

Sermon Shabbat 10 26 18

So, I can't tell you how heartwarming it is when you start to speak and 30 people leave. It's just a great... I didn't even start speaking. When I was a kid growing up, my father used to... I sat next to my cousin, Ben, in shul growing up, and every week, to seder, every single week on Shabbat morning, when the rabbi began to speak, my cousin, Ben, reached into his suit pocket and brought out a pair of very special glasses that have eyes wide open on the outside. I think I'm a little 50, you know, nim num.

Every wedding is an opportunity to talk about what Chazan Basi is so beautifully... That was Chazan Basi's poem, that poem. And so every wedding is an opportunity for me to talk about blind spots. Every wedding, every couple that meets with me, and every moment when the classic understanding of various ritual moments in the wedding are discussed, things like the circling that many people might be familiar with, where traditionally it was the bride, but now there's a kind of double circling, this whole circling of someone who stands, a circle is made.

Blind spots or blind side, the notion that we can't see everything, the notion that we can look at something over and over again and repeatedly see the very same thing that we saw last time, without even knowing that there are objects in the mirror, in the rearview mirror, that we, because we don't have them, don't see things behind us. As I tell the couple, as you walk around your lover, you're promising to them that you'll bring back to them the things you found behind them. Could be beautiful things, lights. Did you know how beautiful you look from this angle, and from this angle, and from this angle, but maybe you didn't see this here. And that the true meaning of what it is to be in relationship is to be... an ezer kinokdo, to be someone who helps the other ripen.

Because by definition, human beings don't have eyes in 360 degrees, we can't see it all. And so it is with fresh eyes that I'd like to look at one moment in tomorrow morning's wisdom, weekly wisdom, and apply it to my life and yours. This isn't a long sermon, but it's something that dawned on me after reading it over and over again this week, various interpretations of a pivotal moment in the parasha, in the weekly wisdom, that I'd like to lift up, because I have a blind spot about it, but I want to share it with you.

Tomorrow morning's weekly wisdom will begin chapter 18 of the book of Genesis with Abraham, sitting, in the heat of the day, and it was pretty hot, sitting in his tent, and he has a vision, that God appears to Abraham, in the terebinths, in the trees, or is it an actual vision, but something divine is happening, there's a meeting between Abraham and God. And within one verse, within one moment of this story, three men appear, three men, three angels, whatever they are, and the Torah describes an interesting scene, where Abraham begins to talk, and uses the word Adonai, or Adonai uses the term Lord, or Sirs, in addressing someone, we're not sure. He says, please don't leave, I want to be hospitable to you.

This leads the rabbis to say that when he uses the word Lord, he's actually not only speaking to the three men who have appeared, who deserve hospitality, but he's actually saying to God, God, please don't leave, I have to go attend to these three guests who have come. And

from that moment, a famous principle emerges in the Talmud, Greater is it to greet guests than it is to get a log-on hit of God. You can put God on hold, and say, hey, I'll be right back.

It's a remarkable story in and of itself, and I've heard it over and over again, and I was thinking I'm going to talk about guest services tonight, and hospitality, and sure enough, it is a great story. And sure enough, I hope if you leave here tonight with nothing less than this phrase, that in every face there is a trace of the Divine, such that God would rather have you tend to those human beings than have you communicate with God. It's that holy, yom kippur, nothing.

Three guests show up, can I help you? Remarkable moment. Famous Lubavitch story in the canons of the Hasidic sect, Lubavitch, about one of the Rebbes who was sitting at home and meditating, and when his father, who was the grand Rebbe, came home, found him sitting and meditating, and his grandchild, this son's son, his grandchild crying upstairs, whereupon the Rebbe said to him, if your meditation is so deep and so immersive, that you can't hear your own child crying. Nope.

Can't tell you, I know Donna's here, but I don't want to out her, but I can't tell you how many times I've been to yoga classes in New York, where people in their rush to get the right spot in the yoga studio, you can finish the sentence. Get out of my way, I'm on my way to meditate. Well, let me, I'll out myself. Hi, yeah, me too. Running the shul. Because when you get the shul, that's when it really starts, right? How many people here in the shul remember that frequently over the last ten years, I would say, Shabbat doesn't begin until it ends. Shul doesn't begin until it ends. It's all great and fine and good, right, when it's all yummy in here, and we're all singing. But in ten minutes, we're going to be out in subways and streets.

