

Romemu Dvar Torah January 27, 2017

It didn't go well, you know, for Moshe. Moses came after much cajoling, after much resistance and divine reassurance. After Moshe was over and over again told by God, Don't worry, I will be with you. Even if you are, as you say, a man of uncircumcised lips, you can't speak. Moshe is given a divine certainty. I will be with you. And so Moshe, against his better judgment, goes back. He goes back to the land that he had left, back to Egypt. And he stands before Pharaoh, and he gives Pharaoh, he reads him the riot act.

And he comes back, and he tells God, you know, it didn't go well. May az bati el pharao l'daber b'shimcha. Hatzer lo yitzalt ata mecha. It's gotten worse. There's a moment where Moshe comes back, the failed leader, and says to God, I can't do it, God. And God says, you can. Yes, you can. Whatever you need, I'll give it to you. Go back. Tell them the five verbs, the five energetic affirmations of divine redemption and salvation. Ve'hotzeiti b'nei Tzav, yitzalti, ve'ga'alti, ve'lakhti, ve'heveiti. Five verbs, I will take them out, I will bring them to me, I will redeem them. Go bring that to the Jewish people, and try that on for size. That's a supersized redemption message. Va'yidaber Moshe k'ein, verse 9 of chapter 6, 6-9.

Moshe returns to the Jewish people. Va'yidaber Moshe k'ein, he brings them the message. Here, it's not me, it's the message. Ve'lo shamu elav, and they did not listen to Moshe, li'kotzei ruach, omei avodah kasha. From shortness of breath, from kotzei ruach. Ruach, spirit, the word in Hebrew, inspiray, right? Ruach, the Holy Spirit. The ruach was kotzei, it was short. It was limited. And they were working hard, they were stressed. Avodah kasha, they were slaves. They didn't have it in them to hear. It takes energy to listen. And they didn't have it.

And a rabbi from the small town of Kolomyia, Poland, living in the early 19th century, he was a rabbi who wrote a book called Ahavat Shalom, The Love of Peace, whose name was Menachem Mendel Hager, or Hager. Strange name.

He was a rabbi in Kosov, the son of Rabbi Yaakov Kapol Chossid of Kolomyia, who himself was a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov. This rabbi, who wrote a book called The Love of Peace, wrote about that verse. Their shortness of breath should remind us, this rabbi says, this rabbi named the stranger, this rabbi says, we should remember another chapter of ruach, another moment of spirit or energy, or ruach means wind.

When in the book of Numbers, Moshe prays to the G-d, who is called Elohei HaRuchot Vechol Basar, the G-d of ruachot, of spirits. A moment when the spies who had gone into the land of Canaan came back and brought gossip. They brought back fake news. They brought back real news. News that Moshe himself knew that Joshua, the one who is known as the one who has ruach bo, the one who has spirit in him, Joshua would need all of that spirit to be able to withstand the winds of ugliness, the winds of deconstruction, the winds of despair and pessimism and cynicism, and othering. And so Moshe Rabbeinu, in the words of the great rabbi from Colombia, Menachem Mendel, the ger, the foreigner, he connects these two stories.

He says that here in the land of Egypt, Moshe comes to the people and says, here is your freedom ticket, you are free to go. And they couldn't hear him, says the Torah, because of their shortness of breath. They had short ruach. It says this rabbi, look in the book of Numbers, look over there. Because there was another moment where there was ruach that was in short supply, a certain kind of ruach. And Moshe called upon the G-d of all ruach and said, give this man Joshua, who will go into the land and will come back and will have to fight against bad wind. Wind that will come out of the mouth that is ugly. He'll need long wind. He'll need a lot of energy, breath, patience, centeredness. He'll need the G-d of ruach. And that's something that the Israelites don't have in the land of Egypt. It's a curiosity. Something about their hearing.

In March of 1991, former vice president Al Gore penned an opinion piece that was printed in multiple newspapers and it said, global warming may be hard to think about, but it's rapidly becoming recognized as one of the most serious problems that we humans face. And the administration's effort to pretend it doesn't exist reminds me of the point made by scientist Carl Sagan and by a song of dire straits. Denial ain't just a river in Egypt. Pretending it doesn't exist. Pretending it doesn't exist.

