

Shabbat 03 02 18 Sermon

I didn't realize it when I made an appointment or a reservation or scheduled a retreat down to Florida, which was last weekend, that, of course, that I would be giving a retreat about 15 minutes from Parkland. I didn't realize when I had made a Shabbaton a year and a half ago or a year ago, back and forth, back and forth. We usually do it in the first weekend of the year, that moving it to February would have us, coincidentally, moving my Shabbaton down into the heart of trauma and pain and loss.

I didn't realize it. And so, as I prepared all of these different things to teach down in Florida, irrespective of all of the stuff that I had prepared and the reams and reams of teachings that I brought with me, inevitably, there was one moment in each and every one of the 11-some-odd moments throughout the four days that someone would raise their hand and say, Rabbi, what do I say to my child who won't go back to school? What do I say to the children? What do we do? What do we say? What do we say? What do we say? And of course, there is a very clear answer in this moment to some degree about not what to say, but what to do. And in that respect, we're following, as we should be, the children.

We're following those who are leading, who are transparent, who don't have the machinations yet to have to hide behind facades. So none of that's happening, so we're following them. But when someone asks the Rabbi, what do you say, it harkens back, of course, to the larger questions. What do you say in the home of someone in a Shiva home? Kind of what is Shiva etiquette 101? And much more so than the question what do you say, there's what is supposed to be said. What do you say 101?

But in terms of what the halacha mandates, what is Jewish law, Jewish practice, Jewish structures, what are the things, the instructions that we are given, we're only given one phrase that we are responsible to say when we come into the home of someone who has lost a loved one, that is, ha'makom yinachem. May the makom, may makom, may God's presence, may God as place. The strange usage of the term makom in this, in the house of a mourner.

We, as a Jewish people, are not bereft of names of God. We're not, there's no shortage, no run on divine names. We've got Yah and Tzvaot, and we have Shechina, Hashem, Yud-Heh-Vav-Heh, El Shaddai, we have many different names, but the tradition somehow feels really, really important and really clear that when we walk into the home of someone who's lost a loved one, we are to greet them at least minimally, perhaps maximally, with ha'makom. May makom comfort you. So think about that.

Think about that for myself. I think about that because I think hidden in this, in this structure is something about the religious journey and about the spiritual life and about my emotional life, your emotional life, what it is to be a human being. And somehow it connects to tomorrow morning's Parsha and to Purim last night, two nights ago. How do we hold things? And what is it that we're intended to hold? When we think often of religious maturation, religious evolution, spiritual maturation, spiritual evolution, we often think, or at least my experience has been that I often think of not obedience, practicum, religious affiliation, identity.

We know here in Romemu what's kind of interesting. For 10 years now, we've been talking about a different frame, a frame that emerges from the Hasidic masters or from the Buddhist teachers about religion or spirituality as practice, not as identity, not as something that you do in order to know yourself differently, but something that you practice. And what exactly is the practice? So it could be to become more mindful, mindful of the present moment. It could be to be more mindful of what's before us, to not be asleep. That's one, certainly one place to go.

But I personally, there was one in my life where a lot of my spiritual and emotional work was centered around the capacity to hold more. Some might view this as tantric, tantra being the philosophy in yoga of moving energy through the body without necessarily repressing it or expressing it, not necessarily repressing it or expressing it. Often it gets a bad rap. It's only about sex and about the Kama Sutra, all kinds of fantastic erotic exchanges wherever they might be in the synagogue or wherever they might be, right? But it isn't, it's too small to be about sex or about even the relation between ourselves and generative energy. It's just about how we build a space or a container for those energies. And the tantric tradition teaches us that the more space there is, the more you can hold. The more space there is, the more you can hold.

I remember the first couple of years when I was doing a deep kind of emotional body work, somehow affiliated with Rolfing, a little bit connected to something called the Postural Integration School. It was based on the breathing work of this guy Wilhelm Reich, where you would breathe into a charge, you would breathe yourself into a feeling and then watch how you work with a feeling. A feeling might come up, it might be sadness, and you'd watch your breathing pattern. Were you in the pattern of pushing your sadness under the belief that unless you pushed it, it wouldn't be there? You couldn't just gently be with it and make room for the feeling. Anger, betrayal, trauma, hurt.

