

Shabbat 01 04 19 Sermon

We began our year with the theme of Emet. I'm going to talk about a little piece of Emet, of truth, tonight. And I want to begin by asking an obvious question that, for anybody that's traveled, you know, which I just finished traveling in about 12 days, anybody who's ever traveled a little bit knows this is a fundamental question and it kind of invites a typology, even of, like, different kinds of people.

How many of you like asking for directions? Love it. The vast majority of you did not. Asking for directions. Such, so obvious, so clear. Who needs it anymore anyway, with GPS and with Waze and all the other, but, like, asking for directions, or at least asking Arthur Fried. Those of you, that's an inside joke, and those who got it, got it, but if not, someone who knows everything about everywhere and how to get there. Sorry, Arthur.

Something about asking for directions, something about asking for advice. It's so obvious that if we think about our lives and we think about how we want to improve our lives and New Year's resolutions and all that that is of a piece at this time of the year, we are fundamentally up against one big problem, which is none of us likes to ask anybody for advice, and we don't like taking it either. At the heart of human independence, at the heart of human motivation is a fundamental resistance project. It starts very young. Would you please put on your coat, it's cold outside, I'm not wearing my coat. And I'm not wearing it because you asked me to wear it. I am going to be my own person. We have within us, thank God, hard wire. A fundamental resistance project. When Freud came along and talked about our ego defenses, it wasn't new to any parent. It wasn't new to any one of us.

Try to get yourself to do something that you advise yourself to do. Taking our own advice. There's an entire industry now, thank goodness, called coaching. We have some good coaches here tonight. Ask a coach or a therapist or a husband or a wife. When was the last time someone turned to their partner, their beloved, trusted friend, and said, thank you so much for telling me something that I needed to know that I refused to know, and now it's clear and obvious to me. Here you go, thank you.

At the heart, and I mean that, and choose that word with deep precision. At the heart of the human being, at the heart of the human being is a tug of war between things that are skillful and unskillful, things that build us and things that destroy us. And at the heart of the great mystery, the koan, as it were, for those who know what a koan is, it's a kind of zen riddle. The intractable, mobious strip of human consciousness is this. How is it that we always wind up shooting ourselves in the foot? How is it that we always get in our own way? You don't have to look very far in our tradition, the Jewish tradition, in the Torah, to see maybe the greatest example of it. In Pharaoh. Pharaoh, who was willing to go down with the ship, no matter what he was shown, no matter what advice he got from his wise men, he was obdurate. No way. You're going to lose it all. Stay the course. Self-destruction is at the heart of the Exodus narrative, and it's not just Pharaoh. Jewish people, too.

Next couple of minutes, I want to unpack a scene in the Exodus story, but it's really me. It's you. It's every one of us, because it's not about something that happened 2,000 years ago. It's me. It's you. It's tomorrow. It's yesterday. It's a week from now. So just to give you

where we are, Moses is the Redeemer. He's a liberator. He's the only one to ever get out of Egypt alive until he takes everybody else out. He, of course, doesn't grow up in slavery. He's grown up in the house of royalty, helping his father, grandfather, whatever he is, Pharaoh. He doesn't know the taste that his brothers and sisters have. He's free already, so he knows how to free others. And Moshe, like the bodhisattva in the tradition of Buddhism, goes back into the lion's mouth. He goes back into Egypt. He fights. He doesn't want to become the Chosen One, but God says, You have to go back. He says, No. Not me. Anyone but me. God says, No, you. No. Yes. Yes. No. Okay. He goes back.

He comes to the Jewish people. He comes to the Israelites, as they were known then, and he says to them, Hey, I'm here. Time to go. What do they say? Well, first they say, Great. Let's see what you got. He shows them, things get worse. He comes to Pharaoh. He says, Pharaoh, let my people go. Pharaoh says, Not over my, right? It's not happening. He comes back to the Israelites, and they say to him, Wow. Thank you, but no thank you. No good deed goes unpunished. Thank you so much, Moses. We appreciate it. But life was great before you came, and now it's much worse.

And in last week's Torah portion, when we finish, Moses comes back to God, and he says, God, what kind of setup was that? You send me to the Jewish people. You give me the keys. I come to them with the keys. It gets worse, and now everybody hates me. And that's where this, tomorrow morning's reading, picks up. And here's where the Israelites and their learning happens.

Moses comes to God and says, You know, God, it's not good. And God says this. You go back, and you tell the Israelites, you need to know my real name. Not the name that I gave Moses, and not even the name that I gave Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. A new name. A name called was, is, and will be. Yod-Heh-Vav-Heh. And then God really gets ramped up. God says, You know what? I'm going to give them these four verbs. You tell them that I'm going to take them. I'm going to save them. All verbs. Action. Dynamic. God says, Trust me! Now Moses goes back to the Jewish people. He tells them everything God said. And they say, The text tells us, they couldn't hear Moses, they didn't listen to him because of kotzer ruach. Come back to that in a moment. They couldn't hear him. Because of short ruach. Short breath. And hard labor. Just go with me here for a minute. What was God's response to Moshe telling him? That things had only gotten worse. God says, Tell them. You'll see. I will take you. And I have a new name to give you. First of all, is it really a new name? It's not a new name. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob have also heard Yod-Heh-Vav-Heh.

And this leads the 11th century exegete Rashi to say, What must this verse mean? Not that God made known to Moses and to the people a new name. But an aspect of was, is, and will be. And these are the words of Rashi. They're amazing because of our theme of Emet that I said we'll explore tonight. Emet says, Rashi, in the context, I don't have my word, I know it by heart. In the context, The truth of my name is this. That my promises will be fulfilled. And Rashi, when he reads that, Now reads something very profound, a piece of advice for all transformation, all coaches, all of us.

