

Shabbat 02 15 19 Sermon

I crushed it. I crushed it. Man, she crushed it. He crushed it. She's got a crush, he's got a crush, they have a crush. Crush. Wow, so many different ways to say both you're been taken over by someone, you've been, someone has kind of made their way into your psyche that you can't stop thinking about them, or that you did really well. One word can mean so many things. Multivalenced. Crushed a football, got a crush on her.

I'll tell you, so I did something that I wasn't, you know, people at Romemu know that I don't do this frequently, but just for all of those who are here for the first time, I decided to check the Urban Dictionary for crushing. Urban Dictionary. Because I was thinking about crushing and soul crushing. Like how sometimes when we say we crushed a football, but when I say my soul is crushed, I felt like I need to go to the dictionary. Like where did that come from? Because soul crush can mean like, oh, it went really well. Or soul crush can mean, oh, I'm devastated. So the Urban Dictionary gave me an interesting definition. Here it is.

To voluntarily suspend a person's beliefs or thought process in a shadow of a doubt that everything they once adhered to was either BS or biased. This act usually incurs the receiver to experience uncharacterized behavior or reasoning for any amount of time, depending on where, how they were raised. It promotes longevity or eventual acceptance of said new philosophies or rationale. This requires the producer to be well-versed and most times either highly accredited or drunk. It can even be used as a noun. I did some wicked soul crushing last night on some narrow-minded people. They didn't know how to react. It can be verbed. You are soul crushing him with your philosophical talk. Soul crushing.

For most of us, the Urban Dictionary's definition isn't what we normally would think of, right, when you think of soul crushed. When crushed and soul come together in some way, usually we think of something painful, not a victory over someone's preconceived notions, but rather a completely devastating or pulverized, unbeaten, I've been broken. I thought about brokenness and this more, I guess, normative understanding of soul crushing. Because I met an amazing man this past Shabbat down in Boca Raton. I was down in Florida, South Florida. I know he was looking at the B'nai Torah synagogue, one of the bigger conservative synagogues in the country. And that morning, everybody was coming out, you know, for the men's club weekend and also to hear some rabbi from New York come and speak to them. But right before I got up to speak, the young person of the year was going to be honored and his name was Gabe Glassman.

Gabe Glassman knows a thing or two about being soul crushed. See, Gabe Glassman, in the span of a few months last year, Gabe lost his dearest friend along with his friend's family in a plane crash. And then a couple of months later, as a sophomore in Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, Gabe was a survivor. And so as Gabe stood up to speak and to receive his young person's award, I had in mind, I wonder who this child is, I wonder who this young man is. And his message moved me. He spoke of faith and he spoke of how he was able to turn pain into promise, how he was able to take suffering and to turn it into something to live for and live beyond. He was working with what he was given and it was remarkable. He was marching and he was speaking out and he was part of a whole collection of those students who were making a difference and who had suffered so immensely. And so when

he spoke, there wasn't a dry eye. He only spoke for about like six minutes and we're all crying. His strength had impressed me, his courage touched me, and his faith challenged me. And I immediately thought of the psalm that says, And I wondered to myself, I want to know his secret. I want to know what Gabe's got. I want to know how he rises up again and again every time he goes to speak and tells a story of those six months of his life that will never ever leave him the same way. I want to know what his secret is. What does Gabe ask himself that he might ask me also in my mind? I want to know Gabe's truth. I want to know how you rise up from being crushed.

So our morning's weekly wisdom, Parshat Tetzaveh, will bring us basically a continuation of all the instructions of the tabernacle, the Mishkan in the desert. But it begins this way, Now you, Moses, command the Israelite people to bring to you that they should take for you pure olive oil, crushed for light, that they might kindle a continual flame in that. This mitzvah, these instructions for the menorah, really not for the menorah, it's for the oil that burned in the menorah, that actually radiated light. The oil had to be pure, that was one thing, it had to be zach. And then the Torah says, katit l'maor, katit l'maor, it has to be crushed l'maor for light.

Rashi, the great medieval exegete, says, He says that the olives had to be crushed not with, right, not with a mill but with your hands, to squeeze them with your hands. Now for the rabbis, of course, the candelabrum, the menorah in the temple wasn't just a symbol of light, it wasn't just a functional thing that would radiate light, it was kind of like, you know, good light in the temple in case you came in in the dark. For the rabbis, the allegory of the tabernacle is at each vessel, each moment is part of their understanding of a human being's service in the world, how we live in the world. And for the rabbis, the candelabrum, the menorah, that seven-branched menorah represents Torah, wisdom. The candelabrum is a representation, a symbol of how we acquire wisdom in the world, the wisdom in the world that we need in order to see our way through the dark, the wisdom we need in the world to wake up in the morning and know how to live, the wisdom we need in the morning to be like Gabe and to get back up again.

And so the rabbis say that we can learn so much about how to live a really good life just from this little moment of what it means to learn Torah and in order to learn Torah, to receive Torah, you have to be able to find fuel that comes from crushed things. The very thing, the fuel that we need, the engine that we have in this world comes to some degree from something that is crushed and then that which is extracted from it is then becomes a fuel for our lives. So how might we learn something? How is Gabe found in this katit l'maor, this crushed for the sake of light?

So the first thing I think that Gabe taught me that morning was that the very experience of being crushed became a vehicle for his own awareness. He recognized that mistakes, horrible, terrible, traumatic mistakes are the way that we learn about the world. Katit l'maor, we are crushed for the sake of light means that the very things that in our lives have brought us low will also be the things that can raise us up. The very things in our lives that we have failed at over and over and over again. The mistakes that we have made, the mistakes that we find ourselves making over and over again become the fuel for our own wisdom. What we can teach the world comes from the things that we have failed at.

