

Eye, Eye: Back to the Start | Rabbi David Ingber's Sermon 4/17/26

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I made a pilgrimage this week. I say that word, pilgrimage, because for me to go to Colorado always feels like I'm going back to the start, where things started for me. It was in Boulder that I found a teacher who changed my life and changed the course of my career, of my calling, my sense of a calling.

It was in meeting Rabbi Zalman Shakir Sholomi, a blessed memory, that, as I've often said, I had a chiropractic adjustment on my soul. And Rabbi Zalman was centered in Boulder. And so each and every year, there was an annual pilgrimage of all the students to learn with him and for the new cohort of rabbis within his lineage to be receiving smicha, hasmacha.

And so when a teaching gig brought me to Denver for a day, just one day, the first thing I did upon alighting from my very turbulent flight was to make my way from Denver to Boulder in the final 15 minutes of the cemeteries being open so that I could sit by the grave of my teacher. And it was, for me, a long time since I had done it. Life has kind of filled in many of the edges.

And my busyness has made going to Colorado every year, or at least to Boulder every year, impossible. And as the calendar got crowded, the flights got harder to justify to my wife and to my family. And one year bled into the next before I knew it.

I think it's been like six years, maybe, seven years. And so there I was standing at his grave. And I felt something quiet rise up in me as I sat there.

It was a presence patiently waiting for me to notice it again. It wasn't grief. It was something much subtler, I think.

It was a feeling kind of like not loss, but neglect, a realization that something that once nourished me had gone untended to. Maybe you know this feeling. A friendship, a practice, yoga studio, something in your life that once was such a source of nourishment, such a source of chizuk and sipok, of strength.

And somehow, for whatever reason, it falls away. And then you're standing before it. And you have longing for it.

You remember how much it fed you, yeah? How much you received from it. And there's a sense of neglect. And so as I flew home, I was holding that in my heart.

And so I went to the Torah to see if the Torah would meet that moment. And I opened up to Tazria Mitzorah. And for those who are giggling, you know what Tazria Mitzorah is.

Those who don't, this is the portion that many people want to rush past. It's got skin blemishes, and priestly inspections, and discolorations. It can read like an ancient dermatology manual.

And some people even joke that this is the parasha when just to keep everybody from falling asleep, you should talk about Israel. That's the recommended, how to keep people awake. But within the lineage of Chassidut, within the lineage of the spiritual masters that Rabbi Zalman Yoneik is receiving his lineage from the Hasidic teachers, the rabbis, they don't skip over this parasha.

This is a deep parasha for them. They burrow into the parasha. And what they find there is one of the most radical teachings in all of Torah about what it means to heal.

So let's begin where the rabbis start. The Gemara in Erechin, the Talmud in Erechin says that the word Mitzorah, which means some kind of a skin affliction, can be playfully read as Mitzorah is motzi-ra, the one who takes evil out. It's an allusion to something called motzi-shem-ra.

It's essentially a cautionary tale about lashon hara, a motzi-ra, someone who brings out the bad. Here it's read as someone who brings out gossip, the destructive power of speech. You speak badly about someone, and the ugliness you put out into the world karmically shows up on your skin, measure for measure.

The outside will now reflect the inside. That's a real teaching, and it matters. But it's not where the Hasidic masters go.

Because if you stay at that level of lashon hara, you're left with a morality tale. Don't gossip, or you'll get spiritual leprosy. Morality tales, as all of us know, as important as they are, don't tend to change our lives.

They just make us feel really guilty. They don't make us feel seen. So along comes our first teaching this evening from the Sfas Emes, Yehuda Leib Alter of Ger.

He opens up something much deeper. He brings a piece of Hebrew wordplay that once you see it cannot be unseen. It's actually from a much earlier source in the third century, but he plays on it.

And I'll get to that. The word that he plays on is the word, or one of the words for affliction that is in this week's parsha. The word is negah.

Nun gemol ayin, ken? Kenuk, ani tzodek? Negah, seder, modkin? Negah. He says negah, nun gemol ayin, is the same letters as what? Oneg. Oneg, negah.

