

Romemu Sermon 10 20 17

I feel like I'm going to be giving eulogies for the whole year because in a way, when you're a great, when your uncle passes away, you're kind of disenfranchised as one who grieves. Meaning, I was very, very close with my uncle, and he was my father's brother, for those who don't know. My dear, beloved uncle passed away about two weeks ago. And I feel like I want to dedicate a lot of this year's sermons to him. I've been thinking about him quite a bit. And one particular aspect of his life that I want to focus on tonight, and its resolution, in a way, or its highlighting, or its tension, or its... just what it is, is that my uncle was a tremendously skilled singer, someone who had a perfect joke and a perfect line at every moment of the day, night, and afternoon.

My uncle, Joe Ingber was, Yosef Sholem was, uniquely gifted in his capacity to communicate, to speak. Whether it was the timing or the rhythm of his speech, whether it was the pitch and the tenor of his voice, something about Joe was always communicating. And yet, as everyone who came to the funeral knew, and those now sitting here will know about him, he had months in the year where he would hibernate and not speak at all, for months on end. He was a beach bum. In fact, some of the people who came to pay homage to him were his chevre, his friends from the beach. They had dedicated, out in Lido Beach, in Long Beach, they had dedicated a bench for him. There were hours where someone who stood up at his funeral said, there were hours where we would sit on the beach, and I would look over at Joe, and he'd look at me, and we'd just smile. Eight hours at a shot. The only words that would pass between us, he said, were hard work moving to get into the sun's direction, and they would commiserate and go back to the sun and to their internal zen-like posture.

This balance between spoken and sung word and deep, reflective, introverted silence. Between spoken word, between sound and all of its fury and the depth of silence and its own sound. It's something that I'm thinking about so deeply tonight because as many of us found out this past week, when one comes to pay shiva, when one comes to comfort a mourner, there are many things that you can say that are the wrong things to say. There are many things that once they leave your mouth, you have a hard time pulling back in, and once they have been disclosed, they can't ever be recovered or closed over again. How we are with people at that essential moment of their life was very clearly up for all of us on a national level over the last few days, and for my personal family over the last couple of weeks. It was remarkable to see the tap dancing that was going on when people came into my parents' home.

How many people here have gone on a shiva call? For those who don't know what a shiva call is, it's the seven days of mourning for relatives, very close relatives, a certain group of relatives, whatever it might be, but it is the Jewish way of expressing deep grief and being supported in that grief work. Well, it's really hard to know how to be with people when they are in that space, when people are sad but maybe angry, when people are feeling closed or maybe open, when people you haven't seen for 10 years or 20 or even, as we found out this past Saturday night, even 50 years. Is it a kiddish? Are we schmoozing? Is it socializing? Is it appropriate to make jokes? Can we laugh? Should we say hello to somebody? Should we wait for them to say hello to us? Should we sit there and wait for them? What's the protocol

in that context? How do we navigate speech, spoken word, communication and silence? And does silence itself convey what needs to be conveyed? How do you do that?

So I want to look at Noah. I want to look at Parshat Noah. I want to look at the story of Noah and the floods with the eyes of a great spiritual master. Some of you might have heard of him. His name was Yisrael ben Eliezer Vissara, otherwise known as the master of the good name. A great, great Rebbe, a great thinker. He would have had his own TV show without a doubt back in the day if they had it in Pedolia somewhere. They would have been calling him and saying to the Baal Shem Tov, can you give us advice? Do you have any good words for us, Baal Shem Tov? You're a magician, you're a shaman. We need your medicine because Torah is medicine. And the Baal Shem Tov was a great doctor for the soul.