And our tradition says, in this first iteration of a very well-known phrase, that treating the guest as if they have a trace of the Divine, because that is the locus of the Holy, that is, wow. How many of us can say that? I would like to be able to say it, like, that's my goal. That God should bless me that I'm not so wrapped up in whatever my sacred undertaking is, that I am missing an opportunity for Levinasian, the great French philosopher, the person before you is the locus of the Holy.

So here's my blind spot. Everybody got that first part? Make sense? Here's my blind spot. According to tradition, the reason why God came to visit Abraham, actually, which I didn't allude to, is this. Abraham had just had major surgery. God was doing what's called bikur holim. God came to visit Abraham as he was convalescing. He was laid up. He just had a horrible surgery. And he was pretty old at that moment, and he had circumcision.

I mean, that's not a great scene. And that moment was something that hit me with such force that I often alluded over it, that here was someone who was so connected and it was so important for him to serve that he, in his pain, did not shut down to the needs of the other. And I don't know about you, but when I'm in serious pain, I sat with people this week who were in unimaginable pain. And the woman who sat with me said, I don't care about anyone. I want my son, my daughter, I want them back. I want this person, I want this one to be healed.

When we are in pain, when we are laid up, when we are convalescing, when we feel like we're not at our best and we have every reason in the world to allow ourselves to be where we are. And nonetheless, I ask myself, what was it in Avram and Abraham, this tariqa, what was it in him that allowed him to say, you know what, I'm in pain, but there's a need.

Or the song I heard when I was a much younger man, I heard a song then about Aung San Suu Kyi. I don't know if it's true anymore, but a friend wrote a song, said, when you're feeling helpless, help someone. When you're feeling helpless, help someone. When you're feeling helpless, help someone. I want that from Abraham. I want in the moment where everything in me wants to constrict and contract and pull in and say, I don't care about the world, it's my pain that matters. I want to stay in. And three strangers show up with their need and their hurt and their possibility and the holy ask of me at that moment, can you get out of the bed? You have God on your Apple TV, your iPod, and say, you God. You. Not me God, you God.

And I think that ultimately, it's this understanding that actually informs what kind of vision was happening here. God wasn't coming to Abraham, and in this way, it's not what the rabbis were thinking. There was no interruption. It was the very revelation to Abraham, the very spiritual succor that he had from being with God herself, that gave him that sense. It wasn't just, God, please don't leave. It was, thank you for giving me the strength. Thank you for lifting me up. Thank you for helping me see that here is an opportunity. When I'm feeling helpless, let me help someone. Thank you.

It's possible to imagine this in non-theological terminology. It doesn't have to be about theology. It can be about my project. It can be about my vision for building a community. It can be about my career. It can be about something. It can be about my vision of what a building might look like or how it should be. There can be all manner of pain that each and every one of us might bring to a moment, and the Torah asks us tomorrow morning in our weekly wisdom, can we go beyond our own personal story and transcend it for something bigger? And isn't that the essence of that circle under the chuppah? Isn't that the essence of that circle in a wedding canopy, the circle of the blind spot, the blind side? The circling partner says to the one being circled, I won't let you lock yourself into your pain. I'm here. I'm going to lift you up. I'm going to give you someone to give to, and I will give to you. As long as we are in that relationship of giving one to the next, you will be my guest, even though you are my beloved, and I will stand before you, on you. I will wait on you and be a server.

The great Richard Alpert, Ram Dass, who had a powerful, transformative experience going to India, meeting his great guru, Neem Karoli Baba. He had been tripping on acid and all manner of other psychedelics, and he had come to India in search of the holy, in search of the transcendent, in search of the luminescent, in search of the lights and the fireworks, and God appearing, and when he came to get his name from his great guru, his guru said, Ram Dass, servant of God, here's what I want you to do. I want you to serve. I want you to love. I want you to remember.

So Avram Avinu comes to me, Abraham the patriarch comes to me, to you and all of us, and says, whether it's tonight, or tomorrow, whenever the Innu says, I can't give one more iota,

if you're feeling helpless, help someone. If you're feeling like everything wants to close down, reach out. It's a blessing to have had this teaching for us. It's a blessing that our teachers thought of it, to lift up our blind spots and our blind sides, to have each other's backs. I'll not have or may I love Decha.

Let's rise up.