Fighting reality, denying facts, not wanting to know what we know somehow, is something that's as old as the human brain itself. Pursued by predators, our bodies and our nervous systems developed a very sophisticated strategy known as fight or flight. When faced with danger, we either fight or we flee. Both of which release, either through standing and fighting or running and fleeing, tremendous amounts of physical and emotional energy is released in both of those modes. Adrenaline used to avoid pain and possibly death is put to good use.

There is, however, a third state that is often overlooked. It's fight, flight, or freeze. Being frozen or in a state of being frozen is a very ingenious survival technique as well. The danger, of course, in freezing is that you don't release the energy that has been pent up. It works to pretend as if you are dead. To pretend in some way to deceive the predator. It's a strategy that animals in the wild use. But animals in the wild shake it off. They release the frozen energy that human beings don't.

The work of Peter Levine and the schools of somatic experiencing and PTSD. We know that there are physical detriments to holding on to energy that was used as a defense where energies were held. But what is the psychic analog of that physical strategy? What is the psychic analog of fight, flight or freeze? When faced with danger that we'd like to avoid an avoid dance takes place. We suppress or repress or pretend things don't exist.

When we are presented with facts that are inconvenient truths we lie or we distort or contort or we retort. This pretending can become a kind of armoring. We forget that we were lying to the point where denial becomes an acronym for don't even know I am lying. Words that leave our mouths are not aligned with our hearts.

And if you're thinking yourself at this moment in the sermon this sounds a whole lot like Pharaoh, you'd be absolutely right. If you're thinking Pharaoh then you probably know the story. Pharaoh and Pharaoh types they have a problem with hearing. They have a problem with letting facts come in. There is a myth of impermeability that Pharaohs like to maintain

at all costs. The oddest problem about Pharaoh is that no matter how much evidence is presented to Pharaoh at great cost to him, to his kingdom, and to everyone around him Pharaoh will not heed the evidence. Pharaoh will continue in an unrelenting way to maintain the facts are the facts even when evidence is given to the contrary. Apparently for good old Pharaoh denial and the Nile are connected somehow because there is a strange midrash a strange rabbinic expansion on the Torah that has to do with denial and the Nile.

You see the midrash says look, he goes out to the water verse 15 in chapter 7 when God tells Moses where to meet Pharaoh. He says look, he's going to the water to the Nile and says the midrash to go to the bathroom. He needs to go to the bathroom in the morning like every human being but he can't do it in his palace. He would make himself into a god says the midrash claiming that he had no bodily needs, literally that he did not need to go to the bathroom. He would rise early in the morning and go out to the Nile to perform his deeds. There Pharaoh constructs himself as a god without needs says the midrash. The midrashic phrase he takes nothing in and he evacuates nothing, he neither eats nor eliminates waste matter, he is obsessed with what goes in and what goes out, according to the midrash. Pharaoh would boast no one ever left Egypt alive. It's tremendous we are the most secure country that has ever been on the face of the earth. No one leaves. We are absolutely impermeable. We have walls around our country. You can't see them, Pharaoh would say, but no one gets out.

In fact, Pharaoh says I don't have any need for what is outside of me either. I live in a solipsistic world nothing comes in and nothing goes out. I don't eat and I don't defecate. I am sealed like a cistern. I am, in the writings of Otto Rank and other psychoanalysts, I am the ultimate. I am the self-made man par excellence. I create myself like the Uroboros of mythic proportions. I am a circle and you all are squares. I have no beginning and I have no end. I am God the posture of the inviolate impermeable human being who can't acknowledge the truth of our reality of human vulnerability.

Aviva Zornberg commenting on Pharaoh's yearning for impermeability quotes Sartre writing on the lapidary hardness of the anti-Semite. How can anyone choose to reason falsely, says Sartre, it is simply the old yearning for impermeability, There are people who are attracted by the permanence of stone. They would like to be solid and impenetrable. They do not want change, for who knows what change might bring. It's as if their own existence were perpetually in suspense but they want to exist in all ways at once and all. In one instant they have no wish to acquire ideas, says Sartre, they have no wish to acquire ideas. They want them to be innate. They want to adopt a mode of life in which reasoning and the quest for truth play only a subordinate part in which nothing is sought except what has already been found in which one never becomes anything else but what one already was.

