

Shabbat 03 16 18 Sermon

This Shabbat is a special Shabbat. We're going to come back to the meaning of it, but just to give you something to hold for the next 10 or 15 minutes, it's called Shabbat HaChodesh. Shabbat HaChodesh means the Sabbath of the month. The Sabbath of the month, and its name is taken from the first word in chapter 12 of the book of Exodus. We're not going to be talking about Exodus that much until the end of the next 15 minutes, but just to hold this, this is the Shabbat where we will read, though we are not in the book of Exodus, from that part of the book of Exodus, from chapter 12, where these words, HaChodesh HaZeh Lachem Rosh Chodeshim, where there is the announcement to the Israelites who live in the land of Egypt as slaves, from the mouth of their leader Moses, this month will be for you the first of months. And tonight and tomorrow, that reading, which doesn't always fall on the new month of Nisan, coincides.

Usually it's done on the Shabbat before, but tonight is Rosh Chodesh, tonight is the very new moon of Nisan, of the first of our months, the spring month, the month of liberation, of Nisim, of miracles, and it coincides with the rabbinic obligation to read that beginning of chapter 12 of the book of Exodus that begins, this will be for you the first month, HaChodesh, HaChodesh. We're going to come back to that chapter 12. But before we get there, I want to talk about the word Shalom and the word Vayikra, two words that are important to me and important to you and important to all of us because they speak to something that each and every one of us experiences in our lives thousands and thousands of times.

I remember in my 20s, when I had left the Orthodox rabbinical world and I was out on my own, last night I kind of did something, I was in New Jersey doing a lecture, and I told people that I had been a waiter for almost a decade and they all laughed, but it felt like they had been waited on by me or something, I thought, had any of you been to the restaurants? So we started going through all the restaurants that I had waited at and maybe they had been at my table or something like that. But during that period of my life, I also, I kind of played with the notion of becoming an actor. And over and over again, people would say to me, you know what, and this happened also when I also had a stint as a realtor for kind of like a month.

What's the connection, right? Make sure you can handle rejection. I mean, that would be the first thing they'd say, listen, you're talented, you're not talented, they wouldn't even say that, they wouldn't weigh in on whether or not I actually, it was a calling, was it a calling, was it, just make sure you can handle rejection. It sounded like I was going dating. But that's what it was, I was going to be going, I was going to be knocking on people's doors and exposing myself and being vulnerable and putting myself on the line. And they said, you know what, make sure you can handle rejection. Now who can handle rejection? How many people here say, you know what, I'm a really, I'm good at getting rejected. I'm great, I mean, look at me, you know, go ahead, reject me, see, I'll show you, go ahead. I reject you. There's a, there's a reason that they were warning me.

They were understanding that perhaps there's a fundamental question of our humanity that is tied together with the notion of being rejected. The Torah would go so far as to say that

the first moment of alienation was when someone wanted to give what they thought was their best and it was rejected. The root of violence in the Torah is not Oedipal, it's not intergenerational from one generation to another, it is between siblings.

And the story of Cain and Abel or Cain and Abel in the book of Genesis is a fundamental existential reality which is that the roots of violence are often tied in with a sense of being turned away. Of I had something to offer and you didn't receive it. Man, I'll tell you something, I watch it, you know, my kids are going to hate me anyway, so I'm just going to say, you know, I mean, there's already a big fund and I'm just going to, you know, let's just put it all... I mean, I can watch it with the boys.

They had been away for a couple of days and then they had a reunion last Sunday. My wife and I had gone down to Florida with one of them and they came back together and I watched the anticipatory, you know, reproach me, they came together and the excitement of one and whether it would be received by the other and when it wasn't, what it then led to. The sense of here I am, I'm so excited and the turning away.

