

Shabbat 03 29 19 Sermon

So as a parent of young children, I spend a lot of my time thinking about getting things done. Or more accurately, well, how to get others or those kids to do the things that I want them to get done. And usually the things that I want them to do or get done, I want them often to do it not just and get it done, but also do it differently. Not just achieving the goal, but also doing it the way I think is the best way for them to do it. And my wife and I, we spend an inordinate amount of time thinking and reading about what works when it comes to motivating cooperation and mindfully managing how we connect or offer feedback to our boys. That's kind of a full-time educational agenda for us.

But you don't have to be a parent to be in this conversation. We're all in this business. Each and every one of us here is in the business of motivating others to get stuff done or motivating ourselves to get things done. It's the human business, right? So whether it's a lover or a partner, if it's your parents, if it's employees that you manage, fellow citizens in this polity, we are all in that business. Accomplishment, goals, results, measurements, all of these are the words that we employ when we speak of progress, which is what it's all about, right? A success, achievement. Getting stuff done is the hallmark of a successful and highly functioning human being.

Getting stuff done together is the hallmark of a successful and highly functioning team. And getting others to get stuff done is the hallmark of a successful manager or leader. But we all know that it isn't easy. Is it? Motivating others, not to mention working with our own resistance, isn't easy at all. Getting things done, GTD, David Allen wrote a book about getting stuff done. Getting things done, GTD. Or any one of the myriad of management software programs like Asana and Todoist and Basecamp and any of the other technological advances that have aided us immensely in getting things done. Those tools and techniques make accomplishing stuff easier, but anyone who's ever used one knows it ain't enough.

The problem with getting things done is even more complicated when we factor in that we human beings are not machines. We don't just put in an algorithm and out it comes. We, each and every one of us, go through multiple days every day. If we judge our days by our emotional feeling tone, there are moments we feel more efficient, more available, and other moments we feel completely unavailable, unable to work. Our emotional equilibrium has been destabilized. We are working with a dysregulated system and getting stuff done at that moment is tough. And I wonder to myself, is there something, a secret, to getting stuff done? Is there some organic principle, some prioritization, some way that we could find the secret sauce to motivating others and ourselves, hopefully, to see through the things that we want, to see ourselves finish, complete, accomplish, achieve? Might the Torah have a story to tell us about that? Might the Torah give us a piece of insight or wisdom into what it is that we are really asking when we ask ourselves to finish something, to do something. Hey, can we just get out the door in the morning?

So here's a story. Here's a story that, from our weekly wisdom, tomorrow morning, known as Shemini, Parshat Shemini, which is chapter 9 through 11 of the third book of the five books of Moshe, Leviticus, Vayikra. And it's a story in this weekly wisdom tomorrow that is a tragic story, a horribly tragic story that has an ending, though, that finishes the story with a

lesson that speaks directly to this question that I've asked and to me and you. It's something I learned this week in the most profound way, more profoundly than I had ever learned it before. It came home to me. It hit me. And that this story not only finishes the tragic story, it's not just the end of the story, but it also has within it, packed within it, I personally believe, maybe the Torah's most profoundly important message for us to not only know, but to live in our moment-to-moment life. That's a lot, right? Here's a story, but a little bit of context before I give you the actual end of the story. But here's a story.

The book of Vayikra is a book all about this tabernacle in the wilderness, in the desert, in the Midbar. This tabernacle, this portable prayer space, this portable temple, as it were, has been built meticulously and with great attention to detail, and it finally will be open for business. But before this mishkan, this tabernacle, could open for business, there had to be a seven-day celebration to inaugurate its grand opening. The seven-day celebration, known as the Yimei Miluim, the seven days of celebration for the tabernacle, had, though it was a seven-day celebration, an eighth day.

