

Shabbat 01 11 19 Sermon

You are the problem. That's right, you heard me. You are the problem. And don't think that any one of you gets away. So let me be super duper clear. You are the problem. Now of course, I don't mean you individually. You, as in Nehemia, David, Alina. You, the problem of you. Human beings from the beginning have a problem with the other. Any other will do. Any you, y'all, them, they, it's he, she, it's whatever. Any you will do. Which of course is a problem because not only are you the problem, but you are the solution. You are the very definition of an existential crisis for me.

If there is a you, I have to share the world with you? And yet at the heart of what it is to become an I is a you. We are intersubjectively born. The sense of who I am is absolutely dependent upon there being a set of I's, a being, someone who is a we with my I, that I might become an I. Without you there's no I, and without I there is no you. That's a problem. That's the solution. That's complicated.

Human beings are fundamentally from the beginning. We are dependent on others to know who we are. We are dependent on a you to know an I. That's where it begins. It begins an arc of growth that will eventually hopefully birth in us independence, not dependence. And hopefully at one point interdependence. But we need each other and that is a problem. We are empty in the beginning. In our emptiness we need to be loved, we need to be seen, we need to be known, we need to be recognized, we need to be played with, we need to be in sync with one another. We need a dance.

If one could take three words together and imagine what an infant or a narcissistic, naturally empty mirror of a child might look like, there are three words, just like me. Won't you please just like me? I need you to fill me up because without you liking me, loving me, seeing me, there is no opportunity for me to grow my own I. I need you. Just like me. And of course, if we stall at that stage of our development, if we never graduate from just like me, if we remain stuck in a stage of our own unfolding where the only thing we see in the world are objects or things that might gratify our deep, absolutely inexhaustible desire to be liked, to affirm that we are, please like me, we become shells. We become an empty expression of our potential. Now, the truth of the matter is that we have a lot of wisdom into what might be a solution to this problem.

Fundamentally, the question is, how do we grow up? And if you're following along the last couple of weeks at Romemu we've been discussing resistance, right? We had all resistance to resistance last week. Our sermon was about not only the resistance of Moses to becoming a leader, last week we did the resistance of the Israelites to hearing the song of liberation, and this week we're going to talk a little about resistance of Pharaoh. I don't know about you, but I did have on my mind this week the notion that there could be a narcissistic individual or leader that might in some way, shape, or form feel the need always to be liked, and because of that need always to be liked in some way, shape, or form, let's say, that person might exhibit self-destructive behaviors that might not take into account a whole group of other people, let's say. And in that self-destructive spiral of unwillingness to surrender and give in, we might find ourselves almost hitting rock bottom, let's say.

And of course, you would be right in thinking that I was thinking about Pharaoh in tomorrow morning's Torah reading. Here's a little bit of advice that Torah is going to give us about people who say just like me. People who are in a position of power, but also have power plus the worst thing they can have, which is fear. When power and fear mix, watch out. Torah has a little bit of advice for us tomorrow morning in this story, and just to bring you all up to date, in the Torah, or as the weekly wisdom turns, we are in the last of the plague portions.

Last three plagues. Unless you think that the plagues are something we shouldn't touch, let's just imagine for a moment that these things didn't happen, let's say, but that the Torah is telling us a story about a ruler who would rather see his entire kingdom, his empire, come crashing down before he would surrender and let go. The Torah is telling us something about me and you, all of us. Not just politically, not just cosmically, but interpersonally, me and you. When I usually think about the plagues, we come to the last three, which are locust, and then darkness, and the last one, of course, the killing of the firstborn. We always imagine them as kind of increasing in intensity, which almost always leaves me bewildered as we come to this portion tomorrow morning.

Because locusts, pretty horrible. They went everywhere, the earth was dark with the amount of locusts that were there, but when we come to the penultimate plague, known as darkness, I've always wondered what exactly warranted the ninth plague, the penultimate plague, to be in its place. What made darkness a plague? Here's the Torah's description about darkness.

Some insight into the mind of someone who is stuck. God said to Moshe, Vayom Ratanai Moshe, Netei Yadcha Al Hashamayim Vayit V'Choshech Al Eretz Yitzrayim And let there be darkness over all of Egypt V'Yamesh Choshech Let the darkness be a tangible darkness. So Moshe does that, Vayit Moshe Yadol Al Hashamayim Vayit Choshech Al Eretz Yitzrayim There is three days of darkness.

Lo Ra'u Ish Et Achiv V'Lo Kamu Ish Mitach Tav V'Slosh Et Yamim V'Lechol B'nei Yisrael Haya Or B'Mosh Votam This is the clue. Verse 23 of chapter 10 tells us about a plague so intense, so overwhelming, so painful that is such suffering for those who experience it. What might be the suffering of the plague of darkness? Is it like locusts? Is it like wild beasts? Is it like dam? Is it like blood or like frogs? No. Here's what darkness does, says the Torah. For three days, you can't touch someone. For three days, the Torah says, and these are the words Lo Ra'u Ish Et Achiv One person could not see their brother. The removal of physical touch, the removal of camaraderie, the removal of I see you, I like you. The penultimate plague, the plague that sets up the killing of the firstborn is characterized as an inability to see your brother. Not being able to see your brother, not being able to see your sister, not being able to leave, come and go.

Pharaoh, in our tradition, is the very embodiment of someone who can't come and go. As we talked about last week, he has no openings. He can't even go to the bathroom publicly. No one can know that he goes to the bathroom, says to Midrash, because he can't let anybody know that he's deeply human. He has no orifices that anybody knows of. Like his land, he is sealed inside and outside, like a place that is walled in. The walls of Egypt become the prison of Egypt. In the words of Mark Nepo, the poet, the walls that we use to construct

against fear and against something outside of us become the very thing that makes it impossible for the very thing that we feel fear to move from us. Because by the time we construct the wall, the fear is already there. Why else construct the wall? The fear is already in you. And so that very thing that you construct to keep everything out now becomes the thing that keeps everything in.

