

## Shabbat 03 15 19 Sermon

On the way to Shul tonight, a short walk with my son Tal, I asked him a question about something that's going on in his life that's pretty confusing, I think, for him. I won't get into the details of it, but it's the kind of thing that is, for an adult, difficult to get my head around, and for him I just wanted to hear where he was with it, and it was essentially wanting him to be able to name a kind of ambivalence, a kind of two-ness, a quality of both and. I wanted to see if he could kind of... I wasn't sure, I said, Tal, do you miss your friend? He said, yeah, I miss him. And then he said, and you kind of don't miss him too, right? He said, Abba, it's both. See, it's both, he said. Asking him to imagine that two things can adhere in one place.

Kind of a quality of a mature mind, being able to hold two things that might be contradictory in some ways, but to be able to hold them in some nuanced form. To have a heart that's large enough to hold a complexity that defies reduction, that defies simplistic or facile soundbite. Asking to hold the two in one place. And for a seven and a half year old, let alone, right? For us, it's a big deal.

And sometimes the mystics of the Jewish tradition speak about the two-ness that is within the letter Aleph, which is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the first letter, which numerically is the number one. They say that the two is already embedded within the Aleph. That orthographically, that if you write an Aleph, it has a little piece that points to heaven, it has a middle column and then another piece on the bottom, expressing an exquisite tension between two things. One above, one below. That even within that little Aleph, that could, even within the first moment of language, there is, for the mystics of the tradition, in the way that the letter is written, there is an expression, there is a revelation of holding two things that are going in different directions.

Aleph is on my mind. And we'll get back to it in a moment, but just to frame why it's on my mind, if you read the Parsha, if you read tomorrow morning's Weekly Wisdom, the beginning of the third book of the five books of Moshe, known in English as Leviticus, or known in our tradition as Vayikra, in our tradition it is known as Vayikra, and God called. Vayikra means to call. There is the oddest Aleph in the alphabet. It is the last letter of the very word, which means to call. And God called Moshe and told him, come on into this sacred space, the Mishkan. And the first four letters of that word are written in normal font size, but the last letter, the Aleph, is written in size, like font six. And it stands out by its smallness. Ostensibly chopping up the word, which means to call, into Vayikra, Aleph, and happened to Aleph.

This little Aleph we'll come back to, but more profoundly, the word that is created by the reduction of the Aleph is a word that is an odd word, Vayikra or Vayikra. It has resonance with the word Koreh, which means what's up, what's happening, man, how's it going in Hebrew, Mach Koreh, right? Vayikar, without the Aleph, that little Aleph that became reduced, the first word of the third book of the five books of Moses, becomes the word Vayikar, which means like an occurrence, a Mikre in Hebrew, it kind of happened. And the reason why that's on my mind, and here you'll come in for a landing, but it's super important, is because tomorrow morning, not only will Jews around the world be reading the first words of the third book of the five books of Moses in Leviticus, Vayikra, but they

will also be reading a special reading from the book of Deuteronomy, known as Parshat Zachor. Zachor dasher esalakha amalek by derech betseidcha mimetzrayim. The Torah tells us that we were vulnerable. We had just left Egypt, historical Egypt or mythical Egypt. We were in a vulnerable place. We were open. We were wide open.

The doors of our sanctuary were unprotected. And into that sanctuary, into that sacred liberated space, came an archetype, a nation that later became an embodiment of a principle known as Amalek. And Amalek attacked us. They attacked us along the way and the word used by the Torah, which we must remember every day and once a year on a special Shabbat before the holiday of Purim, we are to read about Amalek, and the word used for their attack when they attacked us is asher korchba ba derech. Korchba, vayikar. They happened on you.

When they came upon you along the way, they just said, oh, who are those people? They look vulnerable and weak. They look like a group of refugees. They look undefended and insecure. Fun. That quality of Amalek, which is known as korchba. They happened upon you. They occurred to them. It was random. It was chaotic. It wasn't maybe even planned. But they thought, what else do we have to do? Korchba philosophy. Says one of the great Hasidic masters, that word korchba, hope you're following all this Hebrew, everybody, because it's got a reason. That word korchba can also be kar, which means cold. Not only was it chance, not only maybe was it precipitated or maybe worse, it wasn't precipitated, but the net result for us as Jews, as Israelites in the story was we were cooled down. We were injured.

The sense of clarity and vision and mission that we had, having just left bondage to bring a message to the world, that attack diluted it. It made it kar, it made it cold, says the Berdichever. It was like cold water onto a flaming passion for justice. We lost a sense of mission, says the Berdichever. All of a sudden, we began to doubt. Maybe we weren't protected after all. Maybe we are and should be exposed. Maybe we are not to be deployed. If something like this can happen, the one who made you kar, the one who made you cold, if this can happen, we don't know why we're here and what we're doing. How do we respond to this unimaginable occurrence? It threw their worldview into chaos. Who are we if this happens to us? Who are we?

