

Shabbat 03 23 18 Sermon

Religion is a part of your body. Religion is a part of your body. The word religion from the word ligament means that which binds together, that which gives us a sense of tapestry, that which is connected. When we speak of relevant religion, it's redundant. Religion that isn't relevant isn't religious. It doesn't connect us in any way to some larger story that animates our lives and the lives of others. It's just ritual. But religion that is re-ligamenting reconnects us to a story that is bigger than our own thread but gives us a sense that our thread matters. Religion is in your body.

The word in Hebrew for ligament is a word that you might be familiar with. It's gid. Gid. Can y'all say that, gid? Gid. Gid, G-I-D, gid. We know it from the Bible where the Torah tells us about a certain sciatic nerve or some kind of ligament that we're not allowed to eat called the gid hannah, the ligament of forgetting, the ligament that was dislodged when Jacob wrestled with the angel Gid.

We hear resonance of gid in the word lehagid, to tell, to tell a story, to tell a folk tale. A narrative is essentially something that has a through line. Narratives that don't connect, that aren't ligamented, feel like they're dislocated and disjointed.

To tell a story means to give someone a sense of an arc, a sense of a beginning, middle, and an end, the word lehagid, to tell. We hear it in the word haggadah, as in the book that we'll be reading from a week from tonight, telling us, of course, the primary story of our people, lehagid. The gadetel, the dinchah, tell your child, might be ligament your child, bind them to something bigger than their small self. We hear it also in the word gadol, which means big, gadol. This Shabbat is called the great Shabbat, Shabbat haggadol, the great Shabbat. And there are too many reasons, but there are two reasons that I'm going to discuss with you in the next 10 minutes.

The first one right now, and then in a couple of minutes after, before we stop in between in the parasha, but hold, if you could, this sense of lifting pieces together, because essentially, when we're talking about gid, or we're talking about gadol, something great, we're talking about the ability to bring disparate pieces together into some arch, some arc, some bigger whole. The first reason given for Shabbat haggadol is that Shabbat haggadol is the Shabbat that immediately precedes, not just Passover, but it was thousands of years ago on the original Shabbat haggadol, the original Sabbath before the exodus, coincided with the 10th day of the month of Nisan, where we were told, mishchu u'kichu lachem, take for you a lamb into the house, and that the greatness of the day represents the greatness of faith. A people who were enjoined, as Sharon beautifully wrote in her poem for this evening, a people who were bid, commanded, obligated by Moses, the Redeemer, to bring the God of Egypt into their home with all of its bleeding loudness, surrounded by the oppressor, and by those who worship that very object, they were commanded, obligated, obligated.

There was no way out. The only way out for the Israelites was to listen to the Redeemer. And when Moses told them, do this thing, they even said in the Bible, what are you, meshuggah? Do bist a meshuggah? We're gonna bring the God of Egypt into our home, and that's a good idea.

But your ticket to freedom, Moses said, based on God's own obligation, was to bring the God of Egypt into their home and let it be there for four days. And as Dr. Erica Brown writes so beautifully and powerfully, imagine what that must have been like. To bring the God of Egypt into your home, not only is it loud and dangerous, but also it's intimate. You get to know this little sheep. You get to love it, you become attached to it, and then within four days, it will be gone. Your test that you are to be free, says Dr. Erica Brown, is the test of that great Shabbat.

The greatness of the Shabbat, the definition of greatness is your ability to bring the thing that you fear the most, the thing that has you held, the thing that you can't go against, the icon that you dare not shatter, that thing that has power over you that you think is so powerful, bring it close, get close to it, be intimate with it, maybe even remember that you yourselves were shepherds, so you have a connection with this thing, and then offer it up, to lift up this object. But not to forget that this object also has the blood of liberation, it has the blood, the blood that will be necessary for you to extract from it and lift that up.

So Gidulah, if you're here with me, Gidulah, greatness means, Shabbat HaGadol means, the Sabbath on which we commemorate our ancestors' ability to A, defy the power structures, to B, do the thing they thought they could not do, and C, not to throw the whole thing out, but to take that which was pertinent, relevant, holy, important, and use it for a sacred purpose, to religament, to ligament, to bring together courage and greatness, and use that for freedom.

