

Romemu Dvar Torah December 2, 2016

Just for those of you who are wondering when you're getting out tonight, we have about 17 minutes to go until arrival at the gates. That should allow you to relax a little bit to hear some of this Torah.

I met with a dear friend today who handed me his book. My friend Lee Ell wrote an amazing book about, who else, the great Leonard Cohen. And the title of the book is A Broken Hallelujah. And the first story in the first chapter, which he told me to read, and he knows me, begins with this great line.

Life as Leonard Norman Cohen knew, ended on January 14th, 1944, the day his father died. That morning he and his sister Esther, five years his senior, walked past the dead man's coffin, taking one last look at his round alabaster face. It was his younger sister Esther's birthday. His older sister, I'm sorry, Esther's birthday. And when they returned home, Leonard, now the man of the house, told his sister that a celebration was in order. A birthday was a birthday and there was a protocol to be followed. And for a moment they tried to be happy, acting as if nothing else had happened. But every thought led them back to the funeral home, to the high, cold forehead and the lifeless lips. And they started sobbing. Esther was 14. Leonard was nine. For a few days he did his best to carry on. The rules of the house, crafted with care by their father, Nathan Cohen, when he was alive, were still rigidly observed. Shoes lined up neatly in front of the beds each night. Pressed jackets, iron dresses worn to the dinner table every evening. Carrying on the affectations of a lieutenant in the 4th field company of the Canadian engineers who dreamed of one day seeing his son in uniform. But the inertia of discipline wasn't enough to keep emotions in check at bay. Everything about the mourning rites of adults seemed designed to help the bereaved ease into the future. But Leonard wanted a few more moments with the past. One night he sneaked into his father's room and selected his dad's favorite bow tie. And with a pair of scissors, he cut a slit in the fabric and then scribbled a few words on a slip of paper, inserted them into the tie, and quietly he walked down the great staircase, opening the front door of the house. He tiptoed to the backyard, which abutted King George Park, and with the tall locust trees as his dark and silent witnesses, Leonard dug into the frozen earth, tossed the tie into the hole, and covered it with dirt. It was the first time I wrote. It was the first thing I wrote, he told People magazine many years later. And I'd been digging in that garden for years, looking for that note. Maybe that's all I'm doing, looking for that note.

This story so touched me when I read it. The notion that this great prophet, this great poet, this incredible light, can imagine his whole life as just one long digging in the garden in his father's backyard, trying to find that note. It moves me, but it inspires me also. That his father's death was a catalyst. It was the moment that released the gift, the daemon, that he carried. His unique contribution to the world began at a moment of deep crisis, of unimaginable absence. He found the beginning of the gift that he would give to the world.

He found his deployment at a moment of crisis, at a moment of chaos, at a moment of rupture. The crack in everything that the light gets in began with the crack known as his father, and the earth he dug in which to say goodbye. The power of that image, the power of knowing that we are all looking for that note, looking for that moment where our own

gift will be given to the world, where we will know with absolute certainty that we've been deployed.

What our shlichut is, who we are meant to be in the world, and what it is that we are meant to give, our unrepeatable, absolutely unimitatable, unique us. And it happens during crisis. Tomorrow morning another crisis will give birth to something. Tomorrow morning in the parashat known as Toldot, we are introduced to the twins. One who is a mama's boy, who is known as the simple one, slightly elitist and maybe snobby, who sits in tents and has the language of eloquence, and his ruby red brother, man of the field, man of the populace. And the crooked Jacob will steal the blessing from the birthright, the ruby red one, who feels so unheard. But before their birth, we are introduced to their mother, an amazing woman named Rebecca. Rivka we are introduced to at the end of the Akedah, the end of chapter 22 of the book of Genesis, and then in the longest chapter in the entire book of Genesis, we are told about the matchmaking that happens between, in order to find Rebecca. And Rebecca famously said, echoing Isaac's father Abraham, I will go, wherever I will go, elech.

Rebecca, that strong woman, is introduced to us tomorrow morning as someone who is struggling in child, in pregnancy. She's having a very difficult pregnancy. The Torah tells us, and the boys were fighting in the womb, and she said aloud, Rebecca, who is struggling with the pains of a pregnancy that she can't understand, that she can't make sense of, the pregnancy that she begged for, that her husband Isaac prayed for, confused by this pain and suffering, feeling this inner conflict, she says, And that phrase, is a confusing phrase. It doesn't really make much sense. Why am I what? Why am I? As if we know what the end of the sentence is. Why am I? Why am I? Which leads the great medieval commentator Rashi to say, why am I means, why am I, why did I pray? If I am suffering so much in this pregnancy, what was the point of all of my prayers? What did I get myself into? So that's the first model of what we do when we're in suffering.

