

Shabbat 01 26 18 Sermon

You know, there's a never-ending, a never-ending dance that we as human beings play. A never-ending dance that I engage in, you do. We're all dancers. All of us, each and every one of us in our own ways. We're all involved in this dance. You can't get away from it. It's just what it is to be human. It's the dance in which we toggle between the past that we ruminate about, that we try to go back to or flee from. The present that we find ourselves in, ephemeral, hard to pin down.

And the future that we envision, that we imagine, that we dream about. We human beings are caught. Not only vertically, but horizontally, not just spatially, but temporally. We are. That's what it is. I mean, come on. Just this service alone, you probably visited five years ago, ten years ago, thirty years ago. You also visited the future. Welcome back.

Just a story, by the way. Just thought of this story. The Berditchim once, there was a great Hasidic Rebbe who at the end of the prayers went over to somebody and said, Welcome back. He said, Rebbe, you know I've never left Berditchim. He said, During your prayers, you were in Leipzig, you were in Danzig, you were everywhere. Welcome back.

We travel. We're all over the place. The ambivalence about the present, or even its identity, what is that? I remember when I was an ultra-Orthodox guy, we used to sing a song, Ha'avar ayin ve'a'atira da'in ve'hoveh keheref ayin da'agam minayin. The future isn't yet. The past is gone. And the present is like the blink of an eye.

Why? What are you worried about? What are you worried about? There's no better word in Hebrew that captures the ambivalence of past, present, and future than the most famous word in tomorrow morning's Torah reading, maybe the most famous word in the parasha that begins the song of the sea, or the song itself, the word az. Az. Az.

If you look it up in the dictionary, if you look it up in the biblical dictionary, you look up the etymology of the word, it balances like a little fulcrum between then and then. Then, or even in the present, az means in the immediate moment. And then it happens. Right? The immediate present. There we were, and we were at the sea, and there it was, just telling you about it, and the joker's to the left of me, and there I am, stuck in the middle, the ejection's behind, and there I am. And it's terrifying, and I don't know.

And then, az is the next moment. But it can also be the distant future. It's everything wrapped up in it. It's a wizard of az. Who put this guy in PJs? That's what I want to know. That's just, that's just too much right there.

This is Adia. And the amazing thing about az is that it does this dance. It does this dance grammatically, it does this dance verbally, it does this dance, it serves this function in the Torah, it serves this function in our stories, and it's able to hold these multiple meanings in one little two-letter word, az.

It functions in tomorrow morning's reading, And then Moses sang the song, there they were at the sea of reeds, and it was horrible, and then they sang. The only problem, of course, is

that the next word, they sang, can also mean they sang, or they will sing. So you're left wondering, did they sing, or will they sing? So let's assume they sang.

But then, let's take a very famous psalm, Psalm 126, many of us are familiar with this psalm, from the grace after meals, right, before the grace after meals, so it's the tehillah, before the grace after, and it's, shir ha'malot, right, we know this song of ascents, et shivatsi ayinu kechromim, we were then like dreamers, dreamers, like dreamers, az y'mal esrok peynu o'shonenu rina, then our mouths were filled with laughter. We were brought back from exile, we were in a place of exile, we were alienated, we thought we were on the brink of loss, we were, things looked terrible, and we were brought back, et shivatsi, we came back to the Holy Land, to the psalmist, and then, our mouths were filled with music, with laughter. And then the goyim, then the nations said, wow, higila donayla sotimanu, we also want to laugh, like them, we want that redemption song too.

And there too in Psalm 126, is it that we sang, or we will sing, is it a redemption song in the present moment, or a song for the future, maybe it's both. But what's remarkable about both of these instances of az, both of these moments of ambivalence about past, present, and future, both of these are dependent on one very powerful recognition. Something turns on az, something changes on the letters az, something is not just being told about time, but something is told about the progression through time.

Something about the word az in both the story tomorrow morning when we're running from the Egyptians and we finally make it out and whew, that was close, and the other story where we come back from exile and we are laughing our heads off, in both of those az's, and I would argue in all az's cases, there is something profound about the content of the story and the shift in the moment that not only speaks to past, present, future, but determines something, something is lifted up, something important. In the story tomorrow morning, and then they began to sing a song, the turning point is that instead of fetching and complaining, instead of praying, instead of begging God, the Israelites did something remarkable. They acted from their own sense of power to move towards their own liberation.

They took a step in, in the midrashic mind, they took a step into the unknown, they stepped forward, a certain character, whatever this is, some archetype of the human who says, I'll go first, let me break this pattern, let me disturb this pattern. I will be the pattern interrupter. I will be the one who will make the circle of time spread into a spiral of time.

We won't be back where we were, there is Big Ben and there is parliament, and there is Big Ben and there is parliament, here we are on the merry-go-round of life, repeating ourselves over and over again until someone named Nachshon, until some moment named Nachshon, until something in us says, never again. Never again. We're not waiting for you God, we waited 400 years, I'm not waiting for your command, I'm not waiting for your permission, I'm not waiting for a leader, I'm not waiting for the media, I'm not waiting for my husband, I'm not waiting for my best friend.