What would it be like instead of thinking of practice, instead of thinking of analysis, instead of thinking of figuring it out and fixing it, what would it be like if things had more room to be? Would they find their own way to resolution if you just kept making room for them? Almost like the analog would be like curling, I guess. I just thought of that. I know that we want a gold medal in curling now in the United States, so now we're a curling nation. But maybe there's something about that sweeper who sweeps in front of that curling disc, not necessarily pushing it, but giving it its own room to move in its own direction. What would that be like if a feeling had its own intelligence, if a thought had its own, and you made room for it?

I was standing with a friend of mine, a dear friend of mine, many of you might know her, I don't need to, she doesn't mind, Naomi Les, and she kind of told me, she's like, I don't mind, tell the story with my name. I said, okay, Naomi and I were at a place called the Song Leadership Boot Camp in St. Louis, a group of 300 educators, song leaders, prayer leaders, and we were gathered around together praying our morning prayers. Naomi's a magnificent prayer leader, song leader, she's like a team educator, she's just an amazing human being, and she struggled for decades with infertility. And a year ago, we were in the same place, and she had just lost one of twins that she was carrying and she was bleeding, and she wasn't sure if this last chance, this last chance of a child was going to make it, and her mother passed away around that time.

And there we were this year, standing in a prayer circle with her newborn baby girl, and she turned to me, she said, this month, this month in which Purim rests, this month of Adar, my mom passed away in Adar, it's not good news. And I turned to her and said, you know, Naomi, but you have Marlo, don't you? And Marlo was born right after that, Marlo, her daughter. And then I said, I shared with her this midrash. The rabbis teach that when the wicked mythic figure Haman came to curse the Jewish people, he threw a lot, he threw, like, he cast a die to see what would be the most propitious month in which the Jewish people would be cursed or something horrible would befall them. And of course, the lot fell on the month of Adar. And he turned, of course, to his Jewishly curious and strangely Jewishly knowledgeable wise man and said, what about this month of Adar? Is it a good month? And of course, the wise man said, yes, it's an auspicious, propitious month in which to kill the Jews. After all, the greatest Jew of all time, Moses, died in this month.

And says the Talmud in telling the story, but they didn't know, says the Talmud, that Moses also was born on the very day that he died. Moses was born on the day of Zion Adar, the seventh day of the month of Adar, and he was also, he also died, that's his Yahrzeit, on Zion Adar. And so I turned to Nehom and I said, it's both and, isn't it? Faith is focus, and the month of Adar was the month your mother passed away in, and the month of Adar is the month in which you are standing here blessing your daughter Marlow. Wow, you're holding both of those truths, to hold both of those truths in one place.

Tomorrow morning in the Parsha, which of course is the centerpiece of the entire tabernacle over, like the tabernacle, the great mobile app in the desert, the great log on Wi-Fi in the desert, here comes God giving us a tabernacle, v'shachanti b'tocham, we're going to give a portable Sinai, you're tomorrow morning's reading in the centerpiece of the tabernacle narrative, which of course is the world, the tabernacle is a microcosmos of the grand scheme, it uses the language of creation, all of the tabernacle is human beings creating the world that God had created back in Genesis 1, and in the middle of that narrative, we have the golden calf. At the heart of the world is a brokenness.

At the heart of the world, there is the response to the golden calf, which is Moses throwing down the tablets and destroying the tablets, and then God says to Moshe, after Moses pleads with God not to destroy the Jewish people, and after, right, it looks as if everything is completely off the rails, God says these words to Moses. I will do what you ask me, God says to Moses, I will make myself known to you, but you will not see my face and live, for no one can see me, but I will show you my goodness. Verse 21. I will do what you ask me, God says to Moses, I will make myself known to you, but you will not see my face, but I will show you my goodness. Verse 22. I will set you firmly on the rock.

This Torah was sent to me by my friend Larry, and I want to give it the shame of Rabbi Lisa Goldstein. It fits so beautifully into what I've been holding for the last couple of weeks. In the aftermath of destruction, in the aftermath of breaking, in the aftermath of loss, of trauma, in the aftermath of the unthinkable taking place, Moses pleads and in the rapprochement between God and Moses and of course the Jewish people, God says, I'm about to give you my 13 attributes of forgiveness, forgiveness, forgiveness, behold there is a Makom with me, behold there is a place with me.