Lord Jonathan Sacks has written a book about religious violence and he roots fundamentalist violence or violence itself in this fundamental moment. A moment of rejection. Anthropologists and others, Moshe Halbertal in his book on sacrifice. The sense of I have something to offer, I have something to give and you don't receive it or you say no or you reject is in some ways saying you don't exist. We all know that feeling, right? I mean, even though I didn't go into acting, I know the feeling, I've been rejected. I've had high hopes for something that I didn't get and it felt deeply, internally as if something was wrong with me, not that someone had said no to something but like there was something wrong with me.

This yearning to be affirmed, this yearning to be received, this yearning to find a place to give our gifts and to have them received is at the core of Vayikra. The third of the five books of Moses is about the sacrificial cult and at face value no rabbi or any imam or priest or anyone who is involved with sacred literature wants to talk about animal sacrifice. It isn't exciting, it's very difficult to work with but at the core of the system known as the korbanot is the word korban which means to come close and the asymmetrical relationship between the one who has everything and the one who has nothing to offer you and therefore I'm taking a risk.

I'm taking a risk in offering you something that you might reject, that you might not want. This moment of the third book of the Torah is profound and it begins with this strange word not korban which means to come close but a word that doesn't appear frequently when God speaks to his prophets. When God speaks to Moses in the Bible God often will speak and just say and God spoke and the book of Leviticus which by the way doesn't mean, it's not a direct translation of the first word of the third book, right? Vayikra means and he called. Leviticus means the book about the Levites. We call the third book after the word Vayikra and he was called. Who was called? Moses was called but it's very strange for Moses to be called first before being spoken to.

First speak to him God. Does everybody get that point? Well here's the way the rabbis work with that you see the book of Leviticus is not about Moses all the other books are about

Moses, right? And the book of Leviticus is about his brother Aaron so how might Moses have felt when a book about his brother was about to be given through Moses he might have felt like he was on the outside he's on the outside and says Rashi and other midrashim the word Vayikra and he called was as if God was saying Moshe, Moshe God reaching out across a chasm of potential alienation and marginalization God's saying to Moses will you participate in this book? The language of love God said Vayikra and he called him the book that is about sacrifice and about what it is to offer a gift even though you might not have it received. A book that is essentially about also curbing violence, I'm not going to get into that right now, begins with a radical moment where God says Moses can you hear me? Will you participate in the Mishkan? Will you participate in the sacrificial cult? Or do you feel too rejected? And in some remarkable way and this is going to bring it back to us. In some remarkable way everybody here. It's remarkable for God to model what it is to take a risk.

For God to reach out to Moses even though Moses might feel alienated, might feel distant from. That Moses might be on the outside, he might be on the periphery. He might have a good reason because you know what? Maybe he felt that he deserved Leviticus. Maybe he felt that he deserved for this entire system to be called by his name but he was on the outside and God says Moshe Moshe! Hey! God takes a risk because taking a risk for the sake of intimacy is the greatest gift that you can give to someone. Making ourselves vulnerable and exposing ourselves for the sake of the potential for intimacy is profound because we know that nothing exhausts us more than giving to people and nothing fills us up the way giving to people. Nothing is more dangerous than asking for love and nothing is more rewarding than asking for love. Nothing is more profoundly human than the fear that you will be rejected and nothing is more profoundly human than overcoming that fear and God models it. He says Hey Moshe! Come on in and then you know what Moshe says? Okay. Let's go. Wow.

Giving and receiving Giving and receiving The Korban that has to do with peace. I said there was something about peace. One might imagine that the greatest offering of the system is this offering where you give an animal and it's completely consumed and goes up to heaven but there's a Korban, there's a sacrifice that is called the Korban Shlamim which means a peace offering and it really is poorly translated. It means an offering that is a greeting offering, an offering given when we meet and we break bread or we eat together where everyone has a peace.

One of the reasons Shalom is used in this offering is because its peacefulness is that it's not only for God. It's for you and me and the priests eat it. Everybody eats it equally as if to say that Shalom is when you live in a world where everybody has a piece of the pie where everybody is giving and receiving where it's not just one person receiving or one deity receiving and it's not coming back down.