The eighth day is, of course, the name of the parasha is Shemini, the eighth day. And on that eighth day, a whole manner of things were told in the Midrash, in the rabbinic lore, that that eighth day was the first day of the month of Nisan, and it was as great a day as the creation of heaven and earth. It was like a wedding. It was a big chasana, a big wedding celebration. God and humanity, it was a big to-do. Getting tickets was not easy. At the end of this eighth day, the Torah tells us about the preparation of the first official sacrifice, the ecstasy that accompanied the successful receiving of the human offering to God. And at the very end of that ecstatic moment, when everything in the world was perfect, tragedy strikes.

Aaron, the older brother of Moses, of Moshe, who has four children, Nadav, Avihu, Elazar, and Itamar. Four boys. These two of the two older ones, Nadav and Avihu, bring a strange fire, the Torah tells us. Nadav and Avihu, whose names literally mean generous one, and he's my dad. The text tells us that they bring this strange fire that was not commanded. That's all we know about it. And a fire comes out of heaven and kills the two boys. We could and should spend all of our time trying to understand this horrible moment. And we at Romemu, and in other places, we have spoken many times about Nadav and Avihu, and trying to comprehend the incomprehensible. Suffice to say that it defies, the story defies clear answers and any solidly satisfying solutions.

But I'd like to focus on the aftermath of the horrible moment. This emotionally destabilizing moment when Aaron is in shock, when all of the children of Israel, all the Israelites, are crying this trefa, they are crying this horrible event. Something gets lost often and it needs to be raised up. I pick up in chapter 10, verse 16. Moses inquired about the goat of sin offering and it had already been burned. He was angry with Elazar and Itamar, Aaron's remaining sons. The Torah tells us that the interruption of the tragedy, interrupted this sacrificial moment. And Moses comes back to the scene to find out what happened. Did you finish what you had started? And he turns to his two nephews, Elazar and Itamar. The text tells us painfully, in a way it's dripping with pathos, they are called the remaining children. The notarim.

And Moses interrogates them and says, what happened? I come back and I see that the offering that was intended to be offered and then eaten by the priests has been completely

consumed. There's nothing left for you to eat. How could you? He says to the two remaining boys, are you with me? He says to the two destabilized, emotionally torn apart children. Why didn't you finish what you started? What happened? The whole community was waiting and expecting that you would finish the eating of that offering and that would bring atonement because that was the technology. But you screwed it up. You left it on the altar. It's all burned up now. And I'm your Uncle Mo. And I'm angry. Why did you not eat the sin offering? I have given you a command, Moses says to his two nephews, remaining as they are. Why have you not done what I commanded you?

And then, verse 19, maybe the most important verse in understanding how to approach achievement, accomplishment, life, maybe. And Aaron speaks to his younger brother. Today they have committed their sins before their Lord. Aaron says to Moses, see this day they brought the sin offering and the burnt offering. We have done everything you asked us. Aaron says to his younger brother, and such things have befallen me. Such things have befallen me. Your older brother, your older brother, my two boys, your two nephews. We are ripped apart and you ask me about a sin offering? You ask me about finishing the task that has been presented? Had I eaten it? If I had eaten it, would God have been happy? And Moses, verse 20, and this closes the story. And Moses heard, and it was good in his eyes.

He had been rebuked by his older brother. He had been rebuked by his older brother who told him that before you correct, you must connect. Before you correct me. Before you look at me as a cog in a wheel in a system. Before you give me marching orders. Before you worry yourself whether or not I finished the project on time and the deadline. Before you tell me I better get my clothes on so I can get to school on time. Before you hit me. Before you make me into an instrument for whatever anxiety, whatever system, whatever thing you think must be accomplished because of what you think must be done on your timeline, before you correct, you must connect.

The fundamental assertion of our tradition is that we human beings spend six days working. We spend six days getting stuff done, accomplishing, checking things off. But one day a week we stop human doings and we become human beings. We prioritize what is always, always, always already the most important and most powerfully efficient motivator, which is relationship. As Martin Buber called it, an I-you or I-thou, not an I-it relationship. How powerful are the words of the older brother here to teach Torah to his younger brother Moses to say to him, you corrected but you didn't connected with me. You forgot that I'm your blood. You forgot that we are related. You forgot that before we achieve anything we must be intimate with one another. We must respect each other's humanity before we ask one another to accomplish anything.

