crafted with such texture. And the music and the way that the instruments and the vibrato and the forte, it's all amazing.

But it's that line that I kept coming back to Crash through the surface Where they can't hurt us We are far from the shallow now. And it really had me thinking about the question of surfaces and depths. And it had me thinking, of course, about this bigger question which is, Is there something in these lines that is archetypically something that all of us need to know. Is Ali singing and Jackson singing or Bradley and Lady. And who knows, are we singing this song in some way? Does it resonate because there is a nugget of truth here? That is absolutely perennial. It is timeless and it is spaceless. It is everywhere. The ki ilu omet shalat varim. It's the depths of the words. And I mean that in both ways.

And so when I open up tomorrow morning's parashat ha-shavua, when I open up the Torah wisdom tomorrow morning, there's also shallow and there's deep. The Torah itself also has shallow and deep. And so I'll describe the shallow, and then hopefully we'll be far from the shallow in five minute. The shallow tomorrow morning is the end of the book of Leviticus. The third of the five books of Moshe come to a close with a scary parashat. A couple of chapters of the Bible that you might want to skip. The Torah tells us on the shallow surface that God is making a tnai, a conditional statement with the people of Israel. If you keep my Torah like good little boys and girls, then it's going to be great. But if not, no good. A quid pro quo God. A God who says if you are obedient, then you will reap the rewards of your obedience. But if you are oy vavoy, oy vavoy Disobedient You will be punished.

The parashat begins with three famous words Im b'chukotai t'lechu Im b'chukotai t'lechu If you will walk, t'lechu If you will walk, b'chukotai. Can you all say that? B'chukotai If you will walk, b'chukotai If you will walk in my laws. The word in Hebrew, chok, is a law. If you will walk in my laws, the Torah says It will be good. But The mystical masters have another reading of these three words, as you can imagine. As we crash to the surface, where those words can't hurt us, we're going far from the shallow within a story about service and death. The word chok, law, is also a small world, because the word chok, which means law, If you will walk in my laws, also means inscribed, engraved. Laws were engraved on stone. But engraving is not writing. Writing is on the surface.

When you write a ketubah, it is written on the surface. The pen, the writing instrument, moves glides across the surface. But that's not ha-ki-ka Ketubah, writing, is not ha-ki-ka

Chok, law. Chok, that particular word in Hebrew for law means something that is deep. It's embedded, it's a groove, it goes underneath the surface. Im b'chukotai teylechu is If you will walk with me in the deep place, if you will find the deep pattern, if you will be below the surface, if you will crash through. What it appears to be. What the universe appears to be. What life appears to be. If you will break through, if you will be with me, if you will be with yourselves, if you will look for depth. If you will be those who are calling forth that which is not visible, not obvious. That which can't be known in one glance or one look but has to be explored, deep diving. On humans, on issues in communities, in relationships, crash through the surface. Im b'chukotai If you will walk with me in deep relationship.

The Hasidic mystical masters are imagining a god who says Enough with the superficial small talk. Here we are, alone you and I in an empty parking lot. And I want you to show me your deep place. Show me where it moves. Show me the grooves that have been in your life. Show me your depth. What an amazing turn on that word Im b'chukotai teyleichu. Not if you will be obedient little girls and boys, but if you will be men and women, people, humans who look for the depths.

And maybe that's the reason why it comes at the end of the book of Leviticus, a book dealing with rules and laws. And the most salient, memorable feature of the whole book is a disease that afflicts humans on their skin. Original skin is seeing surfaces. Everywhere a surface. Kidoshim teyu, be holy, says the Torah, means, be deep. Don't be phony deep, Deep for the sake of deep. Deep for the sake of cool, but deep from a place of mystery and curiosity, deep. And God says, don't just do that with humans. Maybe do it with me. Maybe with me, herself, the Divine One says. Will you let me run deep in you, in your bones? Will you let me into those places?

What a remarkable injunction. A primary commandment on a Shabbat and on a weekend when we will lift up one of the most thorny political and communal issues of our time, Israel in the American Jewish landscape. Imagine a world where we say to people, I'm walking and marching with the land of Israel, with the state of Israel this coming Sunday. And if you want to know why, it's deep. It's deep if you want to know why, let's talk. It's complicated because things that are complicated are in the depths. The depths hold nuance. The depths can hold pain and pleasure. But if you want me to give it to you on one foot right now on the surface I don't want to live in surfaces. I won't say anything. Imagine that with people. Imagine that with relationships. Say to somebody, listen, you have a very complicated relationship with your parents. It's like, it's deep, it's deep. You want the surface or do you want the depths?