So here's the Baal Shem Tov on tomorrow morning's biblical reading on the story of the floody floody. And God came to Noah and said, build an ark. What does Noah say? Nothing. Noah doesn't speak. In fact, the conversation is very much one-directional. It's a unidirectional conversation. And then God says these famous words, Now that you've built this wonderful ark, that will house and protect and secure the future of humanity and the planet, the covenant with all of living beings. Now, enter into the teva. Can everybody here say the word teva? The word for ark, A-R-K, the ark is teva. But of course, the ark also, the word for ark, teva, also means word in Hebrew. So listen to the way the 18th century master, Baal Shem Tov, understood the allegory of what it is that God was saying to Noah. He said, come into the ark.

Bo Elateva means that whenever there's a flood, whenever there's a raging sense of something outside of you, that you need protection from, protect yourself with the word. Enter into the word. Enter the word. To enter into the word for the Baal Shem Tov meant that when we pray and we feel that we have extraneous thoughts, stop trying to pray by heart. Enter into the words of the siddur, enter into the words of the liturgy. Let the words themselves, as you visualize them and see them, let them lift you out of your crazy mind, my monkey mind, my all-over-the-place mind. Let the words be your anchor. But it also meant something more profound. It also meant Bo Elateva, release what is hidden within you. Find your speech.

There are times in life, maybe not at a Shiva, or maybe at a Shiva, where language, where voice is exactly what is needed in order to rage against the machine, against everything that is coming at us from every different side, to be able to finally free what has been silenced, as Tori Amos says, silenced all these years. Years go by. One more casualty, one more casualty. All of that pent-up silence that is not the silence of presence, but the silence of absence. The silence of I don't have words, or I do, but nobody will hear them. The silence of secrets that seep into a culture, secrets that seep into a relationship, secrets that seep into a country and into a system, secrets which are silence that is imposed, that isn't the presence of fullness, but the absence of language. Bo Elateva, says the Baal Shem Tov, find your voice, your vokare. Find some place, as we've spoken about in the shul many, many times, the exile of speech, the inability to even get out a krex to say ha.

And so we witnessed it this week. Me too. Everywhere. Women who were victims of the patriarchy and of the silencing and of the secrets finally healing our country and this world with Bo Elateva. Kein Yirbu, may they continue to find that, to speak that, to find that

security that can alone be given through the words that they find that they've been silencing for years. I sat around a table yesterday with an organization called Sacred Spaces, which is incredible that it hasn't yet been done in over the last 30 years.

Sacred Spaces is a non-for-profit that just began by my friend Shir Berkovits, Dr. Shir Berkovits, which is demanding that Jewish institutions across the country and the world have a child safety pledge that they've been trained and certified in being able to notice abuse, sexual abuse, predation. And it's been driven by donors who will leverage their grants towards grantees depending on whether they have a heksher, whether they actually have certified that this ark, this container is safe for children who themselves don't have language often. They don't have the tevot. Their silence also is an imposed silence. And so we speak for them, Sacred Spaces. How could it be in the Jewish world we have spent millions and millions and millions of dollars on Jewish continuity when we know that one bad experience in a Jewish institution will scar a human being for life? Waking up.

There's a silence that is a silence of absence and to that silence the Baal Shem Tov said, Boah la teva, find your language, find your words, find your ability to articulate what you haven't yet articulated so that you will be freer and the world itself will be safer because your silence wasn't keeping anyone safe. You might have thought it was. How do we become allies to build that kind of world? That's the first kind of silence.

But the second kind of silence is the silence of tsev me na teva, the end of the story tomorrow. God will come back to Noah and say, Noah, you know I told you to go into the ark? Now it's time to get out. Now words won't help you, says the Baal Shem Tov. Now the only thing that you can offer is a silence that is so full that were you to try to find words they would just get in the way. Has anybody ever had that before? Anybody ever been on a date or in a relationship or in a place where the silence is so full not because you don't have words but because, right, we have so much to say. Silence of presence, silence of absence. Two different modes. People would sit with my father and I was sitting there wondering, I wonder what my pop's thinking. People came in, they started talking about their lives. There'd be literally ten seconds between their sitting down and them telling my father about, you know, what's going on with me, and this and that. The capacity to hold the space for someone else to speak. The silence that actually allows the other to enter the ark.

