

Shabbat 060917 Sermon

So I'm really excited to talk tonight with you about some good advice. Torah is always good advice. Torah is known in the language of Chazal, in the language of the Rabbis, as Itin Tavin, Eitzah Tova, good advice. A little bit of good advice in our lives.

But if you're a parent, or you know parents, or you know children, if you've ever seen children or heard children, if you know what they look like, you take a look around the room, there are a couple of children here tonight, you and I and all of us know the famous questions that besiege anyone as they're about to embark on a journey. What is, when are we getting there? Are we there yet? Are we there yet? Are we there yet? And most of us as adults, you know, we know that a little bit in our own experience. Like I know about my own self, I know that sometimes I find myself, no matter where I am, wondering if I'm there yet. I'm sure you guys on your road trip out here from Orange County were wondering a couple of times, are we there yet? It's a long time on a yellow bus, I know. And I know for myself that no matter where I am in the journey of my life, I often find myself asking questions like, am I there yet? Whatever there might be. I wonder where there is. I also know that as an adult, I often ask the other question, which is, when are we leaving? I want to get out. I'm done.

This, should I stay or should I go, this question of departures and arrivals, is a fundamental human question. A fundamental human question is, when is it time to go and when is it time to arrive? What are the constituent elements of how we choose where we're going? How do we frame these things? And I think more fundamentally, what is it in us? What is it in us, I don't know about you, but I'll speak for myself, that regardless of where I thought I wanted to go, or where it was that I wanted to leave, I always wind up in some version of a crutch. For those of you who don't know what crutching is, if you've never crutched before, if you'd like to crutch, if you've seen others crutching, crutching means to complain, to find something lacking, to feel as if something is missing. Our Buddhist friends call this dukkha. The bitter taste of something that's missing. What's missing?

The great German philosopher Jürgen Habermas called religion the answer to the question that everyone ever asked, ever. What is missing? What's lacking? There is a fundamental spiritual question, what is lacking? And we find ourselves asking that question regardless of whether or not we have arrived or we are wanting to go. Something in us finds something missing. We don't really know how to sell something because we know no matter what we sell, there's always going to be a part of us that if we are on a journey, as Alan Watts once said, if we are on a journey, then we graduate from one moment to the next and we're thinking as we arrive at the next moment, since we're on a journey, where are we going next? And if we're not on a journey, we wonder why we're not on a journey.

Life is a journey. We got to go to the promised land from the moment we left the land of Egypt, we have to get somewhere. And so at the core of this human question of arrival and departure, the core question of what it is in our lives that lead to a certain sense of dissatisfaction that we can feel as some have said as anomie, as something being wrong or something is off.

The Torah wants us this morning, I'm already tomorrow morning, tonight. The Torah wants us this weekend to learn Torah within Torah. The Torah wants us this weekend and every year when we arrive at this parasha to learn Torah. And I'm going to tell you something radical that maybe some of you know, maybe some of you have never heard before and I'm happy that you are here tonight to hear this. Especially these guys. You got the whole Torah in your hand because according to our rabbis, we don't have five books of Moses. How many books of Moses according to the rabbis are there? Seven. There's one opinion in the Talmud that says that the Torah is seven separate books. Seven separate books. And that the shortest book in the Torah, you never heard of this before, look it up. The shortest book in the Torah is 85 letters long. And you all know these two verses, you all know them by heart if you've been to synagogue a couple of times.

If you haven't, this is good incentive to come to synagogue on Saturday mornings to hear us open up the ark and know these two verses because if you know these two verses, you got at least one book of the Torah memorized. Vayehi bin soa haaron vayomer moshe kuma Adonai Right, okay, some of you know this. It's kind of very flamboyant music.

These verses, and then the verses that come after when we return the Torah to the ark. Shuva Adonai ravavot aveisel kuma Adonai minuchatecha These two verses are found in tomorrow morning's reading in chapter 10 of the book of Numbers. They are famously framed in the parchment of the Torah by two upside down letter nuns. What we years ago called the flying nuns. These two nuns, which are inverted, these two letter nuns, if you open up the Torah and you would look inside, you would see those verses have a little nun upside down on the front side and on the back side. And they are separated out from the rest of the Torah. And where they appear is significant because if they are the whole Torah, or one book of the Torah, one whole book is these two verses. These two verses must have some deep significance for their placement here in tomorrow morning's reading. And I'm gonna get into that right now.

