

Shabbat 06 21 19 Sermon

Small things make a difference, and small messages, maybe little teachings from the tradition that illuminate or elucidate a seemingly obscure word can make a whole lot of difference. And I'm just going to highlight one in a moment, but first I got to tell you that, how many people heard of Stephen Wright, the comedian? I'm not going to ask how many people like him, but how many people like Stephen Wright, the comedian? Okay. Stephen Wright, Stephen Wright. So he had a joke, heard recently, said something like, and I don't even know if it's that funny, and you have to say it the way Stephen Wright says it. So I was in school, and I was told that practice makes perfect, and then I was told no one can ever be perfect, so I stopped practicing. There's something about that that is so, like most Stephen Wright jokes, kind of like you take, takes a while for it to drop, right? It's funny, and then you're thinking. So practice makes perfect, that was the first mistake, right? That phrase, practice makes perfect, and because practice makes perfect, but you can't ever be perfect, what's the point of practicing? Or maybe practice doesn't make perfect, maybe practice makes permanent. Maybe practice makes power, maybe practice makes potent. Practice doesn't make perfect, but practice makes proficiency, and with proficiency, presumably, power follows.

There isn't a thing in the world that we don't practice and get better at. Nobody here can name one skill they have that hasn't been honed by repetition, by marinating, whether it's English and language, whether it's cantorial arts, rabbinic arts, whether it's parental art. There isn't a thing that you are good at that you didn't practice. You might say, well, I'm good at being me. Okay, got me. But practice makes proficient, practice makes permanent. Practice is a pre-rec for any skill that we value, that we deem worthy of our time and attention, whether it's art, whether it's your profession, whether it's loving kindness, whether it's sadness and the capacity to hold feelings. Practice is what it takes, and there's a small moment in tomorrow morning's Torah reading where, if you were to go too quickly, you might miss this, and it stuck with me. I remember learning this years ago.

I might have spoken about it here at the shul, at the synagogue over the years, but practice means repetition, so it's good to practice this Torah for a moment. Tomorrow morning's reading will have maybe the most diverse series of topics in any one grouping in the Torah tomorrow morning, and as a rabbi or even as a reader, it kind of hits you so quickly, each and every important moment in the narrative, but I don't even get out of the gate tomorrow morning. The first moment tomorrow morning is a moment that has to do with the menorah, the candelabrum, and in the portable sanctuary in the desert and also in the ultimate sanctuary in Jerusalem, there was a menorah, and the menorah had to be lit by the priests, by the koanim, the descendants of Aaron the priest, and so the parasha tomorrow morning, chapter 8 of the book of Numbers, will begin with instructions on how to light the menorah.

How to light the menorah? And God spoke to Moses saying, speak to Aaron your brother. When you light the candles, make sure all of the candles are facing, this itself is a lot of ink was spilled, what does it mean? It has to face the face of the menorah, the direction of the candles or the wicks. Are they facing the middle column? Are they all facing west or east?

But something about them all facing the face of the menorah, don't hold on to that, we're going to get back to what's before that, but that all of the candles be illuminating.

What strikes the commentators about this instruction is not how odd it is to be given the menorah instructions at this moment in the narrative, what strikes the commentators is not particularly first glance what the menorah symbolizes, what strikes them is the word used by God, by Moses, by the author when instructing the Aaronites, the priests to do lighting, the word used for lighting is not used, but a strange word, a word that becomes the name of the parasha. Can you all say that? A lot of syllables. From the word which means to raise up. What's another Hebrew word for lighting or kindling? The more common Hebrew use for igniting is to light it, but Aaron is told to elevate it, to make it go up, which leads Rashi to say this. Rashi, the medieval exegete, says this phrase that I'll never forget, because the flame is supposed to go up as it is being lit. And also to teach you two things; one, that the priest had to step on a little stool, he himself had to be elevated because he couldn't see over and touch the top of the menorah, so he needed a step stool, an aliyah, a little up; and then this phrase, this is the phrase, to teach us that the priest is to light the candle.

