

Shabbat 06 28 19 Sermon

Something remarkable happens when we stop talking. Something incredible reveals itself to us, a whole world. The minute we close our eyes, the minute we connect with the inner terrain, with the inner landscape. So often people will tell me that if they were ever to go on a silent retreat, they think they would die. Or they would be bored. It's almost laughable, I get it, I understand, I'm compassionate towards that sentiment, but there's nothing boring about our crazy minds. We could entertain ourselves by looking at the machinations, the ruminations, the neuroses, the terrors, the fears, the loves, the longings, the dreams, the fantasies. We could have it on 24-7. Before there was YouTube or Vimeo, before there was anything to look at in the palm of our hand, there was the screen of our mind, full, populated, with all manner of interesting things to notice, to attend to, to be attentive to.

Something remarkable happens when we close our eyes. I had the privilege of spending the last three days in a somewhat semi-silent retreat. The staff, the faculty were speaking amongst ourselves, but we spent the good part of the day in meditation with 22 remarkable fellows of the first-ever cohort of the Romemu Yeshiva, a yeshiva that is egalitarian, progressive, liberal, and dedicated to putting contemplation, contemplative practice, at the center of our curriculum. And during those three days I had a chance to be with my mind, my heart, my body, in a way that I hadn't for months, maybe even years, with the exigencies of life, of building a community, of being an Abba to three very energetic little boys. And as I found myself getting more and more quiet, what arose for me was something very simple in an understanding of what meditation or contemplative practice might be, just a simple phrase. And it came from my dear friend, Rabbi Miriam Margols, who's on the faculty.

Rabbi Miriam Margols is a remarkable teacher and musician, and said, you know, whatever arises, be with it. Whatever comes to your mind, whatever comes to your heart, be with it. And she said, it's like witness or with-nessing. You with-ness your heart and mind. And of course, me and my punny mind, I said, oh, the with-ness protection program. But the fundamental quality of contemplative practice and spiritual maturation as we grow is to be able to be with what is, not to be in a war with our own heart and mind, regardless, irrespective of how shameful the thought might be or how inadequate we feel, just to be able to witness it and to be with it, to with-ness or with-ness-ness.

This quality of being with, of not separating from, not distancing from, not putting outside of the heart, is at the core of spiritual practice. I won't put you outside my heart, no matter how much I want to. If you are human, you are family, even when you are misbehaving egregiously, you will find a place in my heart. I refuse to split you. I refuse to push you out. I refuse to put you at the margins. I refuse to ignore you, to deface you, even if it's my own inner place. And at the core of the entire spiritual project is, as we said on High Holidays, can we stay in the room? Is there enough room in this heart, in this building, in this community, in this neighborhood, in this country, in this world, in this galaxy, for you? So to answer J. Alfred Prufrock, do I dare disturb the universe? It's our job to make sure that you disturb the universe. There's room for you.

And so the story tomorrow morning that we'll read, which has always bothered me, and you'll see in a moment why, the story of the spies is fundamentally a story about witnessing.

About witness. And what are the spies? Spies. Torah and spies. Indeed. Tomorrow morning in shuls around the world, as the Torah turns, we will read about something that at first glance should not be what it became.

The Torah will tell us a story about 12 spies, each spy a prince, a leader, each one of them wanting to be nominated. All of them on the stage, 12 spies. They will be given a task, to go into the land. And in the land, they are to latur et a'areth, they are to reconnoiter, to get information, to bring back facts and figures about the promised land. Even though the land had been promised, and even though when God tells Moses to send the spies, tells them the land, of course, that I gave you, reminding Moses that if God said he would give it to the people, then it should be okay. Nonetheless, 12 spies go out, and they bring back all kinds of information, and 10 of them tell the people all manner of true things about the land.

The rabbis go so far as to say that any lie that doesn't begin with the truth won't ever stand up. So they tell all kinds of truths about the land, but then they get to the moment where they say, but it's too much for us. And two individuals stand out, Yehoshua, Joshua, and Caleb. Caleb and Joshua, two of the 12 stand out and say, no, what they've told you is true, but people know the story, right? They told you it's true, but don't listen to them about what is possible. Don't let them limit what you think is possible. It's true, all of that. It's true, the land, it's big, and lots of big grapes, ketam wine, it's big. But we can do it. The original, yes, we can. Right? Nahol nukhalo, we can.

It always bothered me, as I said, it was bothersome. I never understood what these two actors had that the other 10 didn't. Ever wonder about that? Why Joshua and Caleb? There's no place mentioned that they had any special characteristics. They were not told that they had yichas, right? Relationship with anybody individually that made them unique or special. What did they have? Where might they have taken it from, and what might it teach us?

So here, the first thing about Caleb and Joshua, without any reference to where they came from, is that they had a faculty. They had something that witnessing and witnessing requires. They understood that facts are preferred over falsehoods. But they remembered that facts must be interpreted. They didn't allow themselves to think that the facts were sufficient. They remembered that when presented with quote-unquote facts, visionaries and leaders, visionaries and leaders, remember that interpretation is in the eye of the beholder. And so being with those facts, watching their own fear arise, Caleb and Joshua were able to withstand the temptation to follow only the facts and not remember the vision.

And secondly, more importantly, and this is, I want to give credit to my friend Nachshon, when I asked him where did these two characters come from, what would make them unique, he said something amazing. He said there are sources that say that Caleb comes from the line of Judah, Yehudah, the fourth child of Leah and Jacob, and of course Yehoshua from the lineage of Joseph, which immediately brings us back to the Joseph story and the last time ten brothers stood against two others. Because in the end of the day, what are we talking about here? This story becomes the most important sin in the Torah. Because of this story, Moses doesn't enter into the land. It's easier for Moses to get three million people out of Egypt than it is for him to get into the land, excuse me, than the people to get out of

the land. The people can leave Egypt, but they can't enter the land. Why can't they enter the land? Because at this moment we have a reprise of the fundamental not-witness. When we say to my brother and my sister, you are not with me. I throw you in the pit and I send you down to the narrow place.

People who can stand behind a group or gang mentality that would divide, that would alienate and marginalize and dehumanize and forget the fundamental mission statement of the Jewish people. Those people don't deserve to enter the land that Joseph was kicked out of. This story is so important on a weekend when we remember Stonewall. On a weekend when we lift up our LGBTQI brothers and sisters and trans community and all of those of fluid gender identity and all of those who dared to be themselves, but were sent to a narrow place, who were thrown into pits, and the power that they had to rise to take history and say, if two people can change the course of this biblical story, then a couple of people making a riot in New York City 50 years ago can change the course for millions of humans. It's important on a weekend after the horrific images of a father and a daughter trying desperately to make it from the narrow place to the promised land. But because we live, unfortunately, in a time where those who are still in my heart throw other people out of theirs and agitate and stoke the basest fears that we have that inspire millions to forget the clarion call of what it takes to enter the promised land.

And we will not enter the promised land until we come together forgetting what it is to be a land of the free. A land of the law, breaking both U.S. and international law in criminalizing asylum seekers. This is a week of Caleb and Joshua standing in front of each and every one of us and saying two can change it. It takes two to witness. It takes two to witness. We must witness humanity.

That is our greatest protection, our greatest guarantee, our greatest covenantal quality. To be with. It just takes two who remember to interpret the facts for love and remember and remind us that brothers and sisters are better together.

May God bless each and every one of us with the koach, the strength to march, to raise our voices, to speak up, to raise our voices, to protest, to pray. And when the lights go down and there's quiet, to touch those places in our own heart, mind, our own places that need witnessing too, that we might be Shlemim Ho.

Please rise.