

Shabbat 07 13 18 Sermon

People have a lot of stuff inside them. People have a lot of... You know, people are complicated. Right? Anybody here not complicated? People hold a lot. Human beings contain multitudes, contradictions, places where we are in the light, places where we are in the dark. We hold a lot. And I'm always amazed by my own inability or ability to hold out for that when I meet people or when I know people or think I know people. I'm always amazed by how it shifts depending on who it is that I'm with, how familiar I am with them, how long we've been friends. I mean, you don't have to go far to think about it. You can just do a little thought experiment here with me.

Something that really happened a couple of weeks ago in Jerusalem. We rented a car. My wife and I were in Jerusalem for three weeks with the boys. And we rented a car. And there I am in Jerusalem driving around. I don't know Jerusalem that well. I know how to drive. But Jerusalem, Israel, it's a whole other... If you've driven in Israel, you know.

And sure enough, turn around the corner, my little Upper West Side, Bayside neighborhood, and someone, you know, does one of those things. Cuts me off. And I, you know, went in Rome. When in Rome, when in Israel, I got Israelis. No insult to Israelis who are here, but like... And there I am in the heat of it, you know. I have a kid in the back, come on. And as I'm driving by, Hey, Dan, how's it going? My buddy Dan cut me off.

It's always a deep existential crisis when something like that happens. What happened to the anger? What happened to the rage? What happened to the indignant and the justified? I had a whole philosophical treatise written just to tell this person how this is indicative of the entire Middle East. It's a cultural meme that has spread everywhere. He didn't want to be taken advantage, let me go first, so then he went. And then it was, oh, hi. I haven't seen you in like forever. Let's get a drink. Great. See you later.

How was it that the totality of the person, before I knew them, there was no totality. It was only that person who just caused me displeasure, who just caused me pain, who scared me. And within a millisecond, the familiarity of the holistic ground on which the foreground of this criminal activity had appeared somehow, holistically, that knowing gave them and gave me a willingness to see them against a much broader canvas.

Just like that. And if you think about it, it's hard to think, it's hard to remember to do that even when we become familiar with someone. The familiarity of this person allowed me to give them a much broader canvas, but often in our lives, it's the very people who live with us all the time when we have a hard time giving them the benefit of the doubt, doing them a favor.

It's like when my kids do something wrong, and I know, or I think I do, that their intentions were I was going to say malicious, but they're my kids. Maybe not the most pure. And I say, Bear, where did you get those \$300 bills? You know, whatever it is. Where did you get that? Dad, do me a favor. Do you hear that? Do me a favor. And what the person means is, give me the benefit of the doubt. Assume the best in me. Find the light. Be more surah, more pointless. There are many different pieces in this complex human being. It's something

that's on my heart and mind because I'm thinking about the auspicious nature of tonight in my personal life, my family's life, and also our collective journey through time and through the Jewish calendar.

Tonight is the second, will be the second day of the Hebrew month of Av. The Hebrew month of Av, which, of course, the Rosh Chodesh, the first day of Av was today, which technically we're still there. And some, you know, nine is a very important number in this month. The ninth of this month is the saddest day of the Jewish calendar, the most calamitous day of the Jewish calendar. But nine years ago was the happiest day of my life because nine years ago in the Hebrew calendar, tonight, my son was born, my first son was born. I became a father tonight, nine years ago. So I became a father in the month named Av, which means father, with the powerful number nine this evening, heralding one week from tomorrow night will be the ninth day of Av.

It's really one week from tonight, but we postponed it because it's Shabbat. The number nine in the mystical tradition is very powerful. We're told that the first time the letter Tet, which is the letter of nine, appears in the Torah is in the word good. And God saw the light and it was good. Vayar Elohim et ha'or ki tov, for it was tov. The word tov means good. The first time the letter Tet appears, and the letter Tet has the numerical value of nine. The first time the letter of nine, the ninth element, came into the world was around the good proclamation of light. And the funny thing about the letter is that it is shaped as an open vessel with part of it bent inside.

And the mystics of our tradition say, What, how great is the light that you have hidden deep within. That the number nine, the letter expresses a truth about light, which is it is often looking this way and receiving, but also deeply tzafun, hidden in, like that tat asana, like that, pointing into the heart. That there's something about this month that begs us to find the light in dark places, that begs us to look deeply into the individual and into the collective and raise it up and raise up the light and say, Look at this goodness, even if I thought for a moment that you were about to crash my car.

What would a society look like that did each other a favor by seeing us in our goodness, by working through the obstacles and the externalities? Now we live in a time, obviously, each and everyone, I'm not saying here that we shouldn't judge and we need to judge, especially now, and make discerning judgments and live with those judgments. I'm absolutely clear that this isn't a time to give people a pass on injustice. But I'm afraid, and I'm speaking from the heart, I'm afraid to live in a world where we become infected with looking at each other and not seeing the light, with looking at each other and adding what happens to the mind and the heart that is constantly being critical of seeing what isn't right, what is wrong in, and what I'm wrong about.

I can see its corrosive effects on me. I can see its corrosive effects on everyone around me. And I echo the sentiment of the great Ralph Cook, who wrote so powerfully that pointing fingers at sickness will not bring strength and life, and that the purest individuals do not complain about evil, but instead increase righteousness. They do not complain about atheism, in his terms, or a lack of hope for him, but instead increase faith. They do not complain about ignorance, but instead increase wisdom. And then this line, they do not complain about the dark, but increase the light.