The reason why the Torah, God uses a word that is not usually used to light, the word meaning let it go up, is to teach the one who is to light that lighting it is not enough, that Aaron the priest was there to light it until it caught, until the flame was coming forth from within the candle. It had its own life. One wasn't supposed to just light it and move on. One had to light it and wait until it caught. And when one felt confident enough that one could then walk away from the candle, and that it had its own strength, its own vigor and rigor, it had its own ignition, that was when your work was done.

Had the Torah written just light it, you might have thought okay, light it. I'm lighting up, better go back there, let me light it. I'm supposed to light it, but what if it doesn't catch. You have to keep lighting it until it is lit up. You don't have to be someone with a degree in rabbinics or biblical studies or having studied Torah for a million years to know that every good parent, every good teacher, lights a candle until it lights itself. I don't just teach my kids to brush their teeth, but I hope that when I walk away they will brush on their own. I'm still working on that one. As a teacher I'm not just interested in teaching you Torah, I want to teach so that you will come back to it over and over again, until you are, until you have your own. Until it's burning within you and you want it. There's no value, there's no stage of awareness that doesn't include someone wanting it to be a permanent acquisition. We're not interested in events, we want you to own it until it becomes a part of you. It's your second nature. We want to practice and practice and practice until when we're not there anymore. It's still going and going, the energizer battery. If the only way that we are to engage one another is, as long as I'm there lighting it, lighting it, lighting it, it's until it's olem elah, it comes from within you.

Someone named Jack Engler once said that the purpose of all spiritual work is to turn states of consciousness to traits of character. You come on a Friday night and you have an experience. You come on a Saturday morning and religion to some degree becomes the 50 states. It's a state change, and the deeper invitation of all spiritual work is that as the states, the power of the states are repeated over and over again. Hopefully, those states of rapture, of compassion, of love, of openness, of connection become traits that even when

you're not in shul and you're walking on the streets and you can access a place in you that says, ah, I'm taking my state with me. Because everywhere I go, the shul is all around me. My Abba Amod, everywhere I go, I'm in the sanctuary and can I call it forth. Does the ignition take, can you walk away as a priest and say, ah, that's a fine looking candle.

There's one practice that the world over, over and over again, cross-culturally whether you are in Israel or in Alaska, whether you are in the north, south, east or west, wherever you look to religious and spiritual practices, you will find people sitting and watching the mind. Sitting in silence or movement in tai chi or yoga asanas, the davenin, the world over. Repeated studies and explorations and research show that those who engage in meditation, contemplation, prayer for periods of time and they repeat it and they practice it, they don't become perfect, Stephen writes. They become proficient. They become proficient at knowing how to hold silence, knowing how to feel empathy and compassion, knowing that one breath is really a miracle so that when they read the psalm who says, with every breath I will praise you God, they actually know that.

Four years ago, I began talking with an incredible friend and teacher, a colleague named James Jacobson Meisels and together with two incredible lay leaders here in the Romemu community, Larry Schwartz and Alan Bernstein, we began to conspire, literally to breathe together about what it would look like to birth in Romemu's community a practice center, not for perfect but for permanence, a permanent acquisition of more loving, more compassion, more gentle, more soft, more invitation. It's such a blessing to be here on this Shabbat, the Shabbat before that dream, that yeshiva will finally begin and it is bittersweet that on this Shabbat that we begin that practice, we say goodbye also to an incredible teacher who taught our children daily, daily, daily at Romemu's Seekers Program what it was like to try to ignite kids who have a lot of distractions, a lot of screens, a lot of other things to do and Rabbi Shoshana Leis has been at Roman Mu for three years igniting, igniting, igniting and so many of the children who have been through the Seekers Program at Roman Mu. Their flame has been lit and it is going, going, going. Practice makes proficient, practice keeps the pilot light on and practice in some way invites us into turning states of beauty to traits of character.

I want to bless each and every one of you who is part of the Romemu community. If you're here as a guest, I bless you too but most of all for people who are coming day in and day out, week in and week out, that Romemu is not only a community where you connect with others but where you practice, where you come on a Friday night and you take with you something that you will come back to during the week and then repeat. Practice makes proficient.

May the source of life bless each and every one of us with the desire to practice.

Please rise.

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