What Moses was told to tell the Israelites who couldn't hear, who resisted freedom was that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob didn't understand that a promise made might not be fulfilled in that person's lifetime. They didn't understand the aspect of divinity that is the promises

here in the past, and here's the present, and here's the future. They didn't get that promises' transformation takes time. Go back to the Jewish people, says God to Moshe, and in Rashi's interpretation, go back and tell them not a new name, but an aspect of the name meaning patience. An aspect of the name meaning if you didn't see it yet doesn't mean it's not yet happening. An aspect of the organic, organismic like a natural growth. And with that you can understand now the phrase short ruach.

He came back to a people who said, I don't have patience. I don't have time to wait for you to unfold an organic process. I want to be free now. Give it to me now. For Moses to come along and to say to them, here's an aspect of God. Here's an aspect of a process. Trust me. Trust the process. Don't be so brittle. Don't be so short. How short is your spirit?

I was sitting with a friend in Florida, and I wonder if he's watching. I won't say his name, but a dear friend of mine who's been sick now for the last four months. Woke up one morning, went to his physical a couple of weeks before and they found a mass in his body. I said to him, how are you doing? He said, you know, it's a process. I get it. It's my body, but my body will heal on its own time. I can't rush it, he says. But what I can do, he said, is I want to be healed. I have a desire to be healed. I am absolutely ready. My resistance to healing is down because I know that it might not happen today, but it'll take some time.

So what's remarkable about transformation is that anybody that's ever talked to you about making a change in their life, it's not that we make resolutions or commitments or we know good advice. Someone tells us which way to go. No, it's that we reject it at the first sign of the wrong turn. At the first moment when someone's advice that we were finally able to hear doesn't go exactly as planned, we leave. Or at a moment in our lives where we're in a longer process, we jettison in the middle. So Moshe comes back to the people and says to them, your resistance, while understandable, it's not going to help you if you want to be free. How deep is your dream? What are you willing to sacrifice for it? How long are you willing to put your nose to the grindstone?

So I was listening. I think when you're on vacation, you listen to a lot of things that you don't normally listen to or don't have time to. I don't know if I would normally say it, but Dave Chappelle. Can I say that? I just said his name. First time that Rabbi Dave Chappelle was at the Roman Synagogue. So it's another context entirely, but he was talking about the arc of history, talking about a lot of things. And one of the things he spoke about and spoke to was how last year somebody had been struggling in the news, there had been a big scene, and this person had been really hurt by something that they'd been exposed to and said out loud, now that I've seen this or this has happened to me, my dream is done. I can't imagine my dream ever being fulfilled after having seen this or having been hurt by this or having this obstacle in front of me. And Chappelle went on to say, it's a good thing Martin Luther King, he said, had a dream that wasn't easily squelched. I'm not going to get into the details of what the comparison was, but he then said something called a brittle spirit. He said, when people have a brittle spirit, their dreams shrivel. He said, let's not have a brittle spirit.

And I would say tonight, let's not have a short spirit. Transformation takes years. Changing society takes years. Rabbi Yisrael Salanter said, one of the great rabbis of Jewish history said that to change one character trait is harder, he said, than learning the entire Talmud. To

change one character trait is harder than the entire Talmud. So the diet didn't work. Try again. So coming to shul didn't work. Do it again.

We don't have the luxury to be brittle spirits or to be short-spirited. The work is too important. It's too vital. Freedom is at stake. We need to join the resistance movement against resistance. Resistance training means that when you meet an obstacle, you say, okay, no great thing has ever been done without being first met with an obstacle. That's what happens. You start something, you come to people and say, it's going to be freedom, you're going to get yourself in order, and right away, everything inside of you will assail that commitment. Imagine a world, imagine a world where when we experience resistance or impediment, we breathe into it and say, this too. Imagine a world where as we clenched our fist, we saw our own vulnerability expressed in a little nick, in the blood that then went over the grievances and said, oh, open my hand. This is the way of it. This is the way of it.

There's a lot of work to do inside of us and in this community and beyond these walls. And it would do all of us a lot of good. To root ourselves in a commitment to seeing the process through to the end, regardless and irrespective of or maybe in spite of and because of the expectation that it won't be easy. It won't be easy to change this community, this city, this state, this country. But if we're in it for the long haul, truth tells us, as we said at Yom Kippur, that the story, and whether it's a good one, depends on where you end it. Is it N or MF? The great Rebbe from Kotz, Menachem Mendel Morgenstern, said that every day, twice a day, Jews say the Shema. And we say words that he said I find very troubling. I don't get them. Let these words that I give you today we read twice a day. Let these words, God says, that I have given you today, let them be on your heart. And the Kotzka Rebbe said, the Torah should have said, let these words that I command you today be in your heart. Why on your heart? So Rebbe said, oh, of course. We're not always ready to hear these words. And so we place them on our heart every day, daily placing them on our heart until one day when we are ready and when the gates are at the right moment. Something opens and those words that we placed there, they drop in.

Taking advice from others or directions from Arthur Fried might not be easy. I guarantee you that someone in your life right now, either sitting with you or somewhere knows what it is that you need to stick with in order to find a way for those words to seep in. I invite you tonight or sometime in the near future, before you forget this sermon, might be in an hour, to ask someone you trust to tell you the advice that you need to follow. And then ask them to find a way to have you stick to it, especially when everything in you is saying, my spirit is short. It's a marathon.

Please rise.