

## Sermon Shabbat 08 17 18

So did you hear the one about the rabbi and the prostitute? Unfortunately I heard a couple of people say which one, that's not appropriate. No, seriously. The Talmud has an amazing story about a particular rabbi, Masachet Avodah Zarah and tractate Avodah Zarah, particular rabbi who was known because he was known for that. And one day it dawned on him, believe it or not, that he was doing the wrong thing. Right? How is that possible? Okay, we know. He woke up.

And so, experiencing the absolute sense that he had completely ruined his life and others' life, he went about trying to do tshuva, trying to do the work of returning, of repair, of fixing. And the story goes that this certain rabbi, he went to ask everybody for forgiveness, and they all kind of said to him, well, go ask God. He threw his hands up to heaven and said, God, help me. He said, don't ask me. Went to the mountains, and the mountains said, well, why don't you ask the clouds? And the clouds said, why don't you ask the earth? And everybody was being asked. And nobody wanted to give him tshuva.

Nobody wanted to offer him this absolution. And so finally, the Talmud records, Hiniyach Rosho ben Birkav, he put his head between his knees in a kind of infant posture, the way a baby inside of the womb might hold itself, and said out loud, It would seem that the matter rests in my hands. Whereupon he let out an exhale and passed away.

The Talmud says, There is one who can acquire their world in one moment. With all of the difficulties of this story, and hopefully we're not going to get too caught, I chose a story because of that phrase. Had it been another story, I would have chosen it equally. But that phrase, It would appear that the matter rests with me. You. Me. Us. You. Me. We. Together. Me.

It's so important, in the season of returning, to acknowledge what parts of this process belong to us. What parts of the process that are engaged in Elul, in the month of returning, have to do with, It's up to me. Taking responsibility. Saying, It's in my hands. That justice, that equality, that love, that fearlessness, that courage, that making amends, that repairing, all of it. As the Buddha said, Be a light unto yourself.

It isn't up to Yom Kippur to do it. But Yom Kippur is not going to do it. It won't matter if we sit for five hours in Yom Kippur, starving, or forty, starving. The Talmud in Masakhet Yehoma says clearly that Yom Kippur is not a day that will do it for you. It's up to us. Yom Kippur is a preparation. It's a kind of a container where we can see things clearly. It's a softening of, or a thawing out of the heart. It is that amazing possibility that comes with that day. But it is up to us. The Talmud says very clearly, that the things between people, It doesn't matter. It's up to us.

We have our fate in our hands. There was a great rabbi named the Berditchever, Lev Yitzhak ben Sarastasha, the great Hasidic master of the 18th century, who on tomorrow morning's Torah reading, Parashat Shoftim, introduces us to a unique way of hearing the famous verse in the Torah, Justice, justice shall you pursue. Tzedek, tzedek tirdof.

Says the Kiddush Ad-Levi, says the Berditchever, this teaches us a basic principle, that as below, so above. That what we do here has reverberations above, that as we live our lives here, there's a reciprocity. For him it's metaphysical, for us it might just be passing it forward. That when we do tzedekah, when we do acts of righteousness and goodness and love, there is a correspondence above. And so the Berditchever said, if you want to show up on the day of judgment and be judged favorably, then go about the whole month judging everyone favorably. That will set off a causal chain.

My favoring you and seeing you in a good light will then cause God to see me in a good light. We know this principle from the secret, right? This law of correspondence, that the universe itself is alive and dynamic. And when we mirror Nuran, the universe, it reflects it back to us. When we smile at somebody, it gives them an invitation to smile back. We know it. We know often in our own lives, we have come with a certain attitude and then found, lo and behold, that the other person is so angry. Why are you so angry? I was angry. And then when we change our attitude, all of a sudden we're happy, we see somebody like, oh, the world is smiling at me. Not always.

It's not a hard and fast rule. But the Reditcher invites us into this verse, tzedek, tzedek. Why does it need to be repeated? Justice, justice, of course, because we have to really pursue justice. And one commentator says, even the way that you pursue justice has to be just. Tzedek, tzedek, Tirdof. But the Reditcher says, no, tzedek, when you are charitable, it sets off a charity above. And we might spread that large. We might spread that wide. That if it is up to us, eina davar tolui elebi, if it's up to me, if the only thing that I can control is what I can control, then what are the things that I am seeding in the world around me? Elul is a time to think about where our hands reach and where they don't.

The word elul, we studied, we were just up at this amazing retreat. Romemu had its first ever yeshiva retreat this past week. Where 46 individuals came up and sat in silence and watched the mind and got really clear about another well-known teaching in tomorrow's reading.

