

## Shabbat 07 26 19 Sermon

I just want to say before I even begin my D'var that Jeffrey and Izzy and Shelley, that baby's name is Sinai. That's the name of Sinai. And we're told that there's a voice that cries out from Sinai every day. Oylehem al albonash el torah. This little Sinai has got a good voice. There's a story from the Berditchev. The great Chassidus Shadrableh in the latter part of the 18th century, beginning of the 19th century. Levi Yitzchak ben Sarasasha, the great Berditchever, known as a lover of all of Israel, a lover of humanity, a great lover of people. The Berditchever, some of you have heard this joke, I think you may have told it, but it's one of those that always gives me a little... Berditchever is known to always see people in the best light.

The Berditchever was once walking along the street and he saw, on Shabbat, he saw somebody that he knew smoking. On Shabbat, no less. So he sidled over to the young person and he said, excuse me, my friend, perchance you don't realize that today is the holy Sabbath. The person said, no, holy Rebbe, I do know today is the Sabbath. And he said, okay, perhaps you don't realize that on Shabbat it's prohibited to smoke. Whereupon the person said, you know, Rebbe, I happen to know that on Shabbat it's prohibited to smoke. The Rebbe, with one last effort, said, my friend, maybe you didn't realize that you're smoking. Whereupon the man, the person said, no, Rebbe, I know. And the Rebbe, in this beautiful story, turned to heaven as he was wanted to and said, you see, God, who is like your people? I gave this person every opportunity to lie and they didn't. What a truthful people you have.

This quality of the Berditchever. Man, I could use a little bit of that these days, right? A little bit of what it is in the distance between the motivations of others and my observance, how I see them, looking at someone and thinking I know their insides from their outsides, thinking that some way my x-ray vision can discern from the behavior that they have what motivates them. Man, so many problems come from that, right? That inability that we have, all of us, lovingly said, to see surfaces and not depths. To see surfaces and miss the depths. Or not hold out the hope or the possibility that we might not know what motivates someone else. How hard it is to imagine that amidst all of the different motivations and agendas that there might be a buried goodness, a presumption in our court of law of innocence. A presumption of innocence. The Torah is not immune, right, to that thought.

What Eric Byrne, the great psychiatrist, introduced in his book, Games People Play, where he laid out transactional analysis as a way of interpreting social interactions. He describes three roles or ego states known as the parent, the adult, and the child. And this Eric Byrne, in 1964, when he wrote the book, it sold 5 million copies. He postulates in that book that many of our negative behaviors can be traced to the switching or confusion of these different roles. Sometimes we're in the child when we should be in the adult. My child is speaking to your child, or my parent is speaking to your child, which only makes you feel like you have to be a child. As I said, the Torah is not immune to these games. And this problem of both seeing that it's possible that someone might deceive us, and yet it's demanded to some degree that we cut through it. In the verse in Leviticus, chapter 19, verse 15, the Torah tells us, Make sure that when you judge in your courts of law, you don't give deference to

the wealthy, or lift up the poor. Do it justly. Weigh the evidence. But that very same verse becomes the source in our rabbinic tradition for judging people favorably.

The very same verse in the Torah, in the book of Leviticus, that tells us that we must have an even, just, rational approach to the evidence that has been placed before us, that very same verse, the very verse that says, make sure that you don't lift the poor or the rich, that isn't what is of interest, justice, justice shall you pursue, that very verse becomes the source in our rabbinic tradition for something known as Dan L'kaf Zichut. Judging people favorably. Can you all say that? Dan. One more time. Dan. L'kaf. Zichut. Just mean, like, give people the benefit of the doubt. Like, give them some space.

And in our yeshiva this week, heard a beautiful Torah, a number of people said this Torah, the students of Romemu Yeshiva said, that there's no contradiction between the same verse demanding strict justice and the same verse demanding our generosity of judgment. To be just is to invite generosity, one person said. Tomorrow's weekly wisdom, and as the Torah turns, will bring us to a very unique moment.

The Torah reading tomorrow morning is known as Pinchas, and essentially it begins with the aftermath of last week's horrific story. In last week's episode, the Israelites were in the middle of an orgiastic episode with the women of Midian. A plague has broken out in the camp, and the great Israelite leader, Zimri, is publicly, and for the Torah's purposes, wrongfully and sinfully, engaged with a Midianite, a.k.a. non-Jewish woman, in public. This priestess known as Kozbi, or Kozbi Batzur, is with Zimri in the public square, and arises from the midst of the story a vigilante that is violent, a violent vigilante by the name of Phineas, or Pinchas. He's the grandson of the great peacemaker Aaron the priest, and he grabs a spear, and he kills the two fornicators, and brings an end to the plague. Vaidaber Adonai on Moshe Limor this morning, tomorrow morning's reading, will begin in the aftermath of that horrific scene. We might, as moderns, want the God of the universe to come down and say, Shame on you, Phineas, Pinchas. How dare you take the law into your own hands? There'll be no room for violence in my world. Anything but. Verse 10, in chapter 25, tomorrow morning, begins, And God spoke to Moses, saying, Pinchas ben Al-Azhar ben Aaron ha-Kohen, Hishiv et chamati mea b'nei Yisrael, ve'kano et kinati b'tocham. V'lochiliti et b'nei Yisrael ve'kinati. God says to Moses, Reward Pinchas. Reward that violent vigilante for having done what I might have done. L'chein emor, God tells Moses, Therefore proclaim, Hineni notenlo et b'rity shalom. I will give him my covenant of peace.

