

All We Need is Love - Rabbi David Ingber on Parshat Hayyei Sarah 5781 (11 13 20)

A number of years ago, I gave a sermon. I remember, it was right after the Muslim ban, and it was titled, People of the Door. I spoke about the ubiquitous phrase that is used to describe the Jewish people as the people of the book. I'm all safer, the people of the Bible or of the holy book, but, and, I spoke to the foundational story and the foundational myth of our liberation, which centered not around a particular book, although, eventually, the blood of the sacrificial lamb in the land of Egypt would become ink and be a reminder to us in every door that we stand under, within, every doorpost, every frame, that we were the people of the door at one point, the people who were willing to walk through from one space to another. And that teaching about mezuzah, about doorposts, is really a teaching about transitions and about spaces that are liminal, like the limen in which that sacrificial lamb's blood was placed. If we are a people of the door, we are also a people of liminality, of between, of knowing what it is to make sacred, to make holy, the place in between, the space of between the suns, as it's called in the Talmudic idiom, bein ha'shmashot, twilight, that not this and not that, how we are with transition says so much about who we are individually and as a people, that tomorrow morning when we read about the story of Isaac, the first real portion of the Torah that really deals directly with not only the present of Abraham but the future of his line in the person of his son Isaac.

We are dealing almost in the most extreme way with transition upon transition upon transition. It's as if tomorrow morning's reading about the passing of Sarah, Abraham's wife and Isaac's mother, will bring us into liminality, liminality, liminality, between, between, between, the holiness of between and how we hold the between. It's so fundamental. As one thing passes to another. So tomorrow morning we'll of course read about Isaac's mother passing. And then the Torah will tell us about Isaac's soul mate, Rebecca. And as we find ourselves at the end of that story, after the remarkable way in which the Torah describes the servant of Abraham going to find Rebecca, Rebecca will finally be on her way to meet Isaac. And there the Torah will stop to describe the first moment that Isaac meets the figure that will bring him through the limen, through the space, the loss of his mother, the loss of a relationship with his father through the Akedah. And so the Torah describes the end of chapter 24 וַיֵּצֵא ה' יִצְחָק לֵשׁוֹךְ בִּשְׁעָה לְפָנֹת אָרֶב And Isaac went out towards evening, a time of liminality, לֵשׁוֹךְ בִּשְׁעָה to do this thing called נִשְׁח in the field.

This is the precursor to that moment where Isaac will see Rebecca. And as such it's kind of an instructive moment because it's almost like the Torah is telling us something about the way that Isaac himself was transitioning into relationship with what was coming next. And everything hinges, of course, on that word. What was Isaac doing in the field? He was נִשְׁח בִּשְׁעָה He went out in the field to do this thing called suach. The rabbis hear that word נִשְׁח and they hear the word sicha. Isaac went out to have a conversation.

נִשְׁח from the Hebrew sicha. In fact, it's from here that the rabbis actually say that Isaac went out to pray the evening, the afternoon prayers called mincha. And sicha here as conversation is another word for prayer, another word for prayer.

This is a vital understanding of what Isaac did to prepare himself in the aftermath of loss, in the aftermath of grief, in the uncertain terrain between the places, in the mezuzah space, between the world that he knew and the world that was not yet. Isaac went out to pray, but it was a kind of prayer, say the rabbis in the Talmud in Brachot, the kind of prayer that is conversation. יִצְחָק תִּכְיֶין תְּפִילַת מְנָחָה The sicha, that's conversation, which is prayer.

It's profoundly moving for the late, great Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who passed away last Shabbat on the very day that we were celebrating, many of us. Rabbi Sacks wrote in his commentary on this moment, Isaac is meditating in the field, but the word sicha doesn't mean meditation, it means also conversation. If prayer is a conversation between heaven and earth, it's also prayer in its deepest sense is true conversation. I open myself up to the reality of another person. I enter their world. I begin to see things from a perspective that is not my own. And in the touch of two souls, this kind of listening, this conversation, we are each changed. Prayer must be, he says, conversation, and conversation in its deepest sense is also prayer. For him, the absolute perfect expression of that is Song of Songs, the book of the Bible that deals with love between lovers, that love is a conversation.

And the greatest antidote to liminality, the greatest antidote to anxiety, the greatest possible thing that one can do in the space between is lean into love. Yitzchak lasuch basadeh, Isaac went out to listen, to prepare himself to meet his beloved. That he might enter into a conversation, into a listening, into a sohbet, into a dibuch haverim, into an exchange of interiority that would be the beginning of the next chapter of his life. What else was there to do in the liminal space but to hang up a shingle called listen, shma, listen, converse, attend to, love into. Even as everything was happening in the last week and the anxiety of the election and the fate of the country was in the balance, even as we listened to America, America, and the call to reckoning and returning and going forward.

I was busy last Saturday night driving into Brooklyn to mark the event of an incredible couple who had met many, many years ago in college and through many, many detours that were destinations, that were detours, that were obstacles, that were this, that were that. The two of them maintained a soul connection as I said to them, I said to them, Anna and Benjamin, you guys, you couldn't stay away even if you tried. Your souls were so connected to one another and they found themselves in different relationships and until four years ago when on the evening where Hillary Clinton won, lost the election, Anna had no one to turn to and no one she would rather speak to than to her beloved Benjamin. And so there we were in the liminal space of not knowing there was joy in the streets but they were, they were doubling down on love. They had gone out into the field together and said we are going to prepare our future. We're going to prepare even in the midst of great anxiety and maybe even in the midst of, right, of relief, we're doubling down on love. And then later on in the week I had the incredible privilege and honor to be together with my colleagues Rabbi Coloreses and Rabbi Rivera together with two remarkable individuals who traveled eight hours from Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, four hours in both directions to be in New York for an hour to choose to be a part of the Jewish people. These two individuals took as their names and as their legal names soon both of them. One is named Emet, truth. And the other, K, is Ahva.

Ahva and Emet, love and truth. Even as everything is swirling people are loving. Even as so much is in turmoil and anxiety is still present and so much is unknown and so much is

uncertain like that night in Egypt when we made a little love mark on the door and moved through. Isaac, not sure how he'll grieve from his loss of his mother. He goes out into the field to prepare the space in which love might be planted in him. Maybe that's the deepest meaning of the word lasuach which means to converse. It can also mean, as the Kabbalists tell us, the word siach, shrub. Siach, shrub. Like in the book of Genesis in the beginning of the Torah where every shrub of the field called siach chassadeh, every shrub had not yet grown.

Maybe that's what Isaac was doing. Maybe he went out into the field and planted himself as it were and said, may love grow in me like this shrub. Maybe that's why Rebekah comes with camels to irrigate that field that Isaac had prepared. She said, let me bring water. Let me bring compassion. Let me bring healing. And sure enough, by the end of chapter 24, Isaac has brought Rebekah into the tent and fallen in love. Rebekah's name, Rivka, is the letters Habokir, the morning. She brought dawn and light to his world. But we give him credit for setting the stage. What love is growing in you?

What space are you preparing tonight, this week, for more love to enter into your life with friends, with family, with community? And bless all of you in these liminal spaces that we might listen a little bit more deeply, love a little bit more fiercely, and prepare ourselves for whatever is next.