Negah, oneg. Oneg means delight. Delight.

One word means affliction, negah, nun gemol ayin. Negah, N-G-A. And oneg, delight.

The height of ecstasy. This is from the third century text, the Sefer Yitzirah. The oldest mystical text that we have, it says, ein tov l'malame oneg ve'ein ra l'mata min negah.

Nothing better or higher can be found than oneg, and nothing lower than negah. The highest and lowest are composed of the same elements. First of all, that's, is that amazing? Okay, you really don't get it yet.

Because you're all going like, the same Hebrew letters, the same building blocks in Hebrew that point in the direction of ecstasy are the same letters arranged differently that point to a dukkah, suffering. The same ingredients make that delicious dish that make that disgusting dish. The very same thing, but there's something different, and the letters are pointing to experience.

The very same experience, the very same experience can either be negah or oneg. What's the difference for those who know Hebrew between negah and oneg? Where's the ayin? One is at the end of the word, and one is at the beginning of the word. This is a Torah, blew my mind to read this.

Wherever you place the ayin will make all the difference. Ayin is a letter, but what is ayin in Hebrew? What's an ayin? An oxygen, it's your eye. This is not a wordplay about letters and poochie moochie, simple letter combination, some mystical meaning, it's a deep structure about perception, about perception framing, how we see the world will determine whether we see it through the eyes of negah or through the eyes of oneg.

The very same constituent pieces determines whether something is delightful or something is a source of affliction. If we think about that in our own lives, the relationship between these things is amazing. You think about a relationship that ended, a career that didn't work out, the part of yourself you've been calling a wound is possibly also the part of yourself that you will one day call your wisdom.

The very same thing that you call your wound at this moment might become something that we call our wisdom, maybe. The question of course is a spiritual question that is profound. The raw material of our experience contains within it not just negah but also oneg, not just the pain but also the possibility and not to erase pain.

It isn't my job or any of our jobs to come to any of your pain and touch it in any way, shape or form and say oh, this must be your wisdom place but just to hold the possibility that it might. That's the Sfas Emes. The second Torah.

The rabbi comes along and says, I'm sorry, it's the first Torah, my mistake. Still in the first Torah. The meaning of that, of where you put the ayin says the De'verei Sha'ul is alluded to in a verse in chapter 13.

V'ra'ah kohein, ve'inei lo hafah ha'negah et eino. You hear that? Ve'inei lo hafah ha'negah et eino. That the negah did not change eino, it's ayin.

You hear that? You see it? I mean, you hear it? The De'verei Sha'ul says there's a verse in the Torah that says the priest will come to the person who has negah, who has an affliction and behold, the color of it has not changed. Lo hafah ha'negah et eino. That the color, the word ayin here means color.

It hasn't turned from the color that makes it contagion to what's healthy. But he reads it, no, as the ayin of it. He says if the priest in you comes to life and sees an affliction, a negah, if you wanna know how to turn it into something that is a lesson, a wound into wisdom, frame it differently.

Hafah ha'negah et eino, change the ayin. Change the ayin. Amazing.

Amazing. This negah as a place where wounds might be reconstructed and repurposed is profound. There's another teaching I wanna share on this Mitzorah Motsira.

The second teaching is from a different source. It is, the second Hasidic source says this. In the Torah, God says v'natati negah tzarat, I will give you an affliction.

And the second source asks v'natati, God says I will give you, when you give someone something, usually it's a present. Matana, I'm gonna give you a present. What could possibly be a present in getting an affliction? And the source MS, the second teaching here says this.

Sometimes Motsira, when that which is not healthy comes to the surface, it's a gift. Amazing. And sometimes something's latent, it's beneath the surface, this Motsira, this tzarat, but when it comes onto the skin, now you can heal it.

He says sometimes there are pains in our lives or people in our lives who are in so much pain and it's so deep and they hide it so well that the greatest gift that can happen to you as a friend, as a mother, as a father, as a parent is when the thing that they have been hiding so well is Motsi. It's so, it's so painful, they begin to bring it out. It begins to be exposed to the air of the world.

