

There's a lot to say tonight, and there's not a lot to say. When my Rebbe, Reb Zalman Shachter Shalomi, I love my Shalom, when he was writing a book that he wanted to reach as many people as he could, he had a title that got nixed, but the title was If You're So Universal, Why Be Jewish? If You're So Universal, Why Be Jewish? He thought it was a great title, but the publisher published it as Jewish with Feeling. Thought it was a better title.

The tension between the particular and the tribal and the universal is up, isn't it? The tension between the tribal, the circle that we draw around ourselves or around our family, around our ideology, or whatever it might be, and the greater universal truth to which we adhere or somehow we are rooted in, it's so alive, it's electric, is that we're walking through it in every moment. Not just when you show up at the Yankee game and the same person who before that was your friend but now isn't because he's a Yankee fan. The tribal which was relegated to pockets of tribalism where full-throttled allowance was given to blood-curling screams around your team is now the air we breathe. It's the news we watch. It's everywhere. Whose side are you on? Who has the truth?

So it's important to start the year, and this is the first Shabbat quote-unquote of the year even though it isn't, but it's the first reading of the Bible, of the Torah. Tomorrow morning is the beginning of the Torah, Genesis. It's important to begin from the beginning with fundamentals, with some series of plain and simple, just like I'm sitting and talking to you in my living room, just simple things that we affirm from our sacred literature. Good advice. Good advice. And so there will be a series of sermons beginning tonight where we're going to unpack a little bit of some of the basic fundamental whys of what we do. And we'll start with the simplest why.

What is it that we're here to do? Does our sacred text have anything to say to us about what it is that is our *raison d'être*? What makes us get out of bed in the morning? What's our project? What's our mission? Something Simon Sinek might call starting with why. Do we have a sacred why? As far as we can tell, when you open up the Torah, there is no why given for the creation of the world. Torah doesn't at any point start off and say, well, here's what God was thinking. Here's the idea. I have an idea. Call me crazy, but here it is. I want to... No, we don't have that. We don't have an articulation of purpose. But somewhere towards the end of the first chapter, what is called the first chapter of the book of Genesis, we have an inclination.

We have something, a word that is used. It will become a leitmotif, a leitwort, a word that becomes the word, the clue. When describing Shabbat, the Sabbath, the seventh day, the Torah says, Vayivarech Elohim et b'ma sheveyei. We're going to read this in a moment when

we raise up a cup of blessing. And God blessed the seventh day. Vayi kadesh oto. God made it kadosh. Can you all say that? Kadosh. Kadosh. Maybe we should say it three times. Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh. It's an inside joke.

At the core of the creation story are three dimensions. Time, space, and person. The first holiness project is time. Sacred time. One day a week. One day a week when we are engaged in not being engaged. One day a week when we model ourselves after the divine story, we stop creating, we stop doing, we stop owning the world. Allow the world to be. Shabbat is holy because no one owns it. Shabbat is holy because it belongs to everyone. Creation rests. Shabbat is not a Jewish thing. It's a universal thing. Notwithstanding 2,000 years of Jewish history that said it's only for Jews. Shabbat is for everyone.

There will be sacred space that we'll talk about but sacred person. Me, you, and the whole shebang. In chapter 5 of tomorrow morning's reading we will hear these verses read. Ze sefer toldot adam. This is the record, the book of the genealogy of Adam. Ze sefer toldot adam. B'yom, on the day b'ra Elohim adam b'dmut Elohim as'auto. On the day that Elohim created humans they were created in the image of God. Zacharonikeva b'ra'am. God created them male and female v'ivarekh otam and blessed them and called their name Adam, humans from the earth on the day that they were created. This verse that we'll read tomorrow is the source of an argument in the second century between great rabbis about what is the centerpiece of the Jewish tradition. If holiness is the most important quality holy, to be kadosh the holiness project what does it mean? How does one act in a holy way?

Two great rabbis debated. One said that the key to understanding how to be holy is in the verse Love your neighbor as you love yourself. Said Rabbi Akiva Ve'ahavte le'recha kamocha zeklal gadol bat Torah. That is the great and general principle of the Torah says Ben Azai. Says Ben Azai, another rabbi No, a greater principle on which to hang what Jewish life or human life should be is the verse that we just read.

