

Shabbat 06 07 19 Sermon

It's hard to believe that a whole week has passed since we were here. And I told you about my amazing aunt Corinne, who just passed away a week ago. Those of you who weren't here, it was a pretty shocking event for me personally, and for my family, and even maybe for those who were here when I shared it, but she was 95 years old and she led a beautiful life, a beautiful life.

And so we just began with a chant that for many of you who are here, maybe for the first time, might not be familiar with, but for those who have been here the whole year know that this has been our anthem, this song whose title is Truth, Emet. And last Yom Kippur, we sang it over and over again and over again, we ended it with that anthem, it was a criticore, it was a kind of cry from the depths of a longing to see the truth. And remember also that the word itself reflects in its three letters that spell the word Emet, or truth, E-M-E-T, Aleph, Mem, Tav. It spells that whole beginning, middle, and end. Remember that? The Aleph, the beginning, the first letter of the alphabet, the Mem, the middle letter, and the Tav, or the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet, all of the alphabet in one three-letter truth. That it had a beginning, a middle, and an end, and that truth and stories that we tell, the truth of a story, its happy ending or not depends on where you end the story.

Where does the story end is really a question. So where does my Aunt Cookie, as she was known, where does her story end? She was dedicated to truth, and so I want to speak about a truth that I have experienced, and that maybe you have experienced too, and it has to do with a well-known song that is now circulating in my house, along with The Star Is Born, right next to it, right next to Lady Gaga and Shallow. Do you love me? Do I what? Do you love me? Do I love you? What's the essence of the disagreement between these two amazing characters in this question, do I love you? As the dawn of the romantic era or the modernity begins to encroach, this beautiful song depicts a conversation that is in tension between what we might call romantic love and durative love, or what might be known as a period in a line, a punctive moment and a durative moment, to use grammatical forms, a punctive moment that is singular.

Falling in love, it was immediate, it was Romeo and Juliet, affective, powerful, profound, world-changing, and for 29 years I watched her. Do I what? Do I what? I've been here day in and day out. You want to know about a moment, and I want to tell you about a series of moments. You want to know about a day and a feeling, and I want to tell you about a life of behavior and actions that spell love more than any I love you, because more than words. So in this maroch, in this disagreement, and I think in some way my aunt and a couple of other things that I've been thinking about, I feel as though I have an answer to a problem that I've been thinking about for many years. And that's this kind of, hold this with me for a second, we have three pilgrimage festivals, three big moments in the Bible, or let me say it more clearly, we have three or two plus one pilgrimage festivals.

They of course are Passover, the holiday of Butz Sukkot, and the third holiday known as Shavuot. Now if you were to ask me if one of those three pilgrimage festivals on which thousands upon thousands of pilgrims were walking up to Jerusalem in ancient Israel in order to sacrifice at the temple, if you were to ask me if any of the three, which of the three

has the worst branding, the worst PR, the worst advice on how it is to get people hooked and to tell them a story and to bring them in and reel them in, I'd probably say Shavuot. Not only don't you know about it, most of us, not only is it shafted by North American Jews and so on, unless were it not for cheesecake, nobody would even know that it existed, were it not for a late 16th century, then 17th century endurance test where people stayed up all night learning Torah, Shavuot, it wouldn't even appear on the radar as a holiday, but it's a pilgrimage festival.

And not only that, its name is problematic. It's one day as opposed to the seven days of Passover and the seven days of the festival of Butz, but at least in those two, they have seven days, but the name matters. The name on Passover tells us about something core and essential to understanding the holiday. Passover is about a paschal offering, about a passing over that took place where God passed over. Sukkot, great name. What's the holiday about it is about? Sukkot.

Ah, but no, Shavuot. Try to find in that name anything that has to do with what the rabbis created of this pilgrimage festival. Of course, originally an agricultural holiday that had to do with bringing first fruits, that had just become, right, we bring our gifts of our first fruits, there was an agricultural holiday, but then of course the rabbis living after the Bible, what did they add onto Shavuot? They added revelation at Sinai. According to the rabbis, of course, Torah is given on Shavuot. Shavuot becomes the quintessential holiday to celebrate what, everyone? Not a paschal offering and not holiday of Butz, but what big event? Revelation. So why don't we call it Torah? Why don't we call it something juicy? Hashtag revelation. Hashtag synesthesia. Hashtag they heard what they normally see. Something.

