

Sermon Shabbat 08 03 18

You know, sometimes it's so important to go over some basics. Sometimes it's good to remind ourselves of fundamentals, to remember the foundations, to remember things that are axiomatic, that are given, that are almost so important that everything else rests on them. And sometimes it's important to focus on the things that are usually forgotten, the things that are not obvious, the things that are easy to discard or easy to walk by and not notice. I want to do both with you the next 10 minutes or so. Because there's great wisdom in our weekly wisdom, in our ancestors, scroll of good advice. That's the Torah, the scroll of good advice.

Good advice. So some good wisdom coming out tomorrow morning in our As the Torah Turns that I want to share with you. But also it's important because it's that time of the year when we think about fundamentals and we think about what's most important, what's essential, what's core, what's ikar.

And it's also the time of the year that we might forget what's a little bit less obvious. As the thing that it's grabbing me this week is a moment this week when we were doing a training about respect in the workplace. The Romemu staff is one of a pilot community, one of the pilot communities engaged in training around me too and around workplace decorum and workplace values and living our values in the workplace.

And the moment happened when we were asked to define respect, R-E-S-P-C-T. And it was tough in a way. But the core definition that stood out for me was related to dignity, the fundamental dignity of the human being before you, the intrinsic value that the other human being holds regardless of where they are in your community's organizational chart, regardless of who they are, that each and every human being is endowed and imbued with innate dignity.

And one of the ways that dignity is expressed in our tradition, one of the ways it's shown is when something that is covered is uncovered. When something that should be covered is uncovered. Basically, one of the moments in the Torah that is the most powerful moment around dignity occurs early on when human beings realize that they are naked. A moment of shame, of embarrassment, of feeling exposed, feeling unsafe, feeling as if they needed protection in some way, shape or form. And so dignity and safety, dignity and protection, dignity and covering over are intimately interwoven in our tradition. The ability to cover what should be covered and to reveal what should be revealed, those are fundamental elements of a dignified life according to the Torah.

And it helps us understand a moment in tomorrow morning's reading that is really amazing. Tomorrow morning the Torah, Moses is in his continued march to give the people good advice on the way into the promised land. Last week I talked about not getting into the promised land. Moses won't get there with the people, but the people will get there when he wants to give them good advice. And as he's giving the people good advice and he's telling them, he's actually engaging in a retrospective about their experience in the desert. And he tells the people in chapter 8 of Deuteronomy, verse 4, trying to tell them about the goodness and the grace that God gave them while they were in the desert.

He says to them, how good was it for you in the desert? There are a lot of good things that happen in the desert. And Moses is kind of going through all of them. He lists the manna and the well. He lists the goodness that God gave to the Jewish people as they crossed the sea.

And then he says this thing that many of you, I don't know if you've, in your Bible classes, 101, in yeshiva, wherever you were, maybe you noticed this, but maybe you didn't. He says, your clothing, your clothing didn't wither on you. And your feet were never swollen. Shout out to Gout from the Torah right there. Gout suffer. Your simla, your clothing, didn't wither for 40 years.

First of all, what the, what, what is that? Your clothing didn't wither for 40 years. First of all, it doesn't appear in the Torah. There's no mention of the clothing that the Israelites wore when they were in the desert. And something amazing, like it didn't wither. That's one of the miracles. There was a well that traveled with them in the desert. That's a miracle. That's a big miracle. Right, Josh? I mean, that's a big thing. A well, you see, like in the desert, 3 million people, there's like a well going. That's a big deal. Manna coming down from heaven, big deal. And your clothing, it never wrinkled. It was iron-free. It was wrinkle-resistant for 40 years. I just don't want to go into that desert without a good change of clothes. And I, you know, I only have these. Can it last for 40 years? Pack light. You're leaving Egypt.

And no less than the great French medieval exegete, Rashi, Rabbeinu Shlomo Yitzchak, he says, commenting on this strange utterance from Moses, your clothing never withered. For those who know Hebrew, Rashi says that the clouds of glory acted as irons to iron their clothing. I'm not making this up. They had clothing. And then the clouds came and says, oh, just hold on. Here we go. What's up with this? And then even more, even more, the little ones says, I mean, this is already amazing.

So now the rabbis are engaged in actually trying to figure this out. So okay, so you iron the clothing. So now they didn't wither for that reason. But maybe the children who had size small, how would they have size large as they grew for 40 years in the desert? I mean, how do you work with this myth, Rashi? Well, he says, like a snail, their clothing grew with them. We could unpack that for a couple of hours. But what touches me the most about this frame, what touches me the most is an understanding of what clothing we're speaking about that comes to the great Iraqi sage, the Ben Ishchai, the great Iraqi sage, the Ben Ishchai, who writes that it seems to me that the clothing spoken of here is the clothing of the soul, the soul's garment.

And what are the wrinkles on the soul's garment? The undignified, insulting, interpersonal dynamics that leave a smudge, that leave a wrinkle, that leave a tear in the garment of your soul, he writes. Says the great Iraqi sage, means that throughout the 40 years in the desert, your soul's garment was safe, that the soul's garment was safe, that it was dry cleaned with great regularity. And what would that dry cleaning of the soul mean, says the Ben Ishchai.

He says that each and every human being's dignity, each and every human being's dignity is such that we as friends, as a community, we watch out, he says, for the little small insults, the little small tears in the fabric of our community in the way that we treat one another, in the way that we imagine each other's deepest needs, in the way that we love one another

by preemptively, this is his words, by preemptively imagining what the other might need or feel. Now go back to that training place. How might it feel if your soul's garment is safety? How might it feel in an interaction between those who have different levels of power? How might I imagine the other? It's as if the Ben Ishchai is saying, love your neighbor as yourself, as you would want to be loved, is itself the very prerequisite for having well-ironed clothing.