On the day when God created human beings God created them with a vision with an image, with something transcendent that was beyond something universal. Rabbi Akiva sources holiness in Ve'ahavte Love your neighbor as you love yourself. Says Ben Azai to him But what if you don't mind being insulted? Is that okay then, Akiva? Mayit esanay lach le'chavecha lo ta'aved. It's like, whenever you don't mind you can do that to your friend. Said Ben Azai we have to have a dream we have to have a wish where Seth Godin says if you don't have a wish, it can't ever come true. Ben Azai says it can't be about utility, it can't be

about loving my neighbor as I love myself because who is my neighbor? Is it just my Jewish family? Is it just my Israeli community in this village? Is it just the Roman community? Is it just New York? Is it just the Yankees? Just the Mets? Who's human? Who's involved in the holiness project? Says Ben Azai to Akiva. If you say, love your neighbor as you love yourself, well, who's my neighbor? Trust your neighbor as you would trust yourself. Trust your neighbor as you would trust your daughter.

If this country had for a moment in the last two weeks imagined each and every human being, imagined if their daughter was Dr. Ford sitting there testifying what would the world look like? But she's not their daughter. Imagining what a world might look like when we circumscribe our neighborhoods, gerrymandering our hearts to just allow this person's vote to count in my heart. Notice, says Ben Azai, the great rabbi of the second century to Rabbi Akiva, another great rabbi, note, you drew the circle too small, Akiva brother. It's got to be bigger. If you're so universal, why be Jewish? He'd say you have to be universal or you can't be Jewish. You've got to save every person in the dream that God had and every person in the wish that needs to come true to be seen in that way. What would they want us to do in the Holiness Project? To imagine that each and every human being is created with infinite worth and infinite beauty. That's what we wake up to do and that we align ourselves with that project. That's the Torah's beginning. We are created in God's image. We are created with infinite worth.

We have as our *raison d'être* to enlarge our circle of care and concern to include as many of God's children, as many human beings as we possibly can. That is our wish. That is our truth that will be resurrected from the ground. That is what the Torah wants us to know as we begin. What it means for me and you is that we are infinitely empowered to find hope. We are called, we are enjoined to remember that the fundamental beginning of Torah is the Holiness Project and even if we're at Romemu for the first time, even if we are human, right? We've been human for a long time.

This fundamental truth, this axiom that our meaning and purpose in life is to become holy is underscored in one last way and with that we're going to call it for a night. Coming for a landing. Moshe Halbertal, who's a great philosopher in Israel, said that everywhere you find in rabbinic literature the notion of holiness, you find not ownership but surrender of sovereignty. That everywhere in the Torah where you see the word *kadosh*, holy, whether it appears in any of those three dimensions, right? What are the three dimensions? In time, space, or person, wherever that word *kadosh* appears, Moshe Halbertal argues that that is a place where we are invited to not own. We have no control. We surrender.

What might that look like? He said, well, on Shabbat we're told that on Shabbat you don't control what time Shabbat comes in. You don't control time. When it comes to land, we'll talk about this later on in a couple of weeks, when it comes to land, every seventh year, every Shabbat in years, people that might not know this, but every Shabbat in years, we don't work the land. It doesn't belong to us. Now apply that for a moment to our holiness project in person, in the debate between Rabbi Akiva and Ben Azai. What are they saying? Ben Azai is saying every human being is absolutely irreducible to your sovereignty. You can't control people. And when we try to control people, so as we stand up here tonight and as we make our way out into the world on what was a very difficult week, I am buoyed by this teaching of our tradition. That when I wake up in the morning and I open my eyes, my job is I work for the holiness department. I'm an employee. My benefits are that I don't own anyone, but I accrue with every person I meet, if I see them in the wish that must become true through them, I'm doing that work in the world. So why be Jewish? Good question.

To be Jewish is to affirm the holiness of every human being. To be Jewish is to work on behalf of that disclosure, that revelation. Seeing people, honoring them, removing sovereignty from them and ownership over. That's the work. It's not hard. Well, let's put it this way. It's not complicated. It's just hard.

Let's rise for that.