What does Shavuot have to do with revelation? Revelation. Of course, Shavuot means weeks. Referring to, of course, the 49-day period leading up to the moment of Sinai, the day on which we appeared and God appeared and we had a marriage, as the rabbis say, between heaven and earth, Shavuot speaks to nothing having to do with revelation, but everything having to do with what comes before. The holiday of revelation conceals revelation only to reveal that 49 days were what it took until we arrived at Sinai. And whether the rabbis constructed it this way, whether it was intended, I want to invite you in this moment with me to imagine that in naming a holiday that has to do with something very punctive, a moment, a moment of deep wisdom, a moment that was unforgettable, a moment that was hard to codify, hard to understand, an incomprehensible, overwhelming moment, a romantic moment. Do you love me? The rabbis want us to remember forever that even if revelation was one day and one moment, everything leading up to it and everything that came after it was more important.

A holiday that speaks of one brilliant flash of insight is not named for that moment of insight, but named rather for the 49 days of preparation, the weeks that went into thinking and preparing and emptying out, to be a student, to be empty, to be vulnerable, to be humble. We don't yet arrive there and we're still yearning and longing. Not the punctive, but the durative. Not the moment of, but the moment of plus the moments after and leading up. Shavuot. Not Revelation, not Torah, not all six books of the Mishnah, not everything you ever needed to know but didn't learn in high school about Judaism, but the weeks of counting and counting and counting.

I sat with a young couple last night who were getting married and I began to tell them about how I think about marriage, at least the marriage ceremony, and how I imagine each of the moments of a traditional marriage. And just before we were about to start, the young woman said to me, Rabbi, before you waste your breath on the whole bedecking ceremony, the veiling and unveiling, I just want you to know that we're not doing it and I have three reasons for that. And I said to her, well, before you give me your three reasons, can I at least tell you what I think about when I describe what is known as the bedecking to a couple? She said, sure, go ahead.

For those of you who don't know what a bedecking is, a bedecking is a ritual that became connected to the wedding ceremony probably based upon the Biblical story of Jacob and his love for the beautiful Rachel. Now, of course, Jacob fell in love at first sight with Rachel. He was willing to work for her and so he went to her father named Whitey or Lavan or Laban and he said to him, he said to him, Laban, I'm willing to work for the one that I love. Will you give him to me? He said, oh, of course, no problem. Of course, we all know the story. It didn't work out quite that way because, of course, Rachel's older sister Leah, not nearly as beautiful in the story, not beloved to Jacob, she's replaced by Laban because we don't do that around here and Jacob winds up marrying the wrong woman. Eventually it all works out. Jacob finally marries Rachel and apparently, somehow, bedekin, which means to check in Hebrew or bedek means to unveil in German, that became part of the patriarchal way that we check out the woman.

And so I said to this young woman last night, but here, let me tell you something. We need to appropriate this ritual and here's the way that I look at it. You see, men and women, women and women, men and men, lovers who stand together to commit to one another are about to engage in one of the most dangerous things they can ever do to their relationship and that is commit. Familiarity is the breeding ground for the taking for granted, for that which lacks shine and sheen, for that which doesn't require a question or curiosity. We don't knock on doors where we think we know what's in there. We are not attracted to the known but intrigued by the unknown and so we stand in front of each other and whether you want to use a veil or you want to stand back to back, you want to use a tallit, a prayer shawl, each of you will veil and unveil each other and you will say, I promise to keep looking for you. I promise that just because I am committing to you, I will not take you for granted. There is a mystery in you that I will never know and I will continue to look for what in you is hidden, but I also promise to be there, to show up because I'm committed. I will keep looking but I am a committed seeker. I am not committed to seeking but I am a committed seeker. I commit first and I continue to explore.

There are those in the world we know who are committed to seeking as a full-time profession. We call them dilettantes to some degree. They ebb and flow, they come in and out. Robert Bly, the great American poet, wrote a whole book called Iron John where he named the phenomena of flyboys. You know, the kind of men that make it a living to never fully commit to any one person or women or whomever the profile is. We don't commit to a spiritual path or to any one person. We continue to keep our options wide open. We are enamored with the punctive, enamored by the moment of revelation, the a-ha, the excitement, and we flee the banal and the quotidian, the weekly drudge and sludge of everyday revelation.