Shovtim v'shotrim, titen lecha b'schol shearecha, says the Torah, put guards and policemen in all of your gates and say to Hasidic masters, what are the gates where we have to have guards? The seven gates of perception, the two eyes, the two nostrils, the mouth and the ears, seven gates of perception. Place guards there, because it's not what you see, but how you see it. It's not the thing, the object perceived, but the perceiver itself.

And we got that on retreat, right Arnie? We got that. We're sitting there on retreat and within five minutes, you stop and realize how much baggage we bring to each and every moment's perception. Oh, the gates are really intense. The gates are full. The gates have got a story. The gates have the past. They have the future. They are the gates. And so said the Buddha, make yourself into a lamp. Be an owner of your own perceptions, of your own experience. Take your own reality into your own hands. Tzedek Tzedek Yerdov, plant seeds proactively of creating the world that you want to see.

That's the work of Elohim. So how do you do that? Well, one thing is, we can stop two minutes a day between now and Rosh Hashanah, stop and get quiet and look at your thoughts. If you're not into that kind of thing, okay. Then proactively, possibly, by doing acts

of generosity, we will build a more generous world. Find a place in your life where you are feeling that you are withholding. And imagine that the matter rests with you. Find a place in your life where you are withholding forgiveness and the matter rests with you. Find a place in your life where you'd like to have more joy, more laughter, and say, Ein ha-davar talui ala bi. It is up to me. All of those on the individual level, but now imagine a bigger story than each of you sitting here tonight. Maybe for people watching online tonight or who will watch this week. Maybe for people who are part of this community that you're going to see later tonight, that you said, let me tell you what Rabbi Inger said.

Here's the communal element of this moment. Here's the Romemu specific element of this moment. Many of you in this room know for the last two weeks, I've been mentioning something about a building. Oh, this little thing. Some of you said like, oh, I didn't know. Some of you said, what? I never heard.

Ten years ago, in the winter of 2008, this Romemu community, which is now almost 600 families strong, moved into the building that is 30 feet across from this church, 30 feet south as you leave that door. It's called the Grosvenor House and you can see it plain as day when you walk out those doors. It is 10,000 square feet of juicy, available, open, exciting, Romemu programming. Into that building, God willing, will be an early childhood center based upon the principles of Neo-Hasidism. Into that building will be a place where this entire community can enjoy adult education and the offices of Romemu. They're all of those things, God willing, will happen.

But there's a catch. We need generous individuals to step forward from within our community. We are so close to closing on this building. And just to give you some perspective, I calculated this week the number of people who have walked by this building since we moved in ten years ago. If you average five people per minute walking by from 106th Street to 105th Street, 13 million people have walked by in a 12-hour day along this block. Let me tell you about one or two of those people that walked by Romemu.

One person walked by Romemu on a Yom Kippur morning seven years ago. And when she saw people with yoga mats outside of a church with yarmulkes on, she said, something funky is going on in that church. That's the kind of place that I want to go check out. She walked in, she never left. And not only did she leave, but she became a rabbi and she's becoming a rabbi. And her daughter was the first bat mitzvah in this community.

We have other stories of people who walked into Romemu and said, I have never been to a Jewish community like it's just tonight. Freddie. And we know that there are other communities like this around the world. Thank God we are not the only one. But in this incredible city there are thousands upon thousands of humans who need us to acquire that building. Because in that building, in that building will become a practice center for human evolution.

That practice center will become a model of what it is to live a dynamic, alive, elevated Jewish life. That building over there, not to abandon this one, this, God willing, will also be an amazing place. It will be part of a campus. It's a whole vision. You'll know about it. But that building has a timeline.

We have less than a month left to close the gap. And we are so close. I needed to let you all know about that tonight on the communal level. For each and every one of you on an individual level, the teachings of the Berditchever, the teachings of that rabbi who put his head between his knees and said, the matter is in my hands. I've got the whole world in my hands. The matter is not far off for you to say, me, who will go get it? No, not me, but be.

Not who, but me. The process of tshuvah is a process of returning projections of power, projections that others will save us, projections of the others who will take the matter into their hands. No, says that rabbi. No, say all of us during this three weeks at the Rosh Hashanah. It's in my hands. It's in our hands.

The great Rav Kook said that tshuvah, repentance or repair is inevitable. And I would like to say to the great Rav Kook, I agree with you. Tshuvah cosmically is inevitable, but individually is not. It's a choice. I believe in the power that each and every one of you have. I believe in the power of this community. I believe Bayomkipur will be ready. It's in our hands.

Please rise.