Pharaoh, this yearning for impermeability, says Mary Douglas the great sociologist. She points out this yearning for impermeability is inside each and every one of us. Each of you wants the same thing. It's part of our human condition to long for hard lines and clear concepts. When we have them we have to either face the fact that some realities elude us or blind ourselves to the inadequacy of the concepts.

And I've been thinking so much ironically where we are today we might see what has happened and transpired over the last two years as a return to the un-nuanced; a rejection and a rebellion against the world of multi-perspectival confusion stories that compose a confusing slippery world of multiple truths; a return to a much simpler narrative less grey, more black and white or well, really more white binaries; bathrooms, bad guys. If Pharaoh and other pharaonic leaders represent the frozen fearful posture of the impenetrable impermeable denial that don't even know they are lying to stay invulnerable.

Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses our teacher, represents the absolute opposite. Moses whose name means the one who is drawn the one from flowing waters, Moses knows the power of fleeing. In fact Moses is the only human being to leave Egypt. He leaves Egypt first before any other Jews leave. Moses is the ultimate maybe not fight but flight. In fact Moshe is so good at running that's Moshe's problem, he keeps running. He runs and he runs and he runs. Run Moshe, run. When it comes time for Moshe to stop running and to move from flight to fight Moshe doesn't feel adequate. Moshe doesn't feel that he knows how.

Moshe, not invulnerable, not inviolate Moshe is ultimately vulnerable. Moshe is so vulnerable he can't but say to God I can't speak. I also don't have anything that comes out of me but it's not because I don't want it to come out of me, I wish it would in the language of the Zohar. Moshe has what is called Galut Hadibur, an exile of speech. Moshe represents the desire to speak but the feeling that no matter what one says it won't be heard, that one can't find language. Or that, maybe more insidiously in our relevant moment tonight, one week in maybe most insidiously exile of speech doesn't just mean that Moshe can't find words. But there has been an attack on language in the land of Egypt. There has been an attack on facts and on what signifiers might mean. What might it mean?

Moshe says, I will speak words but they don't mean anything because in the universe that Pharaoh has just constructed if you saw him down by the Nile you didn't really see him down by the Nile. It wasn't really true that I was going to the bathroom down there. Everybody knows and everybody will attest to it. I don't go to the bathroom, I am a God. That does not happen no way, no how, but we have photos. Pharaoh, no we have the turd, Pharaoh nope.

In a world where words become meaningless, God is killed on the altar of of power and the desire to stay impermeable. Our God speaks the world to being language for us is fructive. It is potent. Words and worlds are identical. In our Jewish perspective if someone were to speak a swear or an oath in Jewish world they would have to have someone come and undo that oath, because such is the power of the mouth. Pharaoh in the mystical literature is known as Pera the evil mouth, the letters of his name Paro become Pera, the evil mouth. Pharaoh who undoes the certainties of language that this is what it is lest we think that any one party in this country or anywhere have an ownership over the erosion of what is is, is, is depends on what you mean by is. A steady decline in our ability to understand and to comprehend and to trust that what one says means something.

This is the exile of speech that Moshe was facing as he was going back to the land of Egypt. He said to God, listen God, even if you give me a thousand words even if Aaron is with me, even if you give me a whole speech and you write it out, it doesn't matter because someone

will come along and write an alternate reality. It will be an alternate right or the alternate wrong or the alternate facts.

The great and holy Hasidic teacher, the Baal Shem Tov once said to his Hasidim, to his devotees if you take the first four letters of the Hebrew alphabet, you will know everything you need to know about this world. He said that the letter Aleph which represents one in Hebrew has a numerical value of one, that represents God, that represents the truth. But then Bet Gimel Daled the second, third and fourth letters spell a word Boged, which means to be a traitor. To be a traitor to the truth. Interesting that he roots it in language. In roots, in letters, language can either tell us the truth, it can either disclose what we haven't seen or it can hide it the unintelligibility of language.