Unless you think this is just a story about respect and dignity. It's so profoundly efficient to boot. I had the good fortune of being in a parent's workshop with Ariel. I told you from the beginning we are working hard. And we sat and we learned from experts about parenting, right? That's the easiest thing in the world, right? And they gave us a chance to learn about parenting from horses. From horses. How we motivate horses to do the thing that we want from them. And most of us when we think of getting a horse to do something that we want from them, we think of carrots. Right? Isn't that what you thought? All right, here we go, carrots. But here's the secret, this horse whisperer told us. You can definitely get a horse to

do what you want by giving it a carrot, but that's no hard thing to do. All you'll do is generate in them a compliance and a desire for an external reward.

But she said to us, the most powerful way to get a horse to do something you want is to learn the rhythm of the horse. To reward relationship. It's true. You want to motivate a horse, she said. Sure, give them an external reward and you'll teach them that they can do the thing if you give them a thing. But when you learn that when a horse cooperates, you then reward cooperation through relationship.

The secrets of that are deserving of like a couple of weeks of sermons and talking about that. But that the reward of relationship is learning the rhythm of give and take. And that that reward of seeing you as another being with a will of your own, that deep respect for your rhythms is primary and comes before compliance. Before getting you to do what I want, I have to connect with you to be with you in the same space. Now, that sounds a lot easier than how it looks in the world. Hey, Rabbi, you know what? Getting out of the house in the morning is not easy. Getting my people at work who report to me to do the thing on time that I asked of them. Getting my company to speak with respect even when giving a reprimand or giving a warning or asking for something. Sounds really lovey-dovey and tree-hugging, but in the real world, we have deadlines, Rabbi. In the real world, people can disappoint us. And we can call them on it in the real world. But think about this for a moment with me, for just a moment.

If before we corrected anyone or before we moved to the task we had asked them, we first check in with them and say, Hey, are we okay? Before we teach them, before we enforce anything, we see, are we together? And if not, I'll slow down. What if, as Aaron tells Moses, we put connection before correction? What if we put a pause? At the moment when we feel that someone hasn't done what we wanted them to do or someone hasn't reacted the way we wanted them to react and we stopped for a moment and said, Relationship here is the most important. Before I yell at you, I'll check in and see if I'm connected. Before I demand from you, I will see if we are connected. What kind of world would that be?

I had a friend this week who told me about a work environment that he said was the best work environment he had ever been in. He loved it but he had already told me a story that was very troubling. I listened to the story and frankly, I believed him fully and I had every reason to trust that indeed the work environment in which he was working is absolutely the best work environment anywhere. All kinds of good reasons. But the story he told me about the head of the company and the way the head of that company spoke to someone who is a pivotal player and demeaned them as a way probably to inspire them, to scare them, to express their own frustration.

This notion of connection before correction or connection before request is operative across the board in everything we do in Judaism. Before we ask God for anything, we first remind God that we're connected. Before we ask God for anything, we rest in a connection that is fundamental. Moses reminds us in his acquiescence to Aaron's good advice that all of us have a lot to learn in this regard. We're not there yet. We go in and out, moment to moment, between I eating each other and I vowing each other, between seeing each other as a means towards an end that we've created and seeing each other as ends in and of ourselves, fully human.

So tonight and tomorrow, if something happens where you say, I want to motivate you, I want to ask you for something, I want to have you make a change, I want myself, ask yourself a simple question, am I connected? Are we connected? And if you can create conditions that allow you to drop in and out of asking errands of the world to finish the sacrifice, we can build a better world, a world built on love, respect, dignity, seeing each other. I thank you for that, and I see you. My son.

So here we go. I will connect before I correct you. We can do the work together, one breath at a time, one moment at a time.

Let's rise.