Now they're not hiding it, it's Motsira. They're bringing out their jifa. They're bringing it to me.

And you might say, no, no, I don't wanna see that ra. I don't wanna see that shadow. Keep that shadow to yourself.

And the Hasidic Rebbe, the Sfahasem, says no, this is the second gift of this parasha. Not only is there a gift of seeing things differently, but there's a gift in being able to see or have someone show you what they've been holding underneath the surface for so long and now it finally starts to come out. This week, a mother called me and said that her young child who has been through so much in his young life already and seen so many difficult things in his life already, his mother called me and said that it seems to have taken a turn for the worse.

And the child is needing, is acting out in ways that are really scary and overwhelming and destabilizing for the family and for the friends and they've been wrestling with it. And now it's almost like it got even more intense. And then I read this Torah from the Sfahasemis and I want to say to her, you know, it was always intense.

He's just bringing it out now and asking for it to be healed. It was there all along, but now it's coming out. He's motzira, he's bringing out all of the things that he swallowed and couldn't metabolize, but keeping it inside, nauseous and sick.

And now it's gonna get out and healing can start. Motzira, he says like this, it's so great. Not only is it motzira, he says, it's also the word nega means to touch it, naga.

He says, now that it's on the outside, now that it's here, you can touch it, lingua, you can touch it, you can heal it, you can see it. It's not hidden away. You have proximity to the thing.

It's not held inside. It's not the second gift of motzira, the gift of exposing what hurts so the healing can start. And this last Hasidic Torah, this Hasidic Torah from the Mea Shiloach, after the midlife crisis and the breakdown, after the walls that look clean, only after the stain appears and we begin to clean it, says the Mea Shiloach that the parasha is all about, all about looking back and seeing that sometimes God will bring us into the world by hiding light that tests us to see our desire and to deepen our longing, a heart that breaks, a person who can see their own faults.

But if we stop there, the Mea Shiloach says, we will despair. The parasha comes to teach us, he says, the Mea Shiloach says that sometimes when we have an affliction, sometimes when we have something that is so painful, it awakens in us a yearning and a despair. A longing for our health or for our prior condition.

It brings us into awareness of how good it was and how much of it we needed to be in touch with and had lost touch with. That last Torah from the Mea Shiloach brought me back to that grave with my Rebbe. All of a sudden I was thinking about all the years that I had not gone to visit, all the years that I had missed, all the years when life's exigencies and my travels and all of my schedule made it impossible to go and dip into that well.

I started to ask myself, when I read this Torah from the Mea Shiloach, I wonder what was gestating in me that needed that distance. And now having retouched that connection, I appreciate it. I imagine if I were to tell that to the Ishvitzer, he would say, of course, that's how it always works.

You don't get to see the architecture of the concealment until you arrive at the other side of it and arrivals are never on schedule, they're always exactly when it's supposed to be. And so as I'm entering the Shabbos with you, I wanna ask all of you here, what is the negah in your life? What's the negah in your life? What's the negah you woke up with this morning, this afternoon, tonight, that is asking us to say, lo'afach et eino. Somehow we're still looking at it the same way, maybe we might look at it slightly differently.

What in your life is the negah that you can now touch and say, thank God it was under the service before, but now, motzira, it's coming up, I can see it, I can clear it, I can heal it, because now I can see it. And what moment in our lives together, collectively, is a concealment that one day we will look back at and say something was gestating for us, something was being born in us, something was being closed so that we could be open. What if the actual thing you've been calling a wound is actually a point of contact, a negah, a touch, the place where something larger is trying to reach you? And what if the years of distance from a practice or from a person or from a part of ourselves were not wasted? What if, as the Ishmatzer teaches, the concealment was building something you can only see now that you finally turned back around to? This is the Shabbat of Rosh Chodesh Iyar, the beginning of a new month, whom the tradition says is an acronym, alef, yod, yod, resh, ani, adonai, rofecha, I, God, and your healer, Iyar.

We're in the middle of counting the omer, moving from day to day, from liberation towards revelation, and this month's name tells us that healing is possible. Healing is not something that we achieve, it's something that we receive. Healing is not something we achieve, it is something that we receive.