Pharaoh is in prison. He can't even let the Israelites who are imprisoned in him and in his country leave even though they are destroying his country. Pharaoh is insulated, armored. And like the Choshaf, the plague of darkness, there's no connection, there's no touch. He hides behind a wall of fear, behind a wall of darkness. Pharaoh and the plague are one, the country is one. He is terrified.

So, what's the solution? If the plague is not seeing your brother, not seeing your sister, what is the solution? Just like me. Not just like me, but just like me. What if Pharaoh were able to say, what if the Egyptians were able to say, are those Israelites? They long for freedom just like me. What if Pharaoh were able to grok to understand that killing the firstborn children of the Israelites would be as painful to them as it would be to him, just like me? What if the one who is narcissistically insulated could imagine a reality of the other that is just like them? And what if they could really see their brothers and sisters?

I had the opportunity this week to be a part of a contingent of white liberal rabbis who met with the leaders of the Women's March to try to bring together and to listen to one another around what has been happening in communities of color and around Jews who are feeling walled in, fearful. It reminded me of this quote from James Baldwin, Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and no, we cannot live within. Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and no, we cannot live within. And then he goes on to say, I use the word love not merely in a personal sense but as a state of being, a state of grace, not in the infantile American sense of being made happy, just like me, but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth. The tough universal sense of quest and daring and growth, daring to let down my guard, daring to see my brother and sister as just like me, daring to see those whom I'm trying to protect myself from having the very same fears that I have.

Why are these immigrants running to our country if not because of their own terror? Sure, there are plenty of people whom we'd like to protect ourselves from and protection is vital, but what kind of protection is true protection? What kind of protection is true protection? When we build walls to insulate ourselves against the fear that already exhibits itself in our own bodies, we become locked in the prison that was intending to keep us safe. When we withdraw, when we pull away, when we say I'm not going to talk to those people because they're not like me, Tamika is not like me, like her or not like her, Linda Sarsour, not like me, Palestinians, not like me, Jews, not like me, almost every cruel act, almost every act of inhumanity has begun with those words, not like us. Who are those homosexuals? They're not like us. Who are those black people? Not like us. Everyone not like us. Just like me. Not like me.

Walls, fear, self-destruction, ignorance. Unless you think that it's just Pharaoh in this little red book or someone in a white house or it's all of us, we can span the sublime to the banal. It's me knowing that what really gives me my life force is spending time with my kids but

instead choosing to spend an extra hour working to be the best rabbi I can be because gosh darn it, I got my walls up. It's you. When you imagine someone sitting on the bus or crossing who is not like you or someone running home from work who happens to cut you off, just like me. Just like me.

We play this dance between our own uniqueness and our identity that we share. This Shabbat is special for a number of reasons. One is that a dream that I've had for almost 30 years, to have a contemplative meditative space, a yeshiva of sorts, a kind of seminary, a place where people can study, is coming to fruition with 120 some odd people who are coming on Sunday and then, God willing, our full yeshiva program in June. And I thought it would be nice for us to end tonight inviting all of those who are sleeping now to wake up. It's nice when your sermon can give somebody nice little snooze. I like that.

And as you wake up, I invite us into a comfortable place to do an actual meditation together. The name of this meditation is called You Got It, Just Like Me. So if your feet are not yet on the ground, I invite you to place them firmly on the ground. If you'd like to sit up straight in your chair or on the floor, wherever you are. If you're watching at home, listening, not rigidly standing straight, but just energetically so that you don't fall asleep because you need energy to meditate. I invite you to become aware that there is somebody who's sitting either in front of you, behind you, or next to you.

And if your eyes are not already closed, I invite you to close your eyes and become aware of that presence of that person, that other, that you that is the solution. There is a fellow human being just like me. This person has a body and a mind just like me. This person has feelings, emotions, and thoughts just like me. This person has at some point been sad, disappointed, angry, hurt, confused, just like me. This person has in his or her or their life experienced physical and emotional pain and suffering just like me. This person wishes to be free from pain and suffering just like me. This person wishes to be free of pain and suffering just like me. This person wishes to be safe and healthy and loved just like me. This person wishes to be safe, healthy, and loved just like me. Now let's allow some wishes to arise. I wish for this person to have the strength and resources and social support to navigate the difficulties in their life. I wish for this person to be free from pain and suffering. I wish for these people to be happy because this person is a fellow human being just like me.

I invite you to imagine now, not only in this room, but beyond the walls of this sanctuary, out into the streets, into the people that you will meet in a half hour, an hour, two hours, the people you will meet over the weekend, just like me. Allow yourself to see them and say these words, they suffer, they yearn, they long, just like me. Whenever you're ready to open your eyes, I invite you to open your eyes and just imagine for a moment with me the kind of world that we would live in if just like me-ism were rampant. Imagine the restaurant you go to any time over the weekend where everyone looks at you and treats you as if they were treating their highest self with care.

And imagine the same place and you treat the wait staff that way too. Imagine a community that engages one another just like me. This person wants to feel welcomed just like me. This person wants to connect just like me. The plague of darkness looks simple in its scope, but in truth it is a profound instruction. And what it is, that is at the core of what it is to be human, we need to see each other, to listen to each other, to understand one another, to

walk in each other's shoes, to lift each other up, to imagine a world where that is possible.
James Baldwin was right. Love is daring. Love is taking a chance.

May God bless each and every one of us with the power to take off the masks.

May it rise.