Do me a favor. As if each and every moment, each and every individual who stands before us is asking us to say, Do me a favor. See me as if I were a fuller picture than this moment of smallness that may appear to be small in this moment. This quality in our tradition is called being Dan L'Kaf Skhut. To judge people favorably is to, is if they were standing before us with a scale, and everything in the scale was tipped towards the guilt, and we look at them and say, Oh no, let me give you some merit. Let me read you in a good light. Giving someone merit, doing them a favor. Being Dan L'Kaf Skhut. The great Rav Nachman of Breslev, who was maybe the craziest and most interesting Hasidic master, said, It is necessary for every person to seek and ask for the good, even in the most evil person. Even in the most evil person, Rav Nachman said we should try to find a point of light.

It's a good practice. I don't know about really big evil people. I don't know if I can agree. But we can start small, like tonight. We can see tonight at dinner, when we walk outside, whether or not we can do ourselves and others a favor by reading them in some more well-lit way.

We're entering into the nine days, which are the nine most intense days of the Jewish calendar. It is intensely focused on destruction and rupture, on what went wrong. And one of the teachings from the Talmud is that the reason that the temples were destroyed was for baseless hatred. And the same Rav Kook said, if the world was destroyed because of baseless hatred, it will be rebuilt by baseless love. Baseless love. So just think together with me for a moment here. What would it be like for you and me, all of us here, in a moment when we are focusing on what is going wrong, to say, you know, I'm taking a do-me-a-favor break. I want to read this moment for one second in light. Yes, it's horrible, horrible, horrible, horrible.

But, one moment. There was a great Hasidic master, another one. I mentioned many. Lev Yitzhak Berditchev. How many people heard of the Berditchever? Berditchever, Lev Yitzhak Berditchev. He's a very eccentric mystic. He was really out there. But you know what he was called? He was called the defense attorney of the Jewish people. You know why? Because there were stories upon stories about no matter what happened, he would always, always defend the Jewish people. It didn't matter what was happening in the world. It didn't matter what was happening in Berditchev. He always had something positive.

So here's a story about him. True story, maybe. The Berditchever was walking through the streets of Berditchev on one Shabbat afternoon. And he came across a guy who was just standing in the street smoking. So the Berditchever walked over to him. You can imagine. I don't know, maybe make a caricature of what he would look like. And he sidled up next to him and he said, My man, perchance you do not know that it is the Sabbath? This is in Berditchev. There was nobody in Berditchev that didn't know it was the Sabbath.

He said, No, great and holy Rabbi, I know that it's the Sabbath. So the Berditchever said, Oh, sure, of course you do. Maybe you didn't know that it was prohibited to smoke on Shabbat. And so then he said, No, dear Rabbi, I know it is prohibited to smoke on Shabbat. Okay, okay. Perhaps you didn't know that you were smoking. My dear man, I knew that I was smoking. Yes, I know it's Shabbat. I know I'm not supposed to smoke on Shabbat. And I'm smoking. At which point the story says the Berditchever turned to heaven and said, Master

of the world, you see, Mika, I'm Chay Yisrael, who is like your people Israel? I gave him every opportunity to lie and he refused to lie. That kind of dedication to truth is only in the Ulama Emes, only in the world of truth.

What a truthful man. Wow. Talk about being Don Likav Skhut and judging people favorably. That's a high bar. But maybe we can start small tonight with the people who are at our table or some of the people that we speak about tonight at Shabbat meal. We might not know all of their motivations. We might not know that it was Dan in the car whose father and mother and I know them and I know him. Maybe we can see them in a broader perspective.

Pirkei Avot, the ethics of our teachers, ethics of the fathers, of those who came before us, of the elders, is a well-known aphorism. Asei lecha rav means make for yourself a rabbi or a teacher. Uknei lecha chaver, and acquire for yourself a friend. And then the end, v'havei dan et kol ha'adam b'kav skhut, and judge everyone favorably.

Two questions on that. One, what's the connection between making a rabbi for yourself, acquiring a friend, and judging everyone favorably? So cynically we could say that we rabbis should be given the benefit of the doubt. It could also be that if we judge kol ha'adam, all of the person. Not just all people, but kol ha'adam, all of the person. Allow them pieces that we might never know. Allow ourselves motivations that we might yet see.

If we judge people favorably, then we will find teachers everywhere. If we judge people favorably, then there is no one who isn't your rabbi, your minister, your imam, your priest. If we are willing to see people against the light of who they could be, and not just a small moment of confusion that they present to us, or maybe our own confusion that we live through, then ha'sei v'chara, then you become, you're always making rabbis and teachers, because everyone has something to teach you. In the merit of merit. In the merit of seeing people with zichut, giving them the benefit of the doubt, says Rav Nachman, when we see them that way, they become that thing that we see. They become, be'emet, better people.

In a world that is, at this moment, aflame in judgment, in criticism, in cutting people down, in this world that is now aflame, with not seeing people in their best light, and those who don't see them in their best light also, maybe we can dedicate ourselves during the next nine days, or the next nine minutes, to doing each other, and doing ourselves a favor. Do yourselves a favor.

Please rise.