

Shabbat 06 15 18 Sermon

I'd rather be a hammer than a nail, yes I would, if I only could, I surely would. So the Jewish version of that, I'd rather be a feather than an oak, yes I would, if I only could, I surely would. In the world there will be a man only as a hammer, and he will not be as hard as an oak, who, by virtue of being a hammer, has the right to write in him the books of the Torah and Mizuzot and Tefillin.

A person should always be soft and bending like a reed, not hard and inflexible like an oak. For in the merit of the flexibility of the reed, it merited to be the instrument through which Torah and Mizuzot and Tefillin phylacteries are written. A kaneh, a reed, a reed that is pliable, that is absorbent, that is able to fill itself with the ink that then becomes the vehicle for the transmission of divine wisdom, divine flow, divine blessing. Kaneh, reed. Flexibility and what it is to be flexible, and I don't just mean like gummy bear flexible, I don't just mean yoga flexible, I don't mean asana, being able to touch your nose to your knees or toes. The flexibility that in the story that is the story of the reed, in the Talmud is a story of a rabbi who was coming back from having learned a lot of Torah one year at a big retreat somewhere, a big workshop, and he was filled of Torah, it says in the story.

He was full of Torah. His mind was gassed, was coarse, meaning also he was feeling pretty good about himself, a little bit arrogant, maybe a little bit like, oh, look at me, I'm Sandra D., busy with my Torah vitality. And so there he was, and then he came upon a man who greeted him as he was on literally his high horse, he was on a horse, and the man was on the ground, and the man who was on the ground greeted the rabbi who was full of himself and said, shalom aleichem rabbi. He said, nice to see you rabbi. Whereupon this great Torah master, full of Torah, showed the emptiness in his heart because he greeted the man in return, how ugly are you? And the story then unfolds where the rabbi, the Torah scholar realizes, oh my goodness, that's crazy.

Because of course the man who he's greeted says to him, maybe you should go tell the one who made me how ugly I am, and the rabbi was like, oh, wow. Wow, did I just say that? And at the end of the story, the rabbi apologizes, profusely begs for forgiveness, and the Talmud says, his, his ability to say he was sorry, his ability to show his vulnerability, his ability to be absorbent of the chastisement, the rebuke of this man, he becomes the model of the one who is now full of Torah, the way that the reed will be full of Torah, but also flexible and bendable. His model of, of humility, of having made a mistake, of owning that mistake, becomes the very instrument and the framing for the writing of Torah. As if to say that you can't write a Torah, you can't make this perfect, immutable, unerasable document unless you yourself know what it is to erase, to make a mistake, to bend, to learn, to not be hard like a cedar.

But that's not easy, is it? It's not easy. It's not easy to be flexible, it's not easy to be fluid, it's not easy. Right? It's not easy to be that reed. And when I think in my heart and I think in my mind about an example of that other natural element, not a reed, but some other natural element that the Torah and the rabbis want us to think of as also expressing fluidity, that which takes the shape of the vessel into which it is poured, you can think of no better element than the element of water. Water in Torah, water in the Talmud of the rabbis

becomes an expression also of that which flows from high to low, that which moves from an elevated status to a low place and a low place to a high place. It is that which is flexible enough to take on the shape of the vessel to which it is poured, and it comes in many forms.

There are no two greater and starker images of flexibility and inflexibility than the reed and the oak and fluid water and frozen ice. And on a week when ice is on our minds and hearts, on a week when ice, the frigidity, the inflexibility, the ugliness of ice, we ourselves find ourselves in the story of the greatest challenge to Moses tomorrow morning. Because in the Torah tomorrow morning we will be reading about a challenge between a man named Moshe and a man named Korach. Korach and his group. In chapter 16 and 17 of the book of Numbers, we have the greatest challenge to Moses' leadership. And there's no stronger place for us to look at flexibility and inflexibility than here between Moses and Korach because after all Moses is the man, we're told, who is *minamaye mishiseu*. He is the one who has been drawn forth from the water. Everything in Moses' life has to do with water. His name is from water. His miracles will be with water. He'll meet his wife and his father-in-law by the water. He will bring water to the people and because of water he won't enter the land.

Moses, whose very name means the one taken from waters that flow, will meet his match in a man named Korach, whose name in Hebrew means either bald or ice. The ice man cometh. And the moment of this rebellion and the moment where Moses shows his greatness and Korach his weakness is around inflexibility.

As we know the story, Korach comes with 250 men. He comes to his cousin Moses and says, Who are you to be the great Moses? Who are you to lord it up over us? We too were at Sinai according to Rashi. We too experienced God face to face. We too, let's level the playing field. The hypocrite that he is, he knows that he will still, even though he's speaking the language of populism, he still is not a populist.

How amazing it is to hear of such a story where someone who is not populist at all, who is an elite member of some rarefied 1% comes and says, I speak for the people. And yet he does. And he levels complaints against Moshe and says, Moshe, who do you think you are? And Moshe hears him. And Moshe falls on his face. And then Moses sends out an important communique. He says, go tell them, those people, come. Come, I want to meet with you. He sends out a party. He says, come and meet with me. And they say, no, we're not coming up.

Did you take us out of the land of Mitzrayim to take us from Egypt to this land flowing with milk and honey to kill us here in the desert? And then again, they say at the end of verse 14 in chapter 16, we're not coming to meet you. And only here, 14 verses into the story, and Moshe says, at this moment in verse 15, after 14 verses of rebellion, 14 verses of all the things about Moses that Korach, Mr. Iceman, can't handle, Moses is not angry, Moses falls on his face, all of these moments, and then finally Moses gets angry. And he says, now, you've done it.

