

Shabbat 04 13 18 Sermon

You know, it is a remarkable thing. It's a remarkable thing, this thing called being a human. And we talk about this every week. The miracle of being, just navigating our lives day to day, week to week, month to month. It doesn't matter who you are, where you're from. It doesn't matter your socioeconomic status, your marital status. It doesn't matter what app you use for friendship or socializing. It doesn't matter, right, what your flavor of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Baha'ism, Atheism, Agnosticism. It doesn't matter what your ism is. This thing being human is something that we share, navigating our lives. Something that we share. And life is remarkable. At least in my experience. Feel free to disagree. If this is something that you feel strongly about.

It's remarkable in giving us things all at once. Pleasure and pain, hope and despair, joy and sadness. We don't get to choose a period and say, oh, it's going to be happy now and it won't be sad until, well, let's put it in my calendar, it'll come at about... It's kind of like this.

I had an amazing night's sleep last night. For the first time in 10 years. I know, I heard like, whoa! And just as my eyes were beginning to open, I'm beginning to feel like I'm alive again, and my personality, like me, comes back, I wake up. Right? Careful, Wendy. It kind of was like that, actually. Perfect. Because my two-year-old woke me up with a sword metal to the face. No, I know you didn't hear that. I'm sorry, wait a second. A sword to the face. He's two. Things happen and they seem to...

We don't have control over the weather in our lives. Like, it just happens. The famous Yiddish phrase, a mensch tracht un gat laft. Right? We try, we plan, we have all of our project management software for our lives and for our businesses and for our... And then it's like, disruption. It's all going so well, and then disruption...

I remember as a kid loving the story of, I think it was like... I don't remember the name of the football player. People here probably know. Some Minnesota Viking guy who picked up the ball and thought he was picking up a fumble and ran the wrong way. Right? Thurgood Marshall or something. Marshall? Jim Marshall, not Thurgood. And then the Supreme Court Justice is running after... Didn't happen. Things are going great and all of a sudden...

This week's Parsha. Tomorrow morning the Torah talks about this and it tells us a little bit about some good advice on how to work with that. How to work with that reality. That surprise factor. And it gives us some good advice, but it also tells us how not to be with it. Because there's something very deep about the common sense that comes with knowing not only what to do but what not to do. We can know from...

So tomorrow morning, Parshat Shemini. A relatively obscure Parsha. I mean, it's kind of in the middle of the Book of Leviticus. It literally means the eighth day. The Shemini, Vayi Yom HaShemini was the eighth day of the consecration of the tabernacle. The tabernacle took seven days to be installed. And on the eighth day, which should have been called the first day after the seven days of installation, but they call it the eighth day. On the eighth day, the battle star was ready to go. It was ready to be launched.

The tabernacle of the desert, the powerful way station for spiritual mobility in the desert was ready to go. It was all set to be operational. And on the eighth day, Aaron, the priest, is getting ready. And, of course, the tragedy befalls him. Those who don't know, his two sons, Nadav and Avihu, die in a very strange, tragic moment on the very day where they were to launch this long-awaited, this long-for project, something horrible happens. And it was that they brought a strange fire and they were taken.

Many interpretations as to why that was, but if we just acknowledge the power of this moment, this is the height of the Torah. It's almost as if the entire Torah is building up to this moment and then this happens. In fact, there's a rabbinic tradition that in the middle of the story of the sons of Aaron, in the middle of the story of the tragedy, the difficulty, the inexplicable, the unimaginable, in the middle of the story of the sons of Aaron, the Torah comes to the middle point of the entire Torah.

It's in this story. Two words that are identical to each other appear, one after the other, darosh, darash, same letters. And in the middle of the story, in the middle of the Book of Leviticus, in the middle of the Torah, we have a flag that says, this is the first half of the Torah and here's the second half. It splits the Torah in half. As if to say, this is where the Torah is most profoundly speaking to us. This is our life. We have a moment and then boom. We have the heights and then we have the depths.

They come together this past week. Yom HaShoah, the day of Holocaust remembrance, Yom HaZikaron, coming up, the day of Memorial Day in Israel, and the next day, Yom HaAtsmaot, the day of liberation. They came together. The heights and the depths, the depths and the heights, they come together.

And Moses, the great prophet, comes to his brother Aaron after this takes place, in the immediate aftermath of this tragedy, and he says something that I want all of you to never, never, ever do. He is, after all, in a book of law. The Book of Leviticus is about order, not chaos. And now chaos has erupted and he wants to stuff it back in. He wants to stuff the chaos back in. And he comes to his brother and he says, after a couple of moments in the text, he says, hey, I don't mean to bother you, my nephews, your sons, but I just have a question. Why is it that you were, you know, you were supposed to finish the sacrificial offering before that thing happened. Why didn't you do that? Right? If you're reading this, you're thinking, no, don't say that. And he does.