I was sitting with a friend this week and we were talking in Torah and we were all, it was like a big gathering of people and I had people turn to each other and say, who taught you Torah? Who is your Torah teacher? And each person said someone and I said, probably because my father was in the room, I said, my dad. I probably would have said it anyway, but my dad was there. I said, my dad taught me a lot of Torah and when I think about it, there's one Torah that he taught me more than others that I often think about in my life and it's three words. Just show up. Just show up. Because when we're enamored by the punctive, it's just show time. It's just show. And when it's a show, we'll be there. But when it's show up, we might not be.

I remember this past week, I heard of a dear friend who lost her mother. She had been sick for a while, it wasn't tragic, but it was still news and it came in and she was going to be coming with her husband, her kids. They were going to be in Boston and there was going to be a shiva there and I was very clear the moment when I saw the email that there's no way that I'm not going to go to Boston. But of course, everybody knows that feeling. I woke up and I thought, you know, it's a long way from here to Boston. Nobody will be upset if I don't go. Just show. Not just show. Not, oh, Friday night is very entertaining. It's not hard to come to services on Friday night to some degree even though everybody here, I know you made an effort. I'm so, feel so blessed that you're here. Wow, how do I say that enough? You are all amazing.

But when Romemu started 10 years ago, 11 years ago, we didn't start on a Friday night. We started on a Shabbat morning. We started on March 25th, 2006 as a part-time community because I said to my wife, then fiancé, the test and litmus test of this community's depth won't be measured by how many people come on a Friday night but how many people show up on Shabbat morning because there's not much else to do between 6 and 8 o'clock on Friday nights. Really. I mean, it's Friday night but Shabbat morning, wow. Soul cycle. Pure yoga. Warrior. It's going to be amazing.

Punctive. One moment revelation. One moment revelation. If they had named it that, we would have just been thinking about that one day but they named it Shavuot. There are even some who say that really, if you don't count every single day of the 49 days that lead up to Shavuot, we're not so religious about that. But there's something there. Endurance. Showing up. Regularity. Even when it doesn't feel great. If we don't have that initial spark, do you love me? What does that even mean? I had no choice. But when we mix them together and have a committed, seeking relationship, it means that we show up even when it's not comfortable but we come back because it teaches touching us, it keeps connecting us and we have both of those together.

That's what it is, I think, to be free. That's what it is to be free. I could go somewhere else but I committed. I could miss it but I said I would show up. It's Shavuot morning. I haven't had my coffee yet but the community is waiting for me. The Torah is waiting for me. What kind of world would we live in if people like me and you and all of us would say, you know what? The things that I want to pass on to my future, my children, my cousins, my nephews, are the things that I'm not willing to do myself. Does anybody know anyone like that? Anyone know anybody that says, you know what, I really think it's a value to bring Jewish tradition to the future and make sure that my children know the prayers, they know the

rhythm of Shavuot, and then you ask them, well, what are you doing on a Friday night and a Shavuot morning? You know, I'm not such a committed person.

I think it's a nice idea. I'm getting there. You say, well, what about tomorrow morning? What do you do in between 10 o'clock and 12? It's two hours. It's really musical. It's really exciting. Everybody there is really engaged. It's really welcoming. I'm going to think about it. Communities are built by the committed seekers. Vibrant communities are built by the community seekers. A community of committed seekers is what makes revelation possible. A community of committed seekers is what makes revelation possible.

So here's your homework tonight. I know it's Shavuot. You're not supposed to work. Do it with love and with a smile. How and in what ways might you extend the pontiff in your life? How and in what ways might you build in more duration, more endurance, more showing up? And how might you own the places where you just don't feel like it and just be honest about it? And here's another piece of homework. If you can and you have Yom Shin, come to services tomorrow morning.

We have a wonderful bat mitzvah and Mia Torres is going to be wowing us with her Torah. She works so hard and Romemu people, she's amazing. Come tomorrow morning. And then when you come back tomorrow morning, on Sunday morning we'll be meeting in the Romemu Center for the first time for Shavuot services. Take a couple of hours, celebrate Shavuot, listen to Torah, connect with other people. You'll be glad you did. And if you really, really, really want, Monday morning we'll be back there again. And there's no better way to start the week than singing and celebrating a holiday that invites us to live in weeks, not moments.

I want to bless each and every one of you that you also reflect back to me how I can do that too. How I can become more available, more of someone who shows up even when I don't feel like it, more of somebody who cares about committed community and is continuing to grow in that way. I bless all of us with that.

Please rise.