

Shabbat 02 01 19 Sermon

When I was running in various circles in my 20s reading a lot of Zen literature and Buddhist literature, I came across a story that I also came across more recently in a different variation. Both of them are interesting. The story is basically about two Zen monks. I'm sure many of you have heard this before.

Two Zen monks were walking along the way. They come across a woman in one version of the story. This woman, she's quite beautiful. Zen monks are sworn, they have vows not to touch, you know, a beautiful woman, monastics as they are in the second version of the story. She's an arrogant, angry, good for nothing, very bitter woman, both these stories. And the older monk picks up the woman, either transgressing on the first version and the second version. You'll see in a second. Picks the woman up, takes her across the river or the puddle, and leaves her on the other side. The younger monk watching, incredulous that the older monk has broken his vows. In the second version of the story, after putting down the woman on the other side, she, of course, does not thank the older monk, which angers the younger monk. Either way, the younger monk is angry and upset. A couple of miles later, time has elapsed, and he can't hold it in any longer, and he finally just gets it out, just throws it out there. How could you carry that woman across the puddle river? How could you? How could you? Aren't you angry that she didn't say thank you? The older monk looks at the younger monk and says, you know, I carried that woman across the puddle, across the river, but I dropped her eight miles ago, and you are still carrying her. You are still carrying her.

The story is at once both a story about the things that we carry that we regret and that we have remorse for, transgressions or unskillful activities, things that we say, I wish I would have done that differently. Moral of the story in that version is you responded to the moment. You were the best you could be in that moment, says the older monk. Don't schlep your rules into this present moment. Rules are great in a book, but not when you're face-to-face with what is being called from you. And in the second iteration, the hurts, the slights that we carry around, that we have a hard time putting down, regrets, insults, lifting, dropping.

I don't know about you, but the story is deeply internal, but more often than not, it's not altogether internal that the drama is playing itself out. It's often interpersonal. It's often in a place where the two of us, it's not just internally to myself, but actually, I don't know about you, but sometimes I have a hard time letting go of stuff. Anybody? Sometimes I carry with me things that I should have dropped eight miles back. Sometimes I don't know exactly how in a relationship where someone has hurt me or someone has grieved me. If somebody has left an imprint on me that I have a hard time massaging, it's scar tissue on my soul. I sometimes have no idea how to let it go or if I should. It is a deep, deep question, is it not? How do we work with justifiable anger, righteous indignation? How do we work with the slights that we carry, the wounds that we wear? How do we walk in the world, lifting what we need to lift and finding ourselves unable to drop it? This is, of course, not a unique question.

The Torah is not going to give us something that some other, but the Torah has a conversation to have about this. In fact, it has a beautiful conversation, a conversation that if you were to read tomorrow morning's reading on a superficial reading of the Torah portion tomorrow morning, the weekly wisdom, you will find a verse that will knock your socks off, so I'm going to knock them off right now. And not only is the verse sock-knockable off, without any rabbinic interpretation, it just stands there starkly in the middle of tomorrow morning's weekly reading, but it gets better than that. But just on the superficial level, here's the verse, you might know it, you might not, it's amazing.

Tomorrow morning, of course, Mishpatim, the parsha meaning laws, comes after last week's whispers at Sinai, Revelation is a whisper. And the parsha is the second in number of mitzvot, commandments given, everything from how to treat your worker from slavery to Shabbat, jurisprudence, juridical, you name it, there's torts in there, it's really quotidian. Some have claimed that it is the laundry list, after the ecstasy, the laundry. It is very much the post-Sinai, here's how to live Sinai out in the world. And right smack dab in the middle of it, in chapter 23, verse 5, we hear this. Verse 5 says, when you will see the donkey, the ass of your enemy, of the one the one who hates you, or the one whom you hate, someone write the word Sinai, strong word, you'll see the donkey of your enemy. And what's happening with the donkey of your enemy? Crouching donkey revealed hate, right? Something like crouching, the donkey is bent over, it's a it's back. And you think that you're not gonna help them, him, the enemy, the donkey. The tort says, no, you have to help.