And then this great moment that, I was talking to a friend of mine today and he said, yeah, we often just pass right through it. This is where we get the good advice. Because that's what's not to do. What not to do is to say what Moses said, and I'll get to that in a minute, but here's the response of his brother. His brother says to him, now, if I had done what you say, God, that I should have done, this is Aaron speaking, if I had done what you say I should have done, would that make God happy? Would that have been good? In the eyes of God, you, Moses, you're the prophet. You're the one who knows. You're the one who has the direct lineage. You get it. You're telling me that I should just move on. You're telling me that I should just go forward. Would that make God happy? What a, what a great, read that. Go to your Bibles, read chapter 10 of the book of Leviticus, verse 19, to hear a protest.

As if Aaron is saying, do you think my inner world, do you think my story, do you think my life is in accordance with a book of rules? Is there a pat response to this shock that I should be looking up now? Should I be feeling something? Should I be doing something? Have you given me good advice, Moses? Are you, are you reading the situation? And here's a great moment for both Moses and for Aaron and for us. Verse 20. Vayishma Moshe. And Moses heard. Vayitav be'enav. And it was good in his eyes.

It was good in whose eyes? Moses' eyes? God's eyes? Aaron's eyes? Something good. The same word used in the rhetorical by Aaron, he says, would it be tov to God if I just went on with my life? If I just held this tragedy in the way that you want me to? And then, Moses gets it, and we get it. Life hands us storms that we don't have any schedule for. Life gives us circumstances and struggles and dilemmas and vicissitudes. And invites us to meditate deeply on what is being called forth from us. To ask ourselves a fundamental question.

What is it right now in the midst of this storm that I need to find to get me through? And I can't ask you, and you can't tell me. And the best that we can do for one another, individually, socially, communally, nationally, is to say, what will get me through from point A to point B without the pat answers, without the looking it up, here's the way you did it last time, here's the way you should do it this time. Thank you very much. No. Is this what God wants? God wants us to listen deeply to each and every moment. The Spirit wants us to listen deeply to each and every moment and respond in the unique way that that moment calls forth from us.

I was on the phone with a friend of mine today, a rabbi in California, and I was telling her about a situation, and she said to me, what plank, what are you going to hold on to, she said. There's an unknown in your life, there's an uncertainty, there's something that came at the same moment, something really beautiful came, and now you're holding both of them together but you don't know if you can make it. What are you going to hold on to, she said. What's going to get you through to the other side? I can't tell you, she said, but you know. They know, he knows, because they can tell if you ask them, if you listen. So what do we do when we wake up in the morning and there's a sword on our heads? Well, first of all, you realize, well, that's one way to wake up.

Each of us has that. The things that come into our lives to wake us up in some way, shape, or form. Each of us has those moments, each of us has that by the week, by the month. And we are surrounded by people who come to us and ask us, too, can you help me hold this? And we have a moment where we say to ourselves, you know what, I don't really know. I don't have an answer, I don't know where to look for this answer, but I get it, here's the thing, I can reflect back that you will find what you need to get to the other side. Ha'ita b'nei Adonai, Moses, prophet man? No.

I didn't know Moses could have said, only you know, Aaron. Only you know. So I know that tonight there are people here, you might be sitting next to one of them, you might be one of them, that in your life you might have not a literal sword above your head, you might be feeling that there's something that you're holding that came together with something sweet, something positive, something uplifting.

You might be someone sitting in front of you or behind you or to the side that needs to know that you're going to make it to the other side. That there's a way forward, there's a way through, that it'll be okay, it might be really bad for six months, as my friend Sharon Braus said to me, she said, it could be bad for six months, it could be bad for eight months, but you know at the end you're going to be okay. And what would it be like if at Shabbos tables tonight, after you have a glass of wine and after you eat your first whatever it is, or wherever you are, if someone were to turn to someone and say, well, tell me, maybe you're not there now, but have you ever been to a place where you needed to hold on until you got to the other side and what was it in your life that helped you get to the other side? How often do you go back there? Is there someone in your life that's there now and asks you to help them get to the other side in some way, shape or form? Something.

Because communities that celebrate together are amazing and communities that hold each other and reflect back to each other our innate capacities are incredible. So it's Parshat Shemini and the world tonight and tomorrow will be honoring the power of a man who pushed back and said, your story is not mine, but let me tell you, I need you to wait until I find my way out. So I want to bless all of you tonight.

I bless you, wherever you are, whoever's watching tonight. May you be blessed with the strength of Aaron who knew that there was great grace in saying that's not my story. May you be like Aaron who pushed back and said that's not my narrative, let me find my own narrative. May you be like Aaron in your ability to trust that you will make it through to the other side, wherever that is, but there is a plank, there is something that can hold you even in the most powerfully disruptive waves that might face our lives. May God bless each and every one of us tonight to turn to a friend, to a lover, to a new acquaintance and say in whatever level of intimacy is appropriate, tell me your secret, tell me how you got through that. And may we be blessed and strengthened by that sharing.

Please rise.