Twenty-five years ago, a gunman walked into a mosque, a Jew, and thought, I'm a lake with the Muslims that were praying there and murdered. Yesterday, in New Zealand, 49 Muslims. Yesterday, in Tel Aviv, my sister and my nephews in bomb shelters because Hamas thinks we're a lake. Yesterday, here in this country, we see liberal Jews forced to hold two truths, which is that we are, as liberal Jews, in solidarity with minorities and marginalized peoples, and yet marginalized and minorities are speaking anti-Semitic tropes and asking us to stand up and speak and say, no hatred, no claiming ignorance. The time for ignorance is gone.

Asher korchba. The danger that when Amalek mind and Amalek people and people who are in the world do things, it dilutes our sense of passion and mission, clarity of purpose. We don't know which way to go. How do we hold two things at once? How do we stay connected to our purpose? Asher korchba. We became frozen like deers in headlights, politically maneuvering. Can I call them out? Should I not call them out? Should I equate one form of hatred with another form of hatred? Before you know it, we're crazy in the mind.

I can't tell you how many rabbis are having phone calls behind the scenes talking about how do we? Where are our alliances? Who are our allies? Where do we go? Who's the worst anti-Semite? And what about Trump? And what about white supremacy? And we sit there thinking, wow, human beings are gifted with somewhere close to 7,000 to 15,000 words a day. That's the average usage of language. In our lifetime, some studies say we will use 860 million words.

And I keep thinking to myself, we don't have enough words to say two truths at once. We don't have enough words to condemn and repudiate anti-Semitism across every spectrum, and anti-Muslim across every spectrum, and anti-black across every spectrum. Is it that complicated? Is it so hard to stand up and say that if somebody is a minister who administers to other human beings, no matter how much love they offer, no matter how good they are, if they get up and call Jews termites, they should be condemned. Is that so hard? I know it's complicated, but my seven-year-old knows how to hold two truths. He was a loving figure to you. He helped people out of the ghetto. True. But we condemn that person who speaks hatred. It's that simple.

When will we together say that if a Jew gets up and says that Palestinians are less than human, condemned. If a Muslim gets up and says something about Jews, condemned. If a white person gets up and says something about African-Americans, we will condemn that rhetoric of hate. We use so many words a day, we can't find enough to say with absolute clarity that hatred will not be countenanced. Amalek is everywhere that hatred is. Amalek is everywhere that love is shut out. Asher karcha, it throws cold water and we freeze in our place. Until back to the little aleph that could.

God calls out to Moses in the beginning of the portion tomorrow and says, the world will look cold and like an absolute chaotic occurrence until you put that little aleph at the end and feel called, deployed to speak the truth, to hold those truths and speak them like our heroine Esther in the Megillah of Esther to say the truth and to feel that we are on a mission for God, for love, for purpose.

Imagine that, everybody. Imagine as you're standing there today, as we were standing there today, a group of rabbis holding up signs saying, we, Jewish New Yorkers, stand with our Muslim neighbors. And I was standing next to a great rabbi, a professor at JTS, the Jewish Theological Seminary. And I said to him as we greeted each and every person that walked in, Assalamu alaikum. Assalamu alaikum. First of all, I noticed that I should start doing that for all of you right here, probably at the front door. I thought, this is a fulfillment of the mitzvah to eradicate Amalek. To eradicate Amalek 2,000 years ago for a group of mythic tribal people was to murder an arch enemy. And for us today, it is to stand with people and be tender with them.

Amalek dies. We stand at that door and we look at them and their humanity and we say, we're with you. And they look back and say, we were with you too after Pittsburgh. We will be with you. And we say that around the globe and we lift our trusting mechanism. We go from asher karcha, it was frozen and cold, diluted, to being on a mission, vayikra. And God called to Moses and said, that little olive at the end, vikar olive, you are on a mission to hold two things together and speak it out in the world. That's your mission. Should you choose to accept it, it is a mission impossible.

But we don't have a choice, friends. We don't have a choice. Dual loyalties? Of course we have dual loyalties. You know what our dual loyalties are? To be true. To the truth of being with our stories and the truth of being beyond our stories. That's our dual loyalty, to hold those two things. To be able at one breath to say, hatred on the right and on the left. I'm not going to say which one is worse. I'm going to call them both out. To say in one breath that what happened in New Zealand happened to us. And that those rockets landing in Tel Aviv is happening to everyone else as well. We are both at. I won't choose. Not on a week like Purim where we're asked to hold both of those. It takes place in the month of Adar, Alif Dar, in the month where Alif reigns supreme, where we are held by heaven and earth and we say yes and.

So some news for Amalek if it's in the house anywhere. We're not giving up. We're not giving up. We have a mission. And we won't stop until it is fulfilled. To raise love. To speak the truth. To be nuanced and complex and to say it simply. That is our deployment. Remember how Amalek cools us down and freezes us in our place. Like the little son on his way to school who said Abba. It's both.

Please rise. Please rise.