The emptying of words, wrote Roger Cohen just this morning in the Times, the danger, he writes, is that in a world of alternate facts and in those who tell the media to shut up and listen that we arrive at the doorstep of the emptying words of meanings as an essential step on the road to autocratic rule. Let me say that again, the emptying of words of their meanings is an essential step on the road to autocratic rule. People need to lose their bearings, he writes, before they prostrate themselves.

In a week in which our administration put on a play in the theater of the absurd, the likes of which we have not seen in a long time with a shameless display of impermeability of dissonance to the human condition. Language, as Stephen Bannon said, language is the opposition now. Language is the opposition the language of truth is the opposition to the language of falsehood to the language of human degradation. To the language of spin and storytelling.

Virginia Satir was a great therapist who was maybe single-handedly responsible for a whole school of therapy in the family systems world conjoined therapy. And Virginia Satir wrote that in any healthy system any healthy family has to have at least five freedoms and when Romemu began in 2006, I said there are five freedoms in this synagogue and I modeled it after Virginia Satir. And one of her freedoms was the freedom to say what you see and what you know. The signs had been on the wall for a long time and I have been ignoring them. Many of us have been ignoring them. When someone says what you see is not what you see. What you saw was not what you saw. What the photographs told you are not the truth and we are to distrust those whose freedom to speak is at the center. It's the foundation of this democracy, a check on power.

So many things in that wake I'm terrified to imagine. Just this week we saw an executive order written to roll back the Affordable Care Act. Just this week we saw an executive order to expedite the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline and the Keystone Pipeline. Just this week we initiated planning and designing and building a southern wall that would make us impermeable, nothing will get in and out. Laws are being enacted to punish sanctuary cities. And a ban on immigration that will take three months has been written in.

And I got this missive this morning from my friend Beth Hooping, a rabbi in Seattle, who said share this with the community. I said I will Beth. And here it is she writes that today was a difficult day at the Jewish Family Service of Seattle where I work as a Jewish educator. I am writing to ask you all for help. We have a wonderful refugee program, a resettlement

program, and the impending executive order written in by President Trump regards refugees as very very personal to us. She said, I sat in a meeting with our refugee resettlement director today she told us of families we were expecting to resettle in the coming days and weeks and months and these people have been waiting for years for the opportunity to get to America and in many cases to reunite with family members. When the order is signed anyone coming from certain countries will not be allowed to come. Some have plane tickets in hand for a few days from now unless we think that this is just a delay. She pointed out to us that other documents that were difficult to obtain will expire in the meantime, and then these people will have to restart the process all over again. She writes, I could write much more and share heartbreaking stories but this isn't the time. I share this with you, she said, to go on HIAS's page find out information and advocate on behalf of the refugees.

There are theories of ethical and moral development whose basis for the acquisition of conscience is an awareness of your limits boundaries and borders and vulnerability. It's known in the literature as healthy shame. Shame that involves a blushing, an embarrassment. To be shame in a healthy way means that I know where I begin and where I end. I know where my boundaries begin and end. I have to some degree a semi permeable wall as it were. I know that I can let things in and out. But to be shameful and shameless is to live as if you don't have any human vulnerability or needs. And the hubris of those who have no shame no boundaries, no walls is to stand before walls and memorials and act shamefully.

So I'm sorry, I know it's feeling dire tonight. But I'll tell you something, a new order here at Romemu and in other communities around the country is that even though it's Shabbat and even though we sang and danced and we talked about it last week, singing in the aftershocks. Real things are happening around the corner and down the block to our Muslim brothers and sisters, to our Mexican brothers and sisters, to our Latino friends and family It's happening to LGBTQ it's happening to people who are black and brown and colored. It's happening everywhere and it's not political. If by political, you mean that I'm advocating for any party, I could care less about the parties. The parties have not been a party I care about. Us, I care about. You I care about.