And just for a moment, if you're reading that, you're thinking to yourself, wow, clearly there's something happening here. On one level, you might look at it and think, okay, what's operative here is something called there's a donkey. What did the donkey do to anyone? Shrek anybody? I mean, the donkey is a good thing. Right? Donkeys teach in the Torah. Donkeys speak. What does this poor animal have to do with your hatred between you and your friend? The Torah says, if you see your enemy's donkey and stuck by the side of the road, you might think that you should not help them, but surely you should help them.

What an amazing verse. First and foremost, again, to be considerate of the donkey. But what is more powerful here, something more profound is that the Torah does an amazing thing. The Torah says that your enemy is a human being with feelings. Your enemy, the one whom you the one who hates you, the one whom you hate has a donkey. And that donkey's inability to lift its burden pains your enemy. So help your enemy.

And then we micro look at this verse, something profound happens. Torah tells us something remarkable. The Torah names and admits that even though hatred, even though enmity, even though the virus, even though the pain of what it is to hate another human being, is anathema to the Torah. In other places in the Torah, the Torah says, don't hate your brother in your own heart. The Torah here says and names and admits and acknowledges that you might be carrying a slight, a wound, who that person, that one who hurt me, that one who is endangering me, that one who disagrees with me, that one who didn't treat me well as a child, that teacher, that boyfriend, that girlfriend, that fellow team member, that New Yorker, that cab driver. And the Torah goes right out and says, let's just get it on the table. You don't want to help them. The Torah names the inner psychological state of the person and says, you probably don't want to help them.

Why would you want to help them? The Torah is not Pollyannish, it's not metaphysically, it's not saying to you, you know, everybody is really one, you know, we're all one. And so the hatred you have for him or her or them is really hating yourself. The Torah doesn't say that. The Torah says, no, you are entitled to be angry. You have every reason to be angry. First glance, why shouldn't you be angry? This is someone who is your enemy. We don't even need to know what the reason for, what it could be, that people just left Egypt, it could be an Egyptian. There's historical precedent. I've got a good story, and it works out.

First thing Torah says is, you are entitled to those feelings. In fact, those feelings are true, aren't they? And then the Torah says, but even so, even more so. Because you will feel those feelings, and because you will hate the other, you must help them. Because in a society, at least on this first interpretive model, in a society, when we live together, living together requires the capacity to overcome reactive, understandable, even justifiable rancor, enmity, to alleviate suffering. We must lift the weight for the owner of the donkey. That's why we have to do it. We got to grit our teeth and bear it. It's the right thing to do. If we don't do it, society will come to pieces. So we lift the donkey. For whom? For the owner. Our goodness, our generosity is motivated by a desire to lift for him, her, them. Not for me. I'm angry. We lift for them, and that's good.

How's that for a teaching, everybody? Are we done? Everybody going to go out now and lift donkeys? Not for your own sake, but for someone else. That would be sufficient, says the first interpretive school. We are motivated in this mitzvah, in this commandment, in order to do good for the other.

But there's another deeper puzzle in this mitzvah, in this verse, in this place, and it surrounds the words used for helping. The Torah uses a strange word for helping. Nadav. How do you say help in Hebrew? La'azor or Ezra. Help them with the word Ezra. But the Torah doesn't use that word. And if you don't know Hebrew, everybody, it's okay, we're coming in for a landing in a moment, but it's important because the Torah is telling something really deep, so deep. The Torah says azov. What does la'azov mean, nadav? To leave. The Torah uses a word that is normally used to abandon, to leave behind, to let it go. La'azov, as the word la'azor, to help. When the Torah says you might think not to help him, it says you might think I don't want to leave him. Now what might that mean? But surely you must leave him. The Torah says help him. We become so identified with resentments and the people that we don't like, or the people that we have had and harbored anger towards, or who have injured us. We hold it as an identity. We don't want to let go of them either. The word resentment from the French, resenter, we want to feel it over and over again.

I know myself, I'm the one who has an angry thing with my dad. That's me. I'm the one who can't get along with my sister. I'm the one who has an angry thing with my brother. I remember, it was 15 years ago, we hold on to these wounds, the way the monk, the younger monk, holds on to things long past and we identify with them. And so when the Torah says you might think not to help them, it says you might think not to leave them. You might think not to leave behind the identity, the sense of sitting inside of that knowing. Who would I be if you are not my enemy? Where would I stand? If you weren't the one that every time I saw you made my blood curl, I'd be in a very confused state. I'd be lost, I'd be ambivalent, I would be confused, I'd be thrown.