Tomorrow morning on Shabbat in synagogues around the world, often this parsha, the one we'll be reading tomorrow morning, coincides also with Shabbat HaGadol, and there's a moment in there that kind of reminds me of this bleeding sheep business. It's a moment that I read, because it was my bar mitzvah parasha, I see someone here also for whom it was their bar mitzvah parasha, not to mention my father-in-law, for whom it is also his bar mitzvah. I can imagine that, I guess, 36 years ago, on my bar mitzvah, I didn't quite understand this, but I read it so fluently, it's kind of in my head, so that tomorrow morning we're gonna be reading about more sacrifices, not just sheep, but this particular sacrifice called an olah, a holy burnt offering, and the priest would come and offer this burnt offering, it was a kind of burnt offering that was twice a day, and this animal was burning on the altar, and there would be ashes at the altar, lots and lots and lots of ashes, and the Kohen HaGadol, or the Kohen, the priest would say, would be told and obligated, V'heirim et ha'deshen, asher tochal alav ha'esh, v'samo etzel ha'mizbeach.

The Torah goes out of its way to tell us that the priest had the responsibility to take the ashes off of the altar. Now, the Torah is very, very sparse with its words, the Torah doesn't give us extra sentences and paragraphs and storylines, but here it decides to let us know that there was a sanitary purpose that a Kohen, a priest, had to do, which was to lift the ashes off of the altar. Now, one could say very simply, of course, it was in order for the remainder of the korban to continue to burn. It gets very crowded on an altar when there's a big animal and it's burning, but those words, v'heirim et ha'deshen, can you all say that, v'heirim et ha'deshen, that they would lift up, they would lift up the ashes, that the function of the priest was to take the charred remains of what once was an offering, a sacrifice, and to find in it holiness, not to discard it. Says the Magi de Mezrich famously when asked,

where shall I find fire? He said, if you want to find fire, look in the ashes. Get busy with the ashes if you want to find fire and et la'avut.

The function of the priest was to lift up the ashes, the charred remains of a sacrifice, of something that was whole once, but now is no longer whole, because it still has holiness, and lift that up. Isn't that what is happening this weekend? Isn't that what's happening always in our religious and spiritual lives? Isn't it always the case that we are trying to connect pieces together to find some bigger narrative to which we belong, to take disparate moments along a timeline and somehow string them together into some coherent narrative, some story that makes meaning purpose? Are we all in some way, shape, or form surah? And isn't our art form pointillism at every moment? To take disparate points and to find somehow that there's a picture here, isn't that what religion does? Isn't that what I do for you and you do for me? Isn't that what a community is all about? Isn't that what we do when we, on faith alone, say, in this moment, we are afraid, but there is a larger picture to which this moment is just one little dot, one pixel in a larger frame, and that Gidulah, that greatness, is the very thing that the ashes represent when we lift them up and say, here was wholeness, here is the remnants, but we lift it up and we give it its sacred place. We religament it, the herim et hadeshen, we lift up to Gidulah.

Isn't that what we do with friends and family, community members who lose a mother in one moment this week, or friends who are still, in some way, shape, or form, lifting up ashes of a loss and grief? It is already years in the making, but still has a long way to go. Isn't that what we do? Isn't that what Gidulah is? That is what adults do. The word in Hebrew for adult is also gadol.

That's what we do. That's what adults have over children, usually, is that adults can see the longer timeline. Children, in Hebrew, the word katan is from the word kat, which means to cut. Kat is cut. A child wants what they want now. Trust me. And trust yourselves, you know this. We know that that childish part of us also doesn't have the patience to wait for the next 10, 15 minutes. The next year, the next two, the next three, the next moment.

To be gadol is to always be religious, in the sense of always asking ourselves, what is the larger whole to which this is transcended by? This moment, this experience, this taste, this feeling. What is greater than this thing that to which that can hold it in Gidulah? But ironically, of course, this weekend, in the city and in cities around the country and in the entire nation, this entire sequence of gadol and Gidulah and katan and lifting ashes is completely inverted, isn't it? In a world where the adults should be the ones who see the bigger picture. In a world where adults are the ones who know the value and the absolute value of life over freedom.

In a world where adults should be the ones who lead the way, who have the courage to stand up to idols with acronyms and NRs and such, and slaughter them too. It wasn't adults who lifted the ashes and found fire therein, but of course, the katanim, the young ones, the children, as it were, although they're not children by halachic standards, they're still children. The children who recognize that life is of supreme value.