The rabbi say, You can't understand and stand under Torah. You can't understand Torah unless you failed at Torah. What would it look like for us to present to our prospective employer our CV of all the times that we screwed up? Nice to meet you. I'm going to do a great job. But before I do a great job and impress you with how well I've reworked my CV, here I'd like to give you all of the times that I have been crushed and rose again. All the times that I made a mistake and what I learned from that because that would tell me a lot more about you than all of the times that you achieved without any effort. All the times that you shone brightly and you made everybody stop and stare. Crushed for light. And Gabe was saying, You know what? There were things I didn't know until this happened. There were things in me that I didn't know I had until this happened.

Unless you think this is not relevant for all of you, I'll tell you something. I think a lot of us who walk in the world and experience suffering I'm feeling crushed or somehow in some way, shape or form broken. We sometimes think these thoughts, I don't know if they're your thoughts, they're sometimes mine, that we think all of our sufferings, all of our pain, our trials, our tribulations, maybe they mean nothing. They might be a proof of an indifferent universe, a universe that doesn't care one bit for those of us living here on this teeny insignificant planet. We might think our day-to-day struggles, our moment-to-moment sufferings, our week-to-week successes and failures, they ultimately don't mean a thing. We might have those thoughts, but guess what, everybody? We don't live those thoughts. We might have those thoughts every now and then, but you and I both know most, if not all of us, don't behave as if nothing matters. No one in this room is saying to themselves, You know what? It's all random. And so whatever happens, it's all good.

So the rabbis say, Crushed for the sake of light means that everything in your life might be grist for the mill, for the wisdom that you are here to teach. So Gabe's question, I think, is, Can I use my suffering to wake up? Can I use the particular things that might be meaningless but really mean so much to me, the things that arrive in my world and that bring me down or that make it difficult Can I, in some way, shape or form, use that as fuel to wake myself up and others up too? And the question then becomes, sorry to step over you here, the question then becomes, for me and for you, the Torah of my life are my experiences. And we can't give Torah, we can't give light until we've been crushed.

I would like to know if there's one human being in this room tonight that can honestly say that they know another human being, not yourself, who didn't, in some way, shape or form, find their nobility, find their strength, their character was informed in the crucible of pain and suffering to some degree. How many of you here, I don't have to show my hands, I venture to guess that if you meet somebody that has never had an ounce of, quote unquote, difficulty in their life, you might think, uh-uh, we'll wait for you to seize them a little bit. We'll wait for you to have a little taste of what it is to be crushed, for you to be disappointed, for you to find yourself fallen and then find your character to stand up again.

בית למעור, crushed, but if we ask the question, why are we being crushed, for the sake of learning, for the sake of wisdom, for the sake of Torah, for the sake of what we might bring forth, that's the question. בית למעור, are you crushed for the sake of the wisdom that you will then offer the world? And so I have a suspicion that that's the way Gabe walked into

that. I have a suspicion that Gabe said, you know what, there's a Torah here that I'm learning that I have to share with the world. There's a Torah that I have to teach.

And if we return to the Urban Dictionary's notion of crushed spirit or soul crushing as when someone gives you something that throws you for a loop and throws your own world view into question, we might ask ourselves, is America, is America a place, a seasoned enough country that learns from its mistakes, a seasoned enough country that knows what it is to be crushed and then to find the light, the love, the lessons for the sake of the future. If suffering is to mean anything, it must mean that you and I extract great fuel for teaching ourselves and others. If we continuously fall in the same place over and over again and never learn anything, כתיית למעור, it wasn't crushed for light, it was crushed and crushed and crushed. For light means that we learn something.

So what is it, perhaps, that we Americans, maybe we Jewish Americans, not just individually and communally, but we Americans need to ask ourselves in order to have a crush. Perhaps what we as Americans have to offer the world is the lessons that we've learned and the light that we've sown and shown and the precious pure oil extracted from our painful history. We know too well the dangers of using language unskillfully. We have been crushed by language and the light that we have to show the world is to say to someone like Ilhan Omar, you can be our ally, but choose your words carefully. We know that Torah and we want to teach it to you. We want to bridge misunderstandings, we want to come across divides, but it will begin by us teaching what we have learned from all of our millennia of being crushed. כתיית למעור.

כתיית למעור, we know too well the dangers of demagogues who expand their power and their control. We know how this begins, we've seen this story somewhere before. We know we have been crushed. למעור for light. So we need to teach that. We need to shout it, we need to sing it, we need to march it, we need to protest it, we need to awaken ourselves and others to that truth. That is כתיית למעור, crushed for the sake of light. One year ago, after the shootings in Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, one year ago, 17 human beings crushed. One year ago, 17 lights snuffed out.

And I find myself in Boca waiting for 1,200, mostly above the age of 60 people to give them my big sermon that I had worked on for weeks and upstepped a young man named Gabe Glassman. And Gabe stood up, he took his crushed soul and his soul crushed. He took the pain and the anguish and frustration and the disbelief and extracted wisdom and shared his wisdom. And as I sat and listened, I was crushed too. But I was also transformed. I saw the world differently.

Gabe crushed it last week. And my soul was crushed too. So let me ask you all tonight, what will you radiate from your hard-earned wounds? What Torah will you extract from your textured pain, from your struggles? In what way will you lift up your crushed soul to soul crush another out of their complacency and out of their stuckness, out of their smug certainties? God is close to those who are brokenhearted. And those with crushed souls will be lifted.

Please rise.