Because they are very carefully placed according to the rabbis. According to the rabbis, these two verses are placed in tomorrow morning's reading as a barrier, as a separation between what comes before and the complaining, the kvetching, the tlunot that come after. The Israelites were complaining from the moment they left the land of Egypt. In Parashat B'Shalach, already in chapter 15 of the book of Exodus, they were complaining. They were remembering how great it was in their revisionist history of what it was like to be in Egypt.

They were suffering in the land of Egypt. But nonetheless, they remembered it perfectly. And immediately after these two verses, tomorrow morning in the Torah, we will begin another series of complaints. Complaints that will then continue for the next three weeks. And so these two verses are in a sense the antidote. They are contraindicated if you want to have less kvetching in your life. Don't read these two verses, the Torah says, and the rabbis say, if you want to have less complaining in your life.

Who here wants to have less complaining in their lives? Nobody. I want to complain less in my life. So I want to know what the Torah has to say. And here it is. Say the rabbis, if you look carefully in the verses that immediately precede Vayib and Soa, right before, there is actually a toranot, there is an event that takes place in the Torah that is one of the

vicissitudes, one of the tribulations of the Israelites, but it's not clear from the verses. Right after the verses that we will read that are the quote-unquote separate book of Torah, we have complaining about food and so on, but there is another complaint or another moment immediately preceding it and it says, Vayis'ume har Adonai derech shloshet yamim.

This is the first moment that the Israelites begin to travel. They have been getting themselves ready in the book of Numbers, they took a census, they decided to figure out a way for them to be camped around, and then it was time to go. Everybody loaded up into the bus, it was time to get everybody together, we're leaving. And the Torah tells us, Vayis'ume har Adonai derech shloshet yamim, ve'aron brit Adonai noseh lefnehem, and the Ark of God is in front of them, and they go a three days journey in order to see what is in front of them to seek out a resting place. Va'anan Adonai aleihem yomam benas'am nina machana, and there's a cloud, and then, vayi ben soha aron, and then, when the aron, the Ark was lifted up, or it was traveling, Moses called out, Arise God, and scatter your enemies. What could possibly have happened in this traveling that indicates something went wrong?

So the rabbis, that the Israelites were by the mountain of Sinai for one year minus 11 days. And it was vayis'u mehar Adonai, they got up and they left the mountain of Adonai, and they went three days. Nothing wrong there, right? Anybody find anything wrong with that verse? They get up to move, they left. The rabbis say this, Why would the Torah tell us that they left the mountain of God? It should have said they just left. Why does it have to tell us that where they are leaving from is called har Adonai? Har Adonai, the mountain of God, the mountain of Revelation. And here, every one of us will appreciate the image. They say the Israelites left ki tinok haborech mi beit sefer. That when the Israelites left the mountain of God, they left like a child running away from school. Like a child running away from school.

My son there had his last day of school this morning, and he decided to tell me this morning that he wasn't going. And when I asked him why, he said because I want to celebrate the end of school by not going to school. It's good, right? It's good. It's hard to respond to that. But there is a sense that you can't wait for school to be over. You guys must love school, right? But when school is over, it's like, you know, Bruce Springsteen's song. I learned more from a three-minute record than ever did school. I just can't wait to get out of school. Let me get out of school. I got to go run. I'm going to go have a good time. So the Israelites are at the mountain of Adonai. They're at the mountain receiving Torah for almost a year. And now it's time for them to leave. And they get up and go. And the rabbis say they left by yis'u mehar.

They left the mountain of God as if they were a child leaving school. There was something about being in the presence of Revelation. There was something about being close to what was pleasurable and good that scared them so much that they had to run away. They had to get going. Can you imagine? Can you imagine? Somebody tells you, you know what? We're on a journey. We're going to go somewhere. But we're just going to stop here. And you can load up as much money as you want until, you know, we're never going to tell you to stop. Or we're going to stop here on the journey halfway through. We're going to stop right here. But even though you have to go all the way over there, you can stay here as long as you want. And what you are experiencing at that moment is so profoundly beautiful that you then get up and you leave because you got to run off.

You got to go. You got to get going. The rabbis hear in the way the Israelites leave, their departure from Mount Sinai, the beginning of the complaining that will then take them to the complaints about meat, about not having the right fish, about not knowing where they're going, about why are we going into the land where the spies have seen these great giants.