It was time and I knew it and I had to go. And in this az and its power, we'll talk about the next az, in this az we see the full beauty of all spiritual and religious traditions, writ large, from time immemorial to tomorrow when a new one will be formed and their promise to

entrain and to instill and to practice the power of evolution. Religion is the power of human evolution in its highest form because it is to teach us to move from a pattern of inevitability to open it up into the possibility of what could be.

That's evolution. When Freud said that each and every one of us will repeat compulsively the patterns of our children, of our childhood until we finally get it right, he knew that finally getting it right was the fulcrum on which evolution proceeds. When I've done it over and over again and keep getting it wrong, that great story, I keep coming to that, that cartoon, people know this cartoon, I was walking forward and there was a pit and I fell into it, and I started walking forward and then I finally learned how to walk around it, that's evolution, that's growth, that's spiritual, emotional, that's everything. Az, past, that's the way it was. Azimale, maybe it could be, well, it depends what you do here. What do you do here? And do you think you have the power in this moment to do something?

A friend of mine, Daniel Smokler, pointed out to me a classic commentary on tomorrow morning's reading, you're going to get this, you guys all are going to get this, I got it so deep, he said, you know, how many charioteers did Pharaoh bring with him to find the Israelites camping at the sea? The Torah tells us 600.

That's a lot of charioteers, but here's an interesting number, how many Israelites were there who left Egypt? 600,000 men, 3 million men, women, children. 600 versus 3 million. 600 versus 3 million.

They had it the whole time. They had the power, they had the numbers, they had everything it took. There's Dorothy, begging the wizard, can you take me back? No, sweetie, it's on your feet. It's on your feet. You Israelites are terrified, you're terrified, but az, here's your moment. What are you screaming about? Just go. There are 3 million of you. You are strong together and you can never be silenced again. Because here you stand to speak your truth. You will never again be a victim. You will never again have to stand in front of misogynists and have to deal with the power of the male patriarchy. You will stand and speak your truth.

Az, this is the moment and guess what? You had it before too. But here it is. You want to evolve? Make that choice. Thank God they did. Wow. But there's one more piece. Because the Midrash tells us that when the sea split, it wasn't just the sea that split. The water split everywhere. The water split everywhere in the world.

The Midrash says, Amar Midrash, Amar Rabbi, that the water, even in a cup, that if you were drinking a cup of water there, it would just split. You'd be like drinking and it'd be like, uh-oh. It's a great Midrash, right? What are the Rabbis pointing to with that Midrash? They're saying, evolution isn't just when I evolve, but when my evolution involves everyone's freedom. Because if freedom is just me and my little religion, then I've evolved here. But religion is not just evolution, but evolution that proceeds from ego to ethno, from me to we, from ethno to world, and from world to cosmos. We grow as we include more and more of the world.

So the Rabbis are trying to say, great, you've already been to Oz, you found your slippers, but now everybody, everybody, the bodhisattva's vow, everybody has to be free, not just me. So that anytime you hear a politician or someone whom you love say, well, I'm excited

because it's good for the Jews, but it's not good for everybody else, think about that for a moment. It's good for one side of the country, not the other side of the country, think about that for a moment.

When we think, oh, we're free, but 38,000 African asylum seekers from Africa who live in Israel who will be deported next week. The role of our stories is to bring us back over and over again to the az and say, different this time, never again. That's the fulcrum, not just for me, but for we. Not just for this, but for all of that. Tomorrow, of course, is International Holocaust Remembrance Day, which of course was forgotten last year by our government. Seventy-three years ago, Auschwitz and Birkenau were liberated.

Seventy-three years ago. And the great Elie Wiesel said this, never again becomes more than a slogan, never again is a prayer. It is a promise, a vow, that there will never again be hatred, that there will never again jail and torture, that never again the suffering of innocent people or the shooting of starving, frightened, terrified children never again the glorification, never again will we have the glorification of the base, the ugly, the dark, and violent.

Never again is a prayer. Then, when past, present, and future come together, then our mouths will be filled with laughter, but so will the mouths of those who will say, let God do that for us, and we'll say, yes, that is a full redemption when everyone is saved, when everyone is redeemed, when everyone is laughing, when everyone can click their heels three times and say, I'm home. And there's no place like it.

Tomorrow morning is Shabbat Shira, is this amazing Shabbat of singing a song, and as is our custom here at Romemu, tomorrow morning, you may come and walk down this aisle singing freedom song. But let's make sure that our freedom song is the freedom song of the great Rav Kook, who said, there is one who sings their song of their self, that's great. There's one who sings the song of the nation, that's great. There's one who sings the song even greater than that, which is the song of all humanity, that's great. There is one, he says, who sings the song of the cosmos, and in singing that song includes all of the other songs, shir ha-shirim, asher le-shlomo, the great song of life is the song which is the fulcrum of all songs. So we stand witness tonight to the songs in our lives, the fulcrums, the places where we are enjoying to say, never again, I'm done, I'm at the sea, let me step over.

We're also enjoying now to bring into our communities and say, in our communities, where are those places where we are making a promise, where we are singing that song that is a prayer in saying, never again. And we're also saying, of course, that the larger world, which now is engulfed in a regressive, fear-based reassertion of ethnic identity, fear of the other, we who believe in freedom shall not rest until that day. Az, then.

Ye'ma leishok pinu l'shonay nerina. Then on that day, on that day.

Please rise.