Community is no different. You join a community. You come to shul on a Friday night, on a Saturday morning. The rabbi is there for you. A member of the community is there for you. Why do you join a community? Well, you can list off all the things that you read on the membership packet. You see, it's right here I joined the community because the membership bridge, the covenant says right here, I'm entitled to two tickets. I'm going to have pastoral care, right. Membership is all about what I get. Is that deep? You join a community because it touched you somewhere in here. You said, you know what, if I don't join I'm not a model of what it is to step in. If I don't pay dues, there won't be a Romemu. I don't know what I get for it, but I know what I've gotten from it. I don't know what I'm

getting for it, but I know what I've gotten from it. And so because of that, I wanted to be here for a long time. It hit me deep, it crashed through my surfaces. It opened me up. That's worth the price of admission That's membership. It's not quid pro quo instrumentality, it's not a gym membership, it's not a car dealership. It's a community. A community that disappoints sometimes and sometimes elevates. A community that is complicated because In b'chukotay teylechu. Crash through the surface where they can't hurt us. We are far from the shallow now. In b'chukotay teylechu. Imagine a world like that, because we are living in surfaces, friends.

Our world has become a place where complicated international treaties used to be delicately handled and nuanced, but now they get tweeted out. We live in surfaces. Celebrities are just people who just know how to get everybody to look at them at their surfaces. It's just surfaces everywhere.

I was privileged to grow up in a house with very strong paternal figures, very strong women in my house. My mother, she lived and be well. My sisters Bettina and Amara. But at the head of the house was my grandmother, my mother's mother, Ellie. And her two sisters, the remarkable Gertrude, aunt Gert. And her sister, the youngest, Corrine whom we lovingly called Cookie. All three women were remarkable. All three were leaders, strong, wise, patient, loving, considerate.

But of all three of those powerful women Corrine, aunt Cookie, was the most mysterious. Corrine's surface was almost impenetrable. She would be spotted somewhere in New York City by the New York Post because she wore these beautiful big hats on her bike, riding regally. She lived alone, spent most of her time educating herself in classes at Columbia University during the day and other amazing things. But she was above all things, a woman who concealed more than she revealed. But we always knew that if we crashed through the surface we would be very far from the shallow with Cookie. Found out five minutes before the surface tonight that my Cookie passed away tonight. She was 96, 97 years old. And so I'm thinking about you, Cookie. I'm thinking how you had such a deep disdain for the rendering of complexity into a pocket-size aphorism. How you had disdain for those who spoke more than they listened, who didn't work on the deeply necessary human trait known as curiosity. Reverence for your self-determination and independence. Reverence for your brilliance and wisdom.

She never married but I have to end on a note about marriage. I have friends who are getting married in a week. I have profound insight into why this weekend is this weekend Almost done, boo-boo I know, I know, I just told them, coming in for a landing right now so, tomorrow night is Yom Yerushalayim. Tomorrow night is Yom Yerushalayim. Tomorrow night is Yom Yerushalayim. It's the day that we celebrate Jerusalem. And I don't want to be political, but I want to say that when Jerusalem was destroyed when Jerusalem was destroyed, we instituted part of the wedding ceremony. We'd have a broken glass at the end of the ceremony as a commemoration of that destruction, as a reminder that that had taken place. And that too is a very painful part of a rendering. At the moment of your height as a couple of your joy, of your simcha, we have to remind you of a temple that was destroyed 2,000 years ago.

And rabbis like me try to render that in a new idiom, a new way, a new relevance. And tonight I have another one. I understand tonight that as the married couple, the beloved, these two amazing lovers stand ready to exit, and they need that exit velocity. That comes with being in front of all these people. Taking them they stand together holding hands. And they take that leg, that is the leg of walking, of falling, of bumping, the leg of telechu, of walking in the world. And they take it and they break something, and they crash through the surface. And they say to each other, Come what may, we will be deep with each other. Come what may, we will crash through the surface, crash through the surface where they can't hurt us. We are far from the shallow now.

I want to bless each and every one of you. God bless us that we have the profound responsibility to step into community and to commit. We have a profound responsibility to crash through surfaces with those we meet on the street, those whom we see with two dimensionality and say, whoa, wow surface and that we have the power to surface. Our gifts, our voice If we walk with depth, If we walk with depth. So maybe, you know, I don't know I'm not the only person we want to hear Ilana sing more, right? So Ilana, just take us home with the rest of that song because everybody knows If you all can rise up, go rise up. I'm off the deep end. Watch as I dive in I'll never meet the ground Crash through the surface Where they can't hurt us We are far from the shallow now Everybody I'm off the deep end Watch as I dive in I'll never meet the ground Crash through the surface Where they can't hurt us We are far from the shallow now In the shallow, shallow In the shal-la-la-la-low In the shallow, la-la-la We're far from the shallow now In the shallow, la-la-la-low In the shal-la-la-la-la-low In the shal-la-la-la-la-low We're far from the shallow.