Moshe, if you want to know the secret of forgiveness, if you want to know the secret of how to move past or through, you need to learn the secret of holding the tragedy and the blessing, the brokenness and the wholeness, in the aftermath of something that went horribly awry, God says, make space, come into my space, into my Makom, a space that holds stasis and dynamism, a space that holds rapture and a rupture, a place that holds all of that in your big heart, Moses. Give that to the Jewish people, let them hold that and then hold the 13 attributes of love, make room, make room.

May I tell you something, that cuts to the core, cuts to the core, we are a people of the book, we are people of the door and we are people of the space, can we make room? And imagine for a moment what that might look like when you're with someone who has experienced loss or you're with someone who's expecting a great answer but all you give them is, I will hold the space for you. Imagine that in a community that could hold space like that, a community that could hold the shadow of its heights and depths, a community that could hold all of it. Imagine a world in which that might be true.

There's a woman who just wrote a book about an organization called DEFY, D-E-F-Y. It's an organization that works with criminals in the criminal justice system who are giving them a second chance and she begins her book discussing what it was like for her to crash and burn. She'd just been working in Texas and she'd been working with inmates and bringing them into, right, she had like a 90% non-recidivism rate. No one was coming back. She was getting them jobs, they were moving out of the prison system, they were getting out of the criminal justice system, out of the Jim Crow and they were working and then because of all kinds of stresses in her life, all kinds of crazy things that were going on in her life, she made a huge mistake. A mistake that consumed her. It was a personal mistake.

She got into some relationships with some of the inmates that breached boundaries for her and she begins the book talking about how she thought she would never recover from it and what she discovered on the other side of crashing and burning was that the power to hold that she had made a mistake, the power to be vulnerable about what was really going on for her and to be transparent about it. I read this today sent by a guy named Seth Godin. I read the book, like 30 pages of the book.

I couldn't put it down. I said, there it is. There's Makom. There's Makom. She's writing from Makom. She's writing from vulnerability, holding her shadow, her light. She's being honest. She's being human. There it is. The full, the fullness of it all and how frequently we want one or the other. We want the joy without the tears. We want the height without the depth. We want the holy without the messy. We want democracy without all that it brings in its wake. Can democracy be anything but messy and broken?

And so I think about this to myself when I'm, when I'm in a situation with my kids or at work or with my parents or with myself. I say, what would it be like? And just check out right now for you right now if you could. And if you're falling asleep, I get it. It's a long day. But just, if you're just, wake up for a second here for the last three minutes. We're coming in for landing. What would it be like everybody if we could just practice taking a breath into the body? And what would it be like as we did that to see if you just had more room? I felt it.

You see my voice drop a little bit? What would that be like if we were in a charged situation? I don't know. One of your three kids under eight years old is throwing stump and you have to be in shul in five minutes or something. Or something much more serious. And you said, can I make makom? Can I make room? Let's take one more breath, all right? So I really got this with my friend Naomi. Moses was born on Zion Adar and he died on Zion Adar. And Purim is a holiday when we hold opposites together in one place.

It seems to me that there are two Zion Adars means that there's Zaz Adar. And if that's the case, it helped me to understand why we put a mezuzah on our doors. We are still the people of the door. Because every mezuzah has a bracha that says likboa mezuzah. It's the only mitzvah, the only bracha that says to establish, to make kavua, to make it permanent, a permanent moving thing. The mezuzah holds the complexity and the paradox of what it would be to die and be born in the same moment. To move and stay stable. To expand and be rooted. Mezuzah from the word lazuz, to move, zuz.

Two Zion Adars. We in every home hold that which can't be held. Every single Jewish home is a promise that you walk in the door and we say we're gonna hold the whole drama. The Jew, the Gentile, the inside, the outside, the movement, and the static. It's all there. So I want to bless all of you and bless me too.

I'm imagining a world where when we're in the presence of some yearning to hold only one side of a pole, when we're in the reactive and triggered place to get narrow and to get small, that we take that time and say, Kinei makom iti, says God. Behold, I am the space. Emulate me. Make room. Take a breath. Let the energies work their way out. May we be abodes for that divine paradox. May we be able to hold those two energies or whatever we hold with grace, with love, and with compassion. Amen.

Please rise.