We all know examples of this, we all know it in our lives, we know it in our relationships, we know it with our partners, we know it in schools, we know it wherever we go. The capacity to hold the space for someone else without scratching the itch, without filling this space with a silence that is not present but is absent. It doesn't allow the real words to emerge.

We have Rosh Chodesh tonight, it's the new month, tonight and tomorrow, today, tonight, tomorrow, of a month called Cheshvan. Cheshvan is a month that is, according to our rabbis, a quiet month. It begins with the letters Chash, which means shh. Chash means shh, quiet. It's a quiet month, no holidays, we're all off, we can relax. We can finally get around to paying up the pledges that we made for Yom Kippur, it's all great. All of it's great. It's a silent month. But I like to think about another word that starts with the letters Chash. Chashmal. Chashmal means electricity in modern Hebrew, but it's from the Bible, where angels are called Chashmal, silent mal, speakers. Their silence spoke.

So let me ask you a question now, before we finish the service tonight, you're going to go off to your different ways, wherever you're from, go back, hopefully with an experience tonight of Shabbat that will in some way nourish you, I want to ask you to ask yourself tonight and tomorrow, just this one Shabbat, don't do it on Sunday, if you do, you fail. Okay? When you decide to speak tonight and tomorrow, ask yourself if your speech is filling space, if your speech is a way to avoid silence, or if your speech is a way to enter the words that you haven't spoken or need to be spoken. And do it the other way, when you're listening, is your listening allowing the other to find words they might not have found? Is there a way to listen as actively and as generatively as we speak? Imagine somebody coming to you and saying, you know something? Hi. And at that moment you're about, you have no idea what's being born in them, you're about, is there a way for this space that is between us to be Chashmal, electric, alive with a listening that ends in speaking and a speaking that's a listening? Is there a way for us to enter into other people's grief, other people's excitement, other people's anger and rage with a sense of my silence, my birth in them, a healing that has been waiting for four decades?

Last Saturday night, there was clearly a very experienced gentleman, experienced by Shiva standards, I think he really knew the art of paying a Shiva call. He knew my father from when they were this big. And I'd never met him before. He sat down next to my dad and he waited. As is the law and the custom, he waited for my father to greet him. He didn't thrust himself in front of my father, he didn't come over and tell him anything, he just waited. Chash, shh. My father turned to him eventually, and he saw him and he smiled and he hugged. And the man, I kept watching this man, he kept waiting, like he'd say something and then he'd wait to see where my father went. It was very moving to me. And then, as he got up to leave, he leaned into my father and I, I leaned in to listen. And he said, you know, Sydney, I remember you and your brother Yosef Sholem, I remember Joe. And to this day I can remember you harmonizing with each other during a particular prayer of the High Holidays. He said it just like that. And then he got up and walked out.

And I had to leave the room because I was so overwhelmed. And when my father went back over the whole night with me, of all the guests that came, and there were a hundred people that came, he said, he turned to me and to my mother and said, you know, something interesting, I heard something tonight. Someone who was here said that he remembered me harmonizing with Joe. And I went home and I said, you know, Ingber, that was it. Because my father cried for the first time that night when he said that. He listened to my father. He listened to my father's stories. He listened to where my father had energy. He listened so that what he spoke then birthed in my father something that needed to be born.

What would the world look like if we did that? What would the world look like if we didn't just prepare what we were going to say, but how we were going to listen? What if we prepared how we were going to listen? You know, when I go to that social gathering, I'm going to think about how I'm going to listen tonight. Instead of making idle chitchat, we're going to make idle listening at. How can I listen to you where my listening is presence and not absence? Where my speaking is presence and not absence? That is a lesson of the Baal Shem Tov.

Seymeh na teva, boah la teva, go into the words, leave the words, know which is when.
Hashtag listen more for healing. We need to build a better world and we need to build it
soon. And we can, and we will, together.

Let's rise.