What God's plan is for this world what does God want from this world? He wants a world where each and every one of us are connected. He wants a world where each and every one of us has a song each and every one of us, regardless of our religion or creed whether we believe or not, that we have control over our bodies, that women can make choices. That's the world that I believe that God wants. A world where everyone is safe and secure. A world where children won't be separated from parents and sent back to a country they never were born into. For all kinds of ridiculous absurdities that are now parading around as facts and I know all of you, I'm speaking to you. I know you know it but we have to do more.

This past Wednesday morning I did a funeral for an amazing man that I had never met before. He's the father of a good friend of my wife's and he was an amazing human being. I call him a holy man. His name was Marian Blitz and he was called Max and he was born March 13th, 1926 in a small Polish town called Kolomyia. Right, that town where that rabbi who wrote the book about loving peace, about shalom. Max was born in that town and

when he was 12 years old, 1938, as the Germans and the Russians invaded Poland word got through to his family that his eldest brother who had signed in with the Communist Party would be one of the first that would be rounded up. And so they asked Max's father to take Max's older brother and to leave town as quickly as possible to flee. Fighting wasn't an option so it was either freeze or flee. So his dad looked at him and said Max, you know, you stay here with your mother and with the rest of the family. I'm gonna take your older brother, we're fleeing, we'll be back.

And so as the wagon left Kolomyia Max ran after the wagon. He jumped under the back of the wagon. His father didn't know he hid underneath a blanket, and he made his way out of Kolomyia. No one survived in Kolomyia but those three people. And Max made his way throughout the world. He made his way. He lived in Berlin. He married his sweetheart. He went back to Kolomyia and met a woman named Sally. He started a new life. He started a new life four times. He became an artist. He became a successful businessman. He lived the American dream. Max was a poster boy for for the phoenix rising from the ashes. And as people stood and told Max's story, it was so clear that Max knew how to move from frozen ness to fleeing, and then from fleeing to fighting for love in his life. He fought tooth and nail for the rest of his life to bring love everywhere he went. There were people at his funeral that you wouldn't imagine. There were people from everywhere from he met people in the 92nd Street Y.

They were so touched by his humming, so they had to come to his funeral. There were people who just had lunch with every week. There wasn't anyone that Max didn't meet with an open heart, with an absolutely unguarded, no walled heart. Someone who had lived through the atrocities, who had lost family. And here he was, living with a hum, no walls on his borders, a strong sense of self.

When he spoke, they said it was gentle, it was true. And you could trust him. You could trust Max. So there are so many things we can do to fight. You can call your elected officials, you can exercise your voices and your influence. You can blog, you can comment too. But it's going to take a lot, lot more than that. And this coming week, Romemu plans to roll out programing and technology. And to me, we plan to get together with Rachel, Matt, Cliff and other communities around New York City to inform all of you about the things that we and Romemui are doing daily Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday of this coming week.

Look for those emails on how to walk it out into the world. Because I tell you something, it begins out there, but it's going to come here too. I got an email today that scared me. A press release from the white House in honor of universal of of the Day of Holocaust Remembrance, Universal Holocaust Remembrance Day, that the person who sent to me said, for the first time ever, there was no mention of Jews in that declaration. Not one mention of Jews, no anti-Semitism, no 6 million.

And who cannot think, of course of that beautiful, powerful poem. First they came for the socialists, and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a trade unionist. They came for the Jews, and I didn't speak out because I was not a Jew. And then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me.

So who will speak with the voice of Moshe, for our Muslim brothers and sisters? I will. Who will speak with and for our Sikh brothers and sisters? I will. Who will speak with and for our black, brown, Latino brothers and sisters? I will. Who will speak with Moses's courage to stop fleeing and to fight, and to use the power of language to speak for women and trans people and LGBTQ and all of those? I know we will.

We have so much work to do. 3 million strong. Last week they stood around, they exercised. They brought speech out of exile. They brought speech out of exile. So tonight we stand together. We say, why do I worry when we can organize? Why? Why worry when we can speak truth? Why? Why worry when each and every one of us has a pulpit?

Why? Why worry when we are stronger together?

For the sake of Joshua and his power. For the sake of Max and his hum. For the sake of the Jews of Kolomyia. The sake of all of those with whom we are united in one voice.

Let's rise.