Generation upon generation of those who find these verses as difficult, I trust, trust me as you do. Generations of interpreters have tried to understand the nature of the covenant of peace that God rewards Pinchas with. Is it a reward or is it a corrective? Is giving a covenant of peace a sign that you did it good? Or that, oh my goodness, if you could do that, you must now be in need of a covenant of peace.

One radical Hasidic interpreter, named Mordechai Yosef Lehner of Ishbets, in maybe one of the most famous Torahs, famous teachings in the Hasidic tradition, radically re-reads tomorrow morning's violent vigilante version. This great Hasidic Rebbe in the 18th century, this great Rabbi who was himself a radical thinker, he writes, and listen to this, if you fell asleep, listen to this. Ve'zeh mamash inyan Pinchas ha'yadan ez zimri linoef be'alma.

He says, Pinchas looked at this great leader with this non-Israelite woman, publicly defacing the Jewish tradition, the Israelite tradition, the Torah, and Pinchas says, this great Hasidic Rebbe, the Ishbets Rebbe, Pinchas missed the mark. Pinchas, this great hero of the Torah, that at simple glance is rewarded. He missed the mark. And listen to what this Hasidic Rebbe says. Ki hi ha'yita batzugo mi'sheshet y'mei b'reshit. Pinchas didn't get the memo. Apparently he didn't know. Didn't he get the news, Pinchas? This Rebbe with mit de'bort, looking like a Hasidic Rebbe in Ishbets, says that this Jewish prince and this non-Israelite princess were bashert, they're soul mates, from the six days of creation. And Pinchas, in his zealousness, as only zealots can do, looked outside and saw the circumstances. That doesn't look kosher, he thought. And missed the mark.

And listen to the words of the Rebbe. He says, v'chu na'ar b'inin hazeh. He was a child, meaning Pinchas, the violent vigilante, was childish. He didn't see omek ha'dvarim. He couldn't see beyond the surface. And in this he explains the covenant of peace to say that Pinchas was given not peacefulness but shlemut, that he could hold the surface and the depth together in shalom, meaning with a comprehensive mind that wasn't satisfied with just the evidence that his eyes could see. Whenever I read this and I think about the teaching of being dan nekav schut, of judging others favorably.

I had a friend this week call me to tell me that he worked with a man whose son and husband, husband who is not Jewish, were going to bring a child into the world and not circumcise the child. And this person was beyond consolation, perilously close to losing the relationship with his own son. His son turned to him after he said, How can you shame me? And he said, It isn't about you. I'm concerned for the health of my child. My motivation is pure. I love Judaism. I'm not rejecting you. We are going to have a brit shalom, he told him. We're going to have a brit, a covenant, without the circumcision, but it's going to be a beautiful ceremony. We're going to lift up the value of Judaism. And I didn't want to weigh in on whether or not I believe or don't believe or what are the merits or non-merits. It's a big issue. But I said to my friend, if his father can get to a place where he sees his son's motivation not rooted in rebellion, but in honoring his own truth, in his longing to do what's best for his own son, his son is a doctor, by the way, having done research, can you impugn to him motivations that are rooted in love, in goodness? Can you give him the justice of generosity? Can any of us do that? It is complicated, perhaps maybe the most difficult issue that we face now, because I don't know about you, but as far as I'm concerned, watching Robert Mueller, watching what is going on in our country, it is really hard for me to give people the benefit of the doubt. It's a practice. You didn't cut in line because you are mean or inconsiderate. Maybe you didn't see me here.

Man, what would this country look like if everybody took a deep breath in between what we see and the conclusions we draw? Between what we see and the conclusions we extract? Is there room anymore? Is it possible? Is it too dangerous? Is it scary? Is it possible for us to double down, holding out the option that maybe Zimri met his soulmate and she happens to be a Midianite woman? Is it possible for us to judge one another favorably?

Even more radically, in our yeshiva, we talked about this teaching from the great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, Rav Nachman of Breslov, who says it's not just important to judge others favorably. When we judge others favorably, they become someone new. When we

offer them that little space between what we saw and what they were driven by, we shift from the child mind to the adult mind. And wouldn't it be great if this country and the world were full of adults who were really adults? Adults who were in the adult game, not playing out the trip of a kid or a childish mind. This is, I think, a deep spiritual practice that deserves our time and energy.

If you walk out of here tonight and you go home and you find yourself in a conversation where instead of asking a question that might discern another's motivation, stop for a moment and say, hmm, I don't know why you did that. Why'd you do that? I don't know why you went there. I don't know why you believe that. Can you tell me? Might you disclose to me, adult to adult, what motivates you, what you find beautiful in that, what was persuasive there? Oh, what a world that could be. It's complicated. It's not easy. But who said it was? To be mature, big-hearted people requires diligence.

And even though at Shabbat I invite you to do this work this weekend of judging others favorably, judging others favorably, ask them if you might know at the heart of it, in the depth of it, why they smoke on Shabbat. Maybe they don't know. Or maybe they just want to be honest with who they are. May God bless us with the patience, the spaciousness, the discernment to judge our neighbors with generosity.

Please rise.