

Stepping Into the Cloud

A sermon on the blessing of engaging with hard things in Parshat Yitro (February 6, 2026)

This week, I did something I've been putting off doing for a long time. I'm pro-crastinations. I like... I'm happy like that.

It's not there, it's not in there. Maybe longer than a few months, months, minimally, but maybe longer than a few. I had an infected tooth.

A cavity that wasn't getting any better. I was told very clearly that it needed to be extracted. And I did what many of us would do when you heard that word.

Something that you do whenever you think pain is inevitable is that I delayed. I told myself, yeah, it can wait. I managed it.

A lot of this, like, you know, putting my tongue there. And a lot of that, until I couldn't wait any longer, I lived with it. Again, until I couldn't.

And at a certain point, the pain of not dealing with it became worse than the pain that I was trying to avoid. And so earlier this week, on Monday, I finally went in and had my tooth extracted. And since then, I've been in unbelievable pain.

Swelling and stitches. Discomfort, painkillers, interrupted sleep cycles. And more than anything, that dull, constant ache that sits in the background of everything, kind of like what it is to endure this presidency.

But I digress. Only slightly. Only slightly.

But I also know something else, which is, now healing can start. Now healing can start. I've been thinking all week that there's a Torah in that experience.

Because the question that experience raised for me, this experience raised for me, it's not just obviously about medicine. It's not a medical question. It's a spiritual question.

It's a moral question. It's a communal question. When do we avoid pain? And when do we lean into it? And maybe more importantly, how do we tell the difference between something that's harmful and needs to be removed, and something that is frightening but actually holds blessing for us? That question doesn't just live in my mouth this week.

It lives in this moment for us. I suspect many of us carry a kind of gnawing pain right now. Not physical, but emotional and existential.

A pain connected to what it feels like to be Jewish in America right now. 182% increase in anti-Semitism since Mayor Mdanani has taken office. A pain connected to anti-Semitism more broadly.

A pain connected to the Trumpian dystopia. The national abyss that seems to have no bottom. A day like today where an ugly racist meme was circulated.

And social media only to have us told it wasn't really a pain that is gnawing at us. And so we ask ourselves consciously or not, do we turn away from the pain? Do we numb it? Do we fixate on it? Or do we lean into it? And that brings me and us to the Torah's wisdom this week, to parashat Yitro. The climax of the parasha— let me say it differently.

The climax of the parasha is clearly what happens at Mount Sinai. Mount Sinai where the Jewish people will receive Torah. Mount Sinai where the Jewish people will stand to receive revelation.

The entire purpose of leaving the exodus, leaving Egypt, was to arrive at Sinai to worship God on that mountain, to receive the 10 utterances. That's obviously the climactic moment. But if all we focused on was chapter 19 and its beginning, we would miss the deepest Torah of the Ten Commandments, which is the Torah that comes before the Ten Commandments and the Torah that comes after the Ten Commandments.

The Torah that comes before the Ten Commandments is a truth that Moshe Rabbeinu refused to acknowledge. Moses, our teacher, has met his father-in-law Jethro. What a loving father-son relationship.

Jethro comes and brings his daughter Zipporah and her two children. Moshe comes out to meet him. They hug.

They kiss. They ask each other, you know, what's going on? Shalom. They, you know, hey.

Moshe says, oh man, I got to tell you about all the things that happened. It was unbelievable. It's crazy.

Here, look at this. And there I was. And here's the water.

And that's me throwing my... The whole thing, just showing him the whole movie. And Jethro is like, Baruch Hashem, thank God. It's great.

Asher Yitzchak, saved you. It's perfect. And so they hug.

And then the next morning, people know the story. The next morning, they wake up and Moshe goes to work. And what does Moshe do for work? He's standing.

I don't know about you. I had a job when I was in my 20s. I had many jobs in my 20s.

Many jobs in my 20s. But one of them was to be a check casher at City Hall. I never talked about this.

I actually, every Friday morning, you know, when city workers got their checks, I would stand there and I would look at their ID and give them a stamp. And I stood literally from the morning, like 8 o'clock, they opened and closed at 5. I didn't... I stood there. One spot.

So that's Moshe Rabbeinu. He's standing there and from the morning to night, he doesn't move. He's standing there and the people are lined up around the corner and he's adjudicating all of the matters.

They bring them like this person hurt me in that... One person for thousands. And Jethro said, are you crazy? You're going to wither. You're going to fall apart.

You're going to have a breakdown. The Torah of Jethro comes to Moshe who hasn't even asked for help. He's been avoiding it.

He knows it's not sustainable, presumably. And along comes his father and says, I got you. It's not good for you to be doing this all by yourself.

Take my advice at any price. It's really horrible for you. You're not going to make it.

Who knows how many months Moshe was struggling by himself, thinking there's no way I'm going to break. I'm going to break. That's Torah number one.

And then after the Ten Commandments, after the utterances that shook the world, after there's people hear the two utterances, Anochi, I am. Lo yelecha. You can't have any other idols.

And they get scared and they pull away. And they say to Moshe, you step in. Well, not too much.

Too much intimacy, too much intensity. It's too much for us. Thunder, lightning, fire.

And the people stood at a distance. And Moses comes to the dark cloud. Where God is.

The people recoil. And Moshe advances. Why? In a teaching attributed to the great grandson.