The beginning, the percolation of their kvetch mind, their dissatisfaction begins with the way that they leave Mount Sinai. And then the two verses, and then, when the ark was lifted up, Hum Adonai, rise Adonai, and then when the ark was set down, the antidote to kvetching, the antidote to complain, to dissatisfaction in these two verses.

As the Israelites leave, God says to them, there is no destination. God says to them in the language of the Torah, every time we turn to open up that ark in synagogues from Spain to Iraq to the north of Israel to South America to here in New York to the west coast, wherever there are people who open the ark, we say, and it was when the ark traveled, Moses would say, God, rise up. And when the ark would rest, we would say, now rest. As if to say to each and every one of us, that is Mount Sinai, and wherever that is, that is where you learn Torah.

Wherever that is, and that is an actual ark, but it could be Judy Gray's heart. It could be 125th street. It could be in Orange County. It could be wherever. You are rushing away from Mount Sinai to go enter the land because you have been told by God at some point, you should wait for God to tell you when to go. What are you rushing out of Beth Saphir? Why are you leaving school? Do you think it's going to be any better once you leave school? It's all school. We open up this ark, we say, and we open it. It's so beautiful. And then we recite the second verse as if to say, every rising and every falling is Torah.

Every moment in our lives, we need to know where we're going, but we don't have to be rushing together because we might miss all the Torah along the way. How many of us in this room are spending our lives running after the promised land and missing all of the promised lands along the way? Okay. I'm the only one? Okay.

I'll just... Fine. I need to hear this. I need to hear the rabbi say, you know, there are seven books of Moses and one of them is really short. And you know where it goes? It goes right there. Right in that little verse where the Israelites got up and said, oh, we better hurry up and get our three-day journey going. And then right away, kvetching. Oh, it's not this, it's not that. You're in the desert. You're here to learn what it is to be in the desert, my friends. I haven't brought you into the land of flowing of milk and honey. You are supposed to receive manna now, this really interesting looking tofu-esque marinade.

Our obsession with getting there or our obsession with leaving there, our obsession with that is a deeply human reality. It's a deeply human moment. And it's something that the Torah wants us to know is so vitally important. It's so radically important for us to remember, to remind ourselves, to remember, to remind ourselves that there is no journey other than the journey where you are in the deepest sense.

And that Torah doesn't belong in a mountain and it certainly doesn't belong in a particular piece of land. And it certainly doesn't belong here in this sanctuary or in any sanctuary

because if you think this is the place you have to go to feel God's presence, we all know that that's not true. The person in front of you is your teacher. And the frustration we feel and the joy we feel, if we can stay with them long enough and not run away like children running from school, we will learn. We will take in. We will be humbled. We will... What a world it would be. What a community this would be. What a community every community would be if we could remember that the Holy doesn't belong in any one moment, any one place, but in all moments, in all places.

And if we can remember that as often as possible. The Hasidic tradition says that those 85 letters that are in the shortest book of Moses, those 85 letters come out to the word Peh. Peh, hey. 85 letters Peh. The mouth. And in the Hasidic tradition, they teach that we should close our mouth like the two nuns, you know, be careful what you say.

But I want to say that the way we name reality, the language we use, the Peh that we use is directly related to how we understand and frame what this thing called life is. Where are we going? Where are we going?

So a blessing tonight, I just want to pray, given that our focus is so much on the new prayer book. And I want to say also the new prayer book is not where prayers are. Prayers are also here in this Peh, in this mouth, in these two verses. I want to pray that we lift up tonight and this Shabbat and you go home and try this on. Don't trust me, try it on.

When you feel like complaining, ask yourself, I will ask myself, what is the Torah that I am running away from right now? Is my complaint arising from boredom, from fear? Where am I in a rush to go? Where must I leave from? And where am I rushing to get to? How about these two little verses that remind us, when are we getting there? Now. When are we leaving? Now. May the source of life, the one who arises in us, in those moments, and says, here I am. And then scatters away all of the grasping and the fear and the desire. May that one keep us from kvetching too much. Help us to soften kvetch mind and to rest in Torah mind.

May each and every one of us be able to own and hold those two little verses that give us such a deep Torah. Let us say, Amen.

Please rise.