When we're in pain, when we have a crisis, when something is hurting, we say, what did I do to deserve this? Did I set this up somehow? Is it my fault? Lama Ze'anokhi says, Rashi, what was I doing praying? Had I known how bad it was gonna be when I would be pregnant, I might not have prayed for this. Is this what I prayed for? It was supposed to be rosy. It was supposed to be perfect. It was supposed to be the perfect pregnancy. I would have a list on Bye Bye Baby. My girlfriends would come over, there would be tea. I wouldn't gain any weight in any part of my body whatsoever except right here. All of those things, you know, that maybe, who knows, cultural conditioning might want, who knows. But the reality is, here she is and she's suffering and the very thing that she yearned for, the thing that she longed for, what she had anticipated, expected, is far from what she had hoped.

Im ken, lama ze'anokhi, lama ze'anokhi. Why am I means, why am I here? Did I contribute to this? What was it? Was I crazy to think that this was a good thing? The Rambam, Maimonides has a completely different read. He says to Rashi, Maimonides in his commentary says, Rashi, that doesn't really work in with the words. Why am I doesn't really translate to why did I pray. And so the Rambam says something radical. He says, she's actually asking why do I exist at all. Lama ze'anokhi. Would that I would not exist. I wish that I were not.

And echoing Hamlet and echoing Job, would that I were not is an existential question that Rebecca actually says, if this is the price, if suffering is what one has to go through in order for birth to happen, maybe it would be better if we had not been born. And echoing a Talmudic conversation, is it better not to have been born than to be born? Maybe echoing the Buddha, life is suffering. It's all dukkha.

Is it worth it? Maybe I wish I would be dead. Somebody put me out of my misery. The Guru Aryeh, the Maharal of Prague says to the Rambam, that works in well with lama ze'anokhi. It actually works. Lama ze'anokhi, why am I at all, works with the words, but it doesn't sound like a very religious sentiment for someone as great as Rebecca, says the Maharal. What she's really asking is, and this is the end of the Dvar Torah everybody.

So listen. What she's really saying is, if this is suffering, why am I at all, sitting around, doing nothing? Shouldn't I go and inquire and investigate and make sense of what it is that contributes to suffering? Says Maharal, the Ramban, you're right, it's an existential question, but it's not an existential question that says, why do I exist at all? It is, what is my deployment? Vatelech lidroshet Adonai, she goes to find the answer. She goes to find the truth. She goes on a journey. Maharal's Rebecca is, is where we are. It's where the poem was that we read almost 45 minutes ago. Two nations in one womb, says the Torah tomorrow morning. Two nations in one womb, wrestling with each other. Two nations, believing that there's only enough for one. Two nations, as our poet said so beautifully, in their hearts trying to face one another. The wrestling is also trying to face each other, trying to hear each other. And we are suffering.

I'm suffering, we're all suffering. And we have that moment, we say, you know what, there's suffering, you know what, what did I do to bring this on? That's Rashi. Lama Ze Anochi, what did we do? Maybe it wasn't worth it.

We have a moment with like the Rambam, we say, you know what, it hurts so much, I'm just cutting off. I'm completely shutting down, I can't watch any more news, I can't get involved with anybody, I can't talk to, I just don't want a deal. Don't want a deal. I like the Maharal. It is an existential question each and every one of us faces, every moment now. Lama Ze Anochi, why am I? But not, why am I, I wish that I weren't, but why am I here? Lama Ze Anochi, what am I being deployed to do? What's my deployment?

Every day as I watch the news, Rachel Maddow, Fox, I'm watching all the sides, and I'm watching this parade of people coming to the President-elect, and I'm thinking to myself, I want to serve, I want to serve, let me be the ambassador of love. I want to be the secretary of state, of union. Make me, God. Give me a job, I want a job. I want to know what to do. I want to know how to bring more light to the world. I want to wake up in the morning and I feel the pain around me, and I want to say, Lama Ze Anochi, why am I here? Let me remember. I'm deployed. I have a shlichut. I'm here for a purpose.

In a world where macro-issues are now facing us so deeply, we can forget the micro-issues, that generate love. I was watching a news program, another news program, and there was a little girl from Africa that was being interviewed because her school had been the recipient of money that was intended towards uniforms. And I think it was Lawrence O'Donnell or somebody else was interviewing her and asking her questions, and she was the most

beautiful, radiant girl I've ever seen. I felt her presence through the screen. Her smile, her honesty, her temimut, her simplicity and integrity. And she said, she initiated, she said, before we go, I want to give you a poem. I said, okay. And she started this poem. And the title of the poem was Little by Little.

Little by little we will bring light. Little by little we will bring love. Little by little, little by little.

Why am I here? Little by little. Little by little to reveal what your shlichut is, what your deployment is. So in honor of Rebecca, tonight and this weekend, in honor of her incredibly important question, why am I? I vote for ambassadors of love. I vote for all of us to be deployed and at every moment to say I don't know exactly what I'm doing yet with my career. I'm not really sure what I'm doing yet with my partner. I have figured all of it out.

All will come into focus at some point, but I know one thing without any shadow of a doubt, that each and every one of us and me and you, we are here to little by little change suffering to compassion. So will you take the job? Let's rise together.