The children who are helping the adults to be gadol. The katanim and the katanot who are saying, have you lost the sense of the bigger religion to which all of us are a part? The bigger

mission, the bigger vision that life is supremely valuable. The greatest freedom that we have is the freedom to protect life at all costs. And that we have obligations, not only freedoms. A bill of responsibility is not just a bill of rights. So tomorrow there will be not a Shabbat hagadol, but a Shabbat hakatan. Not a Sabbath of those who are gadol, but the Shabbat of those who remind the gadolim how to be gadol, how to see the bigger picture, not get lost in the rationales and the rationalizations. Because what it is to be religious is to remind ourselves of the biggest story imaginable to which every piece can fit. And is there a greater story than the story that we are all created in the image of God and that each and every one of us has the right to go to school safely? Is there a greater truth, a greater story than the story that each and every one of us imbued with innate dignity regardless of sexual orientation, gender identification, regardless of our political preference, regardless of who our mother or father was, regardless of our economic status, each and every one of us deserves health care? Are those political preferences? Am I now standing here on one side of the aisle? I look to be in the middle of the aisle right now because I want to be gadol and gadol means to hold both sides and one big story, and one big story, as simple as it is, is what children say, and Jesus said it well in church tonight.

Lest ye be like little children, you shall not enter the kingdom. That there is the child and that is why the child is the centerpiece of our Passover story. The child is the one who Friday night, a week from tonight will stand up and say, I have a question. And we say, no, no, you be quiet, Google it. The child stands up, the per-eternus, the eternal child inside each and every one of us stands up and says, ma nishtanam, ma nishtanam, how could it be? How many years after Sandy Hook? How many years? How many more children have to die? We've been waiting for you to get it going. We've been waiting for you to have the courage. So a week early, Shabbat HaKatan comes and they stand up and say, enough with the questions, we have the answers. Man, I'll tell you something. This last interpretation of why it's called Shabbat HaGadol.

The final interpretation that I offer tonight is that Shabbat HaGadol is named for a verse in the book of Malachi, in the book of Malachi, that is usually customarily read on the special haftora for the day. And those who, for whom it is their haftora for the Bar Mitzvah know it well. Hineh Anochi Sholech Lachem Et Elia HaNavi Lefnei Bo Yom Adonai HaGadol VeHaNorah. Behold, the prophet says, I will send to you Elijah before the great day, Yom HaGadol. The great day, Yom HaGadol. The great day is the day that where we say, are we there yet? And we say, oh, we're there. That's called Gadol. We're there yet. That big vision.

Yom HaGadol, the great day. And what will the great day be known by? What will be the significant piece that Malachi will tell? He'll say, VeHeshiv Leiv Avot Al-Banim VeLeiv Banim Al-Avotam. On that day, the children's will turn the hearts of the parents towards them. That's the day. When the children say to the parents, VeHeshiv Leiv Avot Al-Banim VeLeiv Banim Al-Avotam. That's the signifier, says the prophet Malachi. I've seen it in a vision. I came in a dream. The day will come, the great Eschaton, the great Messianic era will be vuchsefed by this knowing. This will be the way you'll smell it. This will be the schmeck of the Messianic age. When parents and children have a reversal.

So maybe we're there. If we could put someone as child, okay. Maybe we're there.

Maybe we're there. But here is what is so profoundly powerful is that children call us on our stuff. Children say it like it is. Children don't see the whole picture so they can't manipulate the pieces. They're so isolated in that one point in the surah, point of this vision. That's their point and they make it. And we say, but what about this point? And they say, no, this point. Shabbat Hakkatan. This one point. As if the children in this country are saying, stay with me now, big people, stay with us. Because you like to lie and figure it out from the big picture. But we have it real simple now. We get it. Beheshiv leiv avot al-banim velev banim al-votam.

I want to live these three principles every day of my life. I want to live the principle of, if I'm scared of it, it has aliveness, go in. I want to live the principle that if I think it's so powerful, why don't I bring it close and see how powerful it is. I want to live the principle that in order to be free, I have to do something that I'm scared to do.

I want to live the principle that I want to see what has been offered, the remnants of it, and lift it up. I want to do that when I come to some kind of ashes and say, where's the fire here that I can lift up and make relevant? Where's the thing that needs to be redeemed? And finally, I want to live the principle of Shabbat Hakkatan. That sometimes we can get so lost in gadol, in this whole manipulative game of gadolah, we forget about the power that children have to ask the question that disassembles us, that undoes us, and reminds us of a simple truth. Beheshiv le'v avotah banim ve'le'v banim al avotam. There's going to be a lot of prayer happening tomorrow. Some of it might be, quote unquote, religious in an old frame, but all of tomorrow is religion day.

The day for gedulah, the day for gid, the day for connection, the day for lifting up what is most relevant, the day for us to remind ourselves and to be reminded of the greatest possible story, the greatest possible Haggadah that we could ever, ever read from. The story of what it is to be a human being. May God bless us tomorrow with being just that. And to pray with our feet, and to pray with our hugs and our smiles, and to bring this country to the place that it could possibly be able to say about itself, the promised land.

Please rise.