Working precisely off of the verse that I just uttered. The people stood at a distance. And Moshe approaches the dark cloud where God is.

Rav Nachman of Breslov says something profound. A powerful lens. He suggests that whenever a person begins to move towards God, towards meaning, towards responsibility, towards clarity, towards holiness, an obstruction will appear.

What he calls a menia. A barrier. A confusion.

A darkness. A doubt. A dark night of the soul.

Not because God wants to push us away, says Rav Nachman, but because the path inward is never simple. Rav Nachman says something daring. He says, God who desires loving kindness hides God's self inside the obstruction itself.

The cloud itself becomes the hiding place of the divine. And here's the difference, Rav Nachman says. The person without doubt, without inner clarity, sees the obstacle and turns back.

But the person of doubt looks into the obstacle and discovers God there. That's the meaning of the verse. The people see the cloud and fear danger.

But Moshe sees the cloud and trusts presence. And here's a critical distinction. And this is where my tooth matters.

Not all pain is the same. Some pain is like an infected tooth. It's genuinely harmful.

Ignoring it doesn't make you holy. It makes you sicker. That pain needs extraction.

It needs an intervention. It needs courage to say the word, this cannot stay. That's one kind of moment.

I think many of us feel it acutely. But then there's the Torah's cloud, which is a different moment. The people at Sinai are not avoiding something dangerous.

They're avoiding something overwhelming. They're afraid of intimacy. Afraid of encounter, afraid of what it means to stand too close to God, too close to what they want more than anything in the world.

And the tragedy is not that they fear destruction. It's that they fear closeness. And Moshe teaches us something essential.

Not every cloud is an infection. Some clouds are invitations. And that distinction matters deeply right now for all of us at this moment.

This week, last Sunday, I was on the stage with the 92nd Street Y as Bret Stephens argued that Jewish life in America has become too centered on antisemitism. That investing enormous resources into trying to eradicate it is a losing battle, he argued. Because antisemitism will always exist.

There's something bracing and partially true in that statement. That argument holds a kernel. We can't build a Jewish future that is only reactive, only defensive, only oriented around fear.

But the opposite extreme is no less dangerous. Pretending antisemitism isn't real or downplaying it or spiritualizing it away, shaming Jews for naming it, that's not courage, that's denial. So the question is not do we turn away from antisemitism or do we obsess over it.

The Torah asks us to hold a much subtler, more difficult question. Are we mistaking danger for presence or presence for danger? Are we standing at a distance because something is truly harmful or because we are afraid of what it would mean to lean into it, to claim identity, dignity, responsibility, and voice? Yitro, the great outsider of the parasha, the Midianite priest, he brings us a crucial piece. It's before Torah has been received, before Revelation, before clouds and fire, before positive, intimate wanting.

He brings something profoundly unmystical. He brings common sense. He brings systems and delegation and sustainability.

And Moshe listens and says, oh, I've been waiting for this all along, but I've been avoiding it. Really great. Lean in.

Which tells us something essential. Leaning in doesn't mean abandoning wisdom. It doesn't mean romanticizing pain.

It means discerning wisely where to step forward and where to cut away. I wish Brett would have said that. It's true the Jewish world can't invest, and overly invest, in the negative identity formation that comes from, oh, they hate us.

But the privilege of being able to stand on that stage, surrounded by security, comes at a cost. Knowing when to lean in is vital. Knowing when to lean in to a relationship with the Black Jewish Alliance.

Last night I was at an amazing gathering of Black leaders and Jewish leaders to honor the new PBS series by Henry Louis Gates, Black and Jewish in America. And that was an example of stepping into the cloud. Of having the courage to step into the cloud where there is pain, where there was intimacy, and to try to find intimacy there again.

There's already a movement, and I hope it continues to grow. A movement, again, to try to rebuild peaceful coexistence, to try to step into the thick cloud that has engulfed the Jewish world and the Middle East over the last two-some-odd years. That's the kind of cloud that Moshe would say, come, let's find God in this cloud.

Some of what hurts right now really is sick and needs to be removed. There's no doubt that having walked here this evening, in the aftermath of what I mentioned earlier, the abyss, I'm not calling for extraction. Let me be clear so that I'm not acting poetically.

It's not my place, I'm not a politician. I'm not calling people in that way. But there is something intensely sick at this moment in our country, in our body politic.

And it won't go away by avoiding it. It won't go away by spiritualizing it. And it won't go away by ignoring it.

And thank God we're not. And thank God voices today, we're all speaking in unanimity from every side of every aisle, saying that there is no place in our country for the kind of disgusting racism that we saw displayed from the highest office today. That kind of pain must be dealt with from the deepest place in the roots.

But some of what scares us right now is also holy, as I said, needs to be approached. And the work of this moment, spiritually, morally, and Jewishly, is not to retreat from the cloud or to live inside it forever, but to lean in with this clarity of mind, with clarity and with courage and with humility. Moshe doesn't dissolve into the cloud.

He enters it and comes back and says, here's the Torah. Not the Torah from the mountain, not exactly the Torah of my father-in-law, Torah, but the Torah of the cloud. The Torah of the cloud, that's the invitation.

Not to be fearless, not to be naive, but to refuse to let fear be the thing that keeps us standing at an arm's length and at a distance. Because sometimes, healing only begins with extraction. And sometimes, revelation only begins.

When we listen to the Torah of the other and we dare to step inside our clouds of unknowing.