And we as readers are thinking to ourselves, wait a second, now they've done it? What about 13 verses before when Korach, Iceman, and his contingent, they begin? Why does it take Moses 14 verses to get upset? Says Nechama Leibowitz, the answer is this, And it angered Moses greatly. He was very angry. Why? Why did he get angry here? Moses asked

them to come forward just to clarify what the nature of their complaint was. Tell me. I want to know. I'm water. I can hear it. Come, bring it to me. I'm an open book. I want to be a great leader. I'm brought forth from fluid and flowing water. Hey, come bring me your complaint, guys. My door is open. My phone is on. Send me an email. Call me up. Knock on my door. I get it. You're upset. There's a rebellion. Just come meet with me. Just sit down. Let me talk to you. Let me listen. Let me try to respond to your complaint. Let me try to respond to your concern. Let me try to appease. Let me try to move. Let me try. Let me try.

Moses in the first 13 verses of this says, I'm Mr. Water. That's my way. If you want to know who I am, you'll find me on the floor. You'll find me in some way opening myself, making myself vulnerable. But no, they say, We're not going up. We're ice.

The personal and the political in the Torah and in our lives are connected. The personal and the larger moral imperatives are intimate. In our own lives on the personal level, we are ice men, ice women, ice people. We are Korachian in the moments when we refuse to be soft like the reed. When confronted with an issue and someone asks to speak with us, we say, No, no, no.

How amazing it is that we have the phrase. My brother called me this week, he said, You know, your niece Bella, she's the most amazing tennis player. She was down five games to love and the third said, For those who don't know tennis, it's not good. She's got ice in her veins, he said. She's always had ice in her veins. You could put her on the free throw line, another sport, sorry, and she could just, two seconds on the clock. The notion that ice in her veins is a good thing. It means, ice in her veins means that she's not taken by the moment's emotion. She's not flexible. She doesn't bend to the pressure. She doesn't cave in. She doesn't surrender. She's got ice in her veins. What a scary image.

Ice in her veins. To be closed off from that fluid, flowing, passionate, ever-changing, impermanent reality of what it is to be in the moment, ice in her veins. Maybe we should teach our children to have ice in their veins. He iced it. She iced it. To be ice, to be hard like an oak, to be ice, to be frozen, to not be thawed, is to be unaffected by what is going on around us. I am unperturbed. I am an island. Oh, I've got ice in my veins.

And the danger of having ice in our veins, of course, is that when there's ice in our veins and the rebellion against what is in the moment is that we don't thaw out after that moment is over. That the very next moment we're still rebelling against the feeling that might interrupt compassion, that might interrupt feeling for the other, the feeling that is struggling to come forth from underneath that very icy, thorny patch. To have ice in our veins, we run the risk that it won't just last for the moment when we're on the free throw line or when we're up giving a sermon or we're somewhere where we can't let our emotions get in the way. To have ice in our veins means that to some degree softness is a problem. Fluidity is dangerous. Can you imagine what it would be like interpersonally if we brought that message into our relationships with people who live with us, who work with us? Ice in the veins.

But then imagine what it's like when we look out at the political realm with moral clarity and see that people who are being asked to tear children away from their parents are called ICE. And that when asked, how could you? Don't you have children? Don't you have grandchildren? What's it like for you? You say, no, I'm just being obedient to the law. Have

we heard that before? Have we heard what it is to say I will not allow my feelings to get in the way of my moral clarity, my moral imperative, my moral responsibility that I won't let my heart, which pumps blood, which brings feeling, which brings emotion, which brings a sense of connection with all living things, that can you imagine using scripture of all things as a precedent for acting cruelly towards those who seek asylum? Can you imagine the kind of ice in your veins that are required? The kind of ice in our veins that make us close ourselves off for the sake of some higher law, whether it is achievement or success or keeping the law of the land, which itself may be and clearly is immoral. Ice against flowing water in tomorrow morning's reading is the Torah's warning to each and every one of us to not be like Korach. Don't be like Korach. Don't be ice man, ice woman, ice person. Soften, soften, soften.

My dear friend and colleague and inspiring teacher Rabbi Sharon Braus wrote today on LISTSERV quoting Martin Luther King. We should never forget that everything that Hitler did was legal and everything that the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was illegal. It was illegal to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler's Germany. But he writes, even so I am sure that had I lived in Germany at that time, I would have aided and comforted my Jewish brothers and sisters. Letters from a Birmingham jam.

Korach is happening all around us. We are becoming inured to the value of Moshe, a man who left comfort to side with those who were powerless, who left the structures of injustice to side with those who were just. And we individually in our own relationships can't forget that we ourselves run the risk at every moment of being rebels to the very feelings that come up that demand from us to let go of the law. The law of being hard. The law of being tough. The law of precedent. The dharma that is undignified. Korach, ice. S

So a couple of things that we can do. So on the political level we need to call for immediate cessation to the egregious criminal act of separating children from their parents. And we also need to call for the resignation of the head of Homeland Security and the head of ICE. But interpersonally tonight when you leave here, because that you'll do after Shabbat is over, but tonight when you're with friends ask them when do I act cold? When do I act rigidly? Can you share and shed some light on the ways in my life where you wish that I would be more like a reed, more bendable, more flexible. Can you be honest with me about that?

I love it when people say they talk about the things that we talk about here in Shul, but talk about this question. Where in my life, if you know me, could I be more like a reed? Where in my life could I be more fluid like Moses? Where in my life am I like Korach? Where in my life could I use some thawing out? May the source of life, the one who is the spirit of all living flesh, soften our hearts. Soften our hearts.

Teach us to thaw out. Teach us to allow our feelings, our vulnerabilities to run through our veins. May the source of all that is alive pump a new life into all of us for the sake of love, for the sake of freedom, and for the sake of humanity. Amen. Amen.

Please rise.