But the Korban Shlamim, the Zevach Shlamim means Shalom means that I call out vulnerably and then there's enough to go around. Think about this in terms of our lives Think about how frequently a moment where we were not received becomes a closed off place. Think about the times we've come to synagogues or come to other institutions and they didn't welcome us in. We felt that we weren't seen we weren't noticed, we weren't felt and we say you know what? I'm done. Think about a relationship that had high hopes. Think about a yearning that was missed. Think about how frequently the Vayikra and the word

Shalom appear in our lives in terms of our day to day. What it might look like for me, for you. What might it look like if our religious value our religious sentiment, our religious yearning was to be able to open even after rejection. Even after being missed. Even after having not been seen. Even after a dissonant note in a song made the whole song feel as if it was troubling. What would it look like in our lives if that was our value to keep opening like an aperture of a camera a shutter What if our religious training was the training to remain open even after we took a risk and to take another risk How often do we imagine religiosity as risk averse.

To be traditional is to stay as if it were in the past. But what if the past only told you that the future would be a closed place What if the past only gave you the information you needed to know that you shouldn't take a risk and you shouldn't try.

I was so blown away last week when one of the members of our community and who's on our board said you know the reason why I love the thing where people stand up and introduce themselves is because for the first time, and I've been coming here for 10 years, he said but for the first time I heard someone behind me who's from a place that I had just visited and I turned around and I introduced myself and then I invited them to my house for dinner and I thought to myself that's the first time that happened here. That's the first time we went out on a limb and opened ourselves and said you know what I don't really know who you are but would you like to come to my house for Shabbat dinner? I don't really know who you are but I see you and would you like to sit next to me or what would it look like because we ask people to take risks in spiritual life. We ask them to take risks in personal life, in professional life. We ask them to open themselves up and then they come in.

So back to chapter 12. We're coming in for a landing The salient feature of the book of Vayikra is that it's a book about sacrifices but it's not about sacrifices it's about taking a risk. It's about risking that if I open myself to love even and especially if I open myself to rejection it's only through that that something profoundly healing can take place and that we will be rejected we will be cut off. We will have to rise up from the cynicism of past rejection past the violence that it engenders and open ourselves up to the possibility that we will open ourselves and be received.

Can you imagine 210 years of slavery? I'm sure you can. Can you imagine systems of oppression back breaking labor night terrors? Can you imagine historical people who have been so bludgeoned into a sense of despair that even when the Savior came they rejected him but still he rose he came back. They pushed Moses away and he kept coming back. He said I'm going to keep coming back and keep opening myself to you even though it hurts until you realize that you have to open yourselves to hope. You won't rise again. No one rises unless they can overcome rejection unless they can come in again and again and say that my vocation as an actor is so profoundly important that I must show up even though you don't see it yet. I will still show up. I will still go out on dates. I will still ask for the job. I will still rise.

And so there the people of Israel are in chapter 12 of the book of Exodus and lo and behold the Savior comes again and says it's your month it's your month before you leave slavery

you must accept. You must accept that hope is possible. You must double down that this time it will be different. This time it will be received. This time it will be fulfilled. This time won't be like the other times. You must rise up.

So before the holiday of liberation before our holiday of liberation which is not ours it's everyone's holiday of liberation to some degree. It's everyone's story. It's every human story. It's the story of the buds in the soil. It is the story of spring overcoming and opening herself up after the rejection of winter and saying here I am again. It's time for renewal. It's time for the moon. It's time it's time.

So to be one who rises to be one who rises up is to be one who loves justice and who trusts that even if rejection comes it isn't the final answer and that we will fight and we will march and we will pray and we will turn and we will open. We will open. You went first God. You said hey Moses I'll take a risk. Will you take one? Still we rise.

So please rise.