When we stop running from the negah and let it be what it actually is. Reb Zalman, my teacher of blessed memory, used to talk about spiritual technologies. And he used to say all the time that what happens to me or you in our daily lives, we don't know with absolute certainty that it's meant for us.

Each person has to feel each moment that there's a bracha, there's a blessing that's coming our way. So let me tell you what Reb Zalman sent me today. You wanna hear? You wanna hear what he sent me today? This is private.

So don't tell anybody. Said it? Okay. There's this conversation that's been happening between me and Rabbi Braus from Mikar, I mentioned it here, an important conversation.

And I spent the morning this morning trying to explain to friends of every persuasion my position vis-a-vis the conflict, where I stand with it, my moment is what I'm not, I'm not gonna get into it. I said, as I said, we usually talk about Israel on this parasha, but we're gonna talk about the parasha. But those of you who have been in the shul now for a couple of years know where I stand about the importance now of supporting the state of Israel, the importance now of supporting clear moral reasoning around so much of what's happening.

And so I spent a couple hours doing that. And then I checked my Facebook page. Big mistake.

I had posted a picture of my Rebbe, of me at my teacher's, at the grave, when I was meditating and visiting the grave. I was in Boulder, as I said, and I was visiting there. So I took a picture of the Matzeva, and I posted it on my Facebook page.

All of these people that know Rav Zalman and know me and know Romimu, they all kind of wrote beautiful things about Rav Zalman, about how much they remember him and all this Torah and so on. And then somebody decided, Ramesh, amazing, somebody decided to write something horrible about Rav Zalman. Clearly somebody who is still very much in the Orthodox world and had not so nice things to say.

Okay. So I took it offline, and I engaged this person. I kind of started trying to talk to him about what's going on.

And he said things about me and about what it is to be praying in a church. By the way, I didn't even know that we pray in a church. I mean, it was news.

He said it to me. I thought, we're in a shul. Is a shul, no? Is that church? It's like, what's going on? What church? He said it to me.

I said, what's going on? And he said, you know, you give people the not real Judaism, he said, said you're bringing people to something that isn't the authentic version. Some, all this stuff. Okay, Seder.

And I was, it really hurts. Not because what he said, for even a moment, made me think that it's true. It's just hard to think that still there are people in the world who doubt how powerful it can be just to be together singing L'chad Dodi, like this gentleman from Israel said.

How beautiful it is. Yineh ma tov, ma la'im, shevet achim, gam yachad. We're together and it's Shabbat and all of you are here.

And so I was a little bit down. And then Rabbi Zalman said, you know what? You're gonna be teaching tonight about that little ayin, about how to change the frame. I'm gonna send you a third email.

And that third email will be dispositive. That will be the thing for you that you need to hear. And so right before Shabbat, I got an email from somebody.

And it started like this. Rabbi Ingber, you don't remember me, I'm sure. But Romu changed my life.

Romu changed my life. I came at a time where I was alone and I was looking to marry, I was looking to be partnered, and I was despairing. And we sat together and then I came to Romu and the music of Romu and the people at Romu and the open heartedness of Romu and the messages of Romu.

All of it, it gave me such chizuk. And then she said, two months after she came to Romu, she met a nice, amazing Iraqi Jew. They live in Israel now.

She sent me a picture of her beautiful daughter. And she said, these are the lines she said, never doubt for a second that what you guys are doing matters in the world. So that might look like a backhanded way to say how amazing we are, but it wasn't the point of the story.

The point of the story was about the hinei lo hafah ha'nega eteinu, that using our eyes, using our perception, we can change, we can change if we put the eye in at the start. Nobody said it was easy. Nobody said it wouldn't be hard.

But we have to go and put our eye at the start. We take our eye from nega at the end and we put it at the beginning of oneg. Remember to see with an eye in tova, to see the world with a good eye, to see ourselves and our brothers and sisters with an eye in tova.

To not fight, we're to be melamiz chut on each other, to find merit in one another. Am Yisrael chai, we need to be together. May the merit of my holy teacher be a guide for all of us to find our way back to the start.

Amen.

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