Wait a second, you all remember about a month and a half ago we talked about the brothers of Joseph who came down to see Joseph and Joseph acted generously to them and he completely threw them off, right? This vizier of Mitzrayim of Egypt should be angry at us but he's giving us things. What would it be like to counteract that feeling that I can't leave you behind? The Torah says you must surely leave them behind. The interpretation of those words in the Aramaic translation of Unkelos and Targum Yonatan is brilliant.

The Targum and the Unkelos both say that when it says *azov* it means unburden your heart from the anger you feel. And in the second interpretive school of what it means to help the donkey, lift the donkey, it means I don't lift the donkey for you, I lift the donkey for me. When I lift your burden, when I lift your load with you, when we lift that load together, there is a chance that one day I might come to not only lift the load with you but drop my hatred of you. That when I lift the load with you, I might drop my hatred for you. That when I lift the load with you, that if we find a shared combined project, commonality, something deeper that binds us together, that I might be forced to leave behind my narrow self-understanding and come out of it I might have to give to you.

And now imagine this teaching, imagine this Torahitic teaching all over the place. Imagine what the world would look like, imagine what communities that lift and contribute together don't have time to hate one another. Communities that help realize they can't hate and help at the same time. That the minute I begin to lift the burden that you are holding, I already feel as if I am interwoven with you.

Imagine this scenario if you come home tonight and you're with your husband, your wife, your partner, your beloved, your sister, your daughter, your brother and you're in a fight with them and you're upset with them because the last time you were hanging out together this, this, this. And for a moment you stop and realize and say to yourself, I wonder how much he's carrying right now. I wonder how much he's carrying right now. I wonder how much that crouched eyebrow, that kvetch, that heaviness in the shoulders, how might I lift that burden with you and see if you can hold on to your anger. That's a test of Unklas and all the great commentators seeing if you can hate and help at once. Is that possible? The Torah says it might be possible but more likely there's a vision of a world where helping one another and lifting one another becomes operative and so hatred dissipates and we find a more common bond.

Now that might be utopic, that might not be real, but you know what? There are all kinds of donkeys that are crouched by the sides of roads everywhere we look and all kinds of relationships that are more important than lifting that donkey. We close down the donkey of our government so 800,000 people won't have a paycheck because we can't help one another lift it. We do that in our relate, we do that in our shuls, we do it in synagogue, we do it in you name it. The minute we start holding things we become identified with the Torah says overcome, transcend that natural desire and help. So that's my time to close up. Appreciate that my friend.

Here's the test for each and every one of us tonight, tomorrow, wherever you are. If when we lift for love, when we lift for love and hate drops, when we lift together with love, for love, in love, when we reach out across our natural inclination not to and destroy that

identity of someone who is my enemy, the one whom I hate, we are actualizing one of the most beautiful axioms, one of the most beautiful teachings that no one has ever heard of in Judaism. If I asked your average person, have you ever heard of the maxim, who is the strong one? Someone might say who is the strong one? The one who is able to the one who can subdue their inclination. The one who is able to look temptation in the eye and say who is a giber, who's a hero? The one who conquers their urge. But the same rabbi who wrote that and became codified said something else that was brought in a vote of rabbi Natan in an obscure source and he said who is the giber, who is the hero? The one who can turn their enemy into their friend. Who is the hero? The one who can turn their enemy into their friend.

Wow. It's not just across the aisle, it's not just in Washington DC, it's not just here in New York City, it's in my house, it's in my heart. Can I help by leaving behind what I thought was the nature of our relationship? Can I lift with you and in lifting with you drop the story, the hatred? That's the koan everyone, that's the riddle.

Check it out tonight over Shabbat dinner. Ask the person sitting next to you if there's someone you're carrying with you that you should have sat down eight years ago, eight miles back, what would it take to get you, that person, your table to pick up the phone, to write a letter, to say what you wanted to say, to reach out and to lift the burden that the other is carrying because you know that in helping them you will lift the two of you up and out. Oh, I wish it for this world. I wish it for myself, I wish it for this country, I wish it for this human race.

May God bless us with the strength to see what others carry, to roll up our sleeves, to leave behind our legacies and labels and to drop our hate who is a hero, the one who turns an enemy to a friend.

Please rise.