The soul's wrinkles come when we don't love one another, when we don't take into each other's space what the other might anticipate, the pain that might be caused. And by extension, for us tonight, it might mean that anticipating the needs of another, anticipating what the other's soul might need for it to be safe, might be the teaching of your garments were well-ironed. So what might that look like in a world where we actually took them dark? We are the, as it were, the irons of each other's soul.

During the same course, we learned that even a small amount of cortisone released because of fear can significantly reduce the mind's ability to figure out complex problems or produce. That when there's fear, we grip. When there's fear, when security, the root chakra is endangered, we shut down. So do unto others as you would have them do unto you is a fundamental, just think about that. Love unto others as you would want them to love you. Work unto others as you would want them to work to you. What is fearful to the other, be careful.

So I'm going to give you three examples of the way this might play out in this community, in our lives. And the first one is something called Onat Dvarim. When we remind somebody of a past mistake or a past place in their life, and we use it against them in the present moment in order to make them feel less. This is a category of Nezik, of injury that is often not noticed. It's found in the writings of the rabbis as a reason why the world is destroyed. An example given in the rabbinic literature is coming up to somebody and saying, you remember when you were addicted? Wow, so good to see you now, all clean and sober. Remember when you were really, really in a bad place and you say it in a way that brings them back and you're doing it on purpose?

Or maybe if you know somebody has a dream or a vision and you're in a relationship with them and they've been there for you no matter what. They've been with you when you've been down and you've needed comforting. They've been with you or they've been with you in celebrations and moments and you come back at a moment when they need you and you say, before I'm going to help you out, I just want to go over a couple of things that have been bothering me for the last six months. I know that you're in incredible duress and stress and I would love to help you, but let me remind you. I know it's keeping me up all night. I know that it's keeping all week. Let me schlep the past into the present because I can. At this moment, I have that. It's a kind of, oh, not varim. It's a way of using words and language in a way that that's not skillful. It's not compassionate.

That's one example. I'll give you another example. Second example. One of the ways that our clothing wrinkles, our clothing withers is when we stay within our comfort zone and we look out at someone who is desperately in need of us leaving our comfort zone and we think first and foremost of our comfort as we spoke about last week. And to comfort is sometimes to put ourselves in discomfort and uncomfortable situations.

And the last example here tonight, how it is that we might protect one another's soul garment is that we withhold positive regard, lest the other become too haughty. We withhold positive regard and positive reflection. We hold back a compliment that we know the other will enjoy, lest we feel that, God forbid, they might be too, it might lead to a big head. Anybody ever do that? I really want to give you a compliment, but I'm thinking you probably get a hundred of them, so I won't say anything. And that withholding, that withholding, that ruins, it withers, it tears apart the fabric of the social elevation of a community.

So as I concluded last week's D'var Torah, I want to make this D'var Torah as personal as I can. Last week I said to you after I spoke about comforting, I said I needed your comfort. Because if you remember, some of you were here last week, some of you weren't, but some of you who were here last week, you contacted me to ask me about this curious thing that I mentioned called a building. I mentioned last week that the Romemu community has an opportunity between now and August 20th to purchase the building that we began this journey together on 10 years ago this year. 30 feet across the street, when you walk out the door on the south side of this same eastern 105th street corner, there was a building called the Grosvenor House that we had our first services in 10 years ago, and it has become available to the Romemu community, and we need people to step forward to help us purchase the building.

It is right there, and I asked you last week to hold me because I'm being comforted because that's my dream, and I needed you guys to comfort me, but there's hope. The dream isn't dead, it's not, it's alive. So here's what I need from you tonight.

I need you to preemptively, if you are someone who can help this community, purchase that building, not wait for me to call you. I need you to understand and think that this man and this staff and this community's garments are wrinkled. I need you, if you know someone who could help us build that dream across the street, which would not replace the sanctuary, it would be in addition to, it would be the place where we have our early childhood center and our Hebrew school, which now is busting out of its spot.

Now that school across the street where we started could be the place where we have our Romemu yeshiva training and all the wonderful things right there. And I need you to take into account and think how it is that you can help me iron my very wrinkled shirt. It's just one small example.

It's something on my heart, mind, and I'm sharing with you. You might have a million other things that are going on in your life that you can turn to your friend tonight and say, hey, you know what I could use? I could use you to know that I really am going through something now in my life and I could use you to preemptively call me every Tuesday. You could go out of tonight and you could turn to your friend and say, you know what? My wrinkled garment could use a little ironing because I just need you to know and say once in a while how great things are going for me. Say and notice the things that I'm doing that are well. You might walk out of here tonight with any of those three things and 25 more but I just needed to share. And I have the microphone.

It gets hot in the sanctuary, doesn't it? But it's a kind of heat that's beautiful in a way. It kind of, right, kind of sweats our prayers, maybe. Moses says to the people, remember the grace that for 40 years you had a shirt that didn't need to be ironed.

What would it be like for us to imagine other people's garments with wrinkles that we ourselves helped to iron out? How could we engage in that conduct? How could we engage in that lifting up, that elevation? That would be a world I would want to live in. So get your irons out, everybody. Even though it's Shabbat, we got plenty of wrinkles to straighten out, plenty of creases that deserve a good measure of that which will help each and every one of us make it through the desert.

Please rise.