

Romemu Shabbat February 17, 2017 Sermon

If I had to choose one of the millions of things that, as a rabbi that I am blessed and obligated to participate in, one of the obligations or one of the roles I officiate or perform, if I had to choose what was the top moment on my list, I think my first thought might be weddings. You know, going to weddings, really beautiful baby namings, super amazing. But I think that edging above those two, I think actually by a long shot, is when I am invited in some way, shape or form to participate in a conversion or a naturalization process where someone chooses to become Jewish. I was blessed this morning to be at the Upper West Side Mikveh, at the ritual bath on the Upper West Side and participating in one of those moments.

A very religious individual who had been brought up as a Christian in a Mormon context, who found his way to New York and having come out, became a part of the Romemu community and then drifted towards orthodoxy, a little bit more traditional, invited me to participate this morning. It was an incredible moment, incredible energy. He had almost a full entourage with us, not just rabbis, but friends. And they brought cake and... strawberries and all kinds of amazing things. And we were singing from the beginning to the end. Singing our song. It was very moving for him because he sacrificed a lot in making this choice. And all choices, we know, mean something is left behind.

And so, as we waited for him in his preparation to go into the ritual bath, we were gathered and singing and kind of setting the container, which is kind of New Age speak for making the place ready with our intentions and our vibrations and our song. And we heard a loud knocking on the door. And... we turned to where there is a separate entrance because we were in the men's mikvah, the men's ritual bath. And once again, we weren't sure, but... we opened the door and there were a group of men who had lined up because Friday morning, it's their ritual to go to the mikvah, go to the ritual bath as an order to prepare themselves for Shabbat. It's a custom that has pretty old roots. It's not law. You're not wrong if you don't do it. It's a wonderfully beautiful way to prepare for Shabbat. And they were waiting and there was a line and they were angry.

And so, here's the scene. About 10 people singing this amazing young man on his way to becoming a Jew, this moment that he's been waiting for for years, jumping through hoops and physical and spiritual and emotional challenges and impediments and all of it to reach to this morning. And we had barely made our way into the ritual room when there was a lineup of traffic and angry members or customers of the ritual bath who pay a yearly annual membership who were going to make their way into the mikvah. We told them we'd be five minutes and they waited. And when we weren't five minutes, because this individual was crying and we were holding the space, the knocking came again. And this time it was in the middle of the moment.

And so, not needing me, because there were so many people, I walked out and I walked over the door and I opened the door and I slammed it behind me and I said, what are you doing? What are you doing?

I'm gonna come back to this story because this story, it leaves me with chills because it also is profoundly happening, not just here in New York and maybe in other places, whatever the lesson of that story is, but it's also happening in our sacred story tomorrow morning. Our sacred story tomorrow morning, which I've already named for you, Yitro, Jethro, J-A-T-H-R-O, Jethro, the Anglicized Yitro. Yitro was the father-in-law of Moses, father-in-law of Moses who is known in the Torah as a Kohen Midyan. He is a high priest of the land of Midyan, Moses' third father. And Yitro, as we're introduced to him, becomes of course the father-in-law to Moses, his daughter Tzipora marries Moshe. And then as the Israelites have left the land of Egypt, they have, right, they've redeemed, they've been freed, they've sung a song, we arrive now at what is the most important moment of the Torah, arguably, because tomorrow morning we're gonna read the 10 utterances, the Aser HaDibrot, the word of God, the moment of radical intimacy between God and human beings, revelation, that which is obscured becomes revealed, that which is yearned for becomes obvious, it's all there.

And we interrupt this very important moment to let you know that Jethro is in the house. That's the way the Torah rolls tomorrow morning. We're almost there and all of a sudden the Torah says, pause, and introduces us, Vayishna Yitro, Kohen Midyan. And Jethro, the high priest of Midyan, heard all that God had done for Moses. He had taken them out of Egypt. Vayikach Yitro, Choten Moshe, Tzipora Eshet, Moshe Achar Shidokha. And so Jethro gets Moses, his wife Tzipora, she hadn't been there, the children hadn't been there, and they gather together and they come looking for Moshe. And they come and arrive where the Israelites have encamped.

Now there are some rabbis who say that this actually is not chronologically correct. This story, they say, is actually happens after the giving of Torah. And it's placed here before the giving of Torah for a number of reasons. Even if you didn't believe that it was given after, it's kind of just there and this is the flow, the same reasons would apply. Apparently, Jethro is, as the Talmud says, rewarded, his reward is great because Jethro was the one who took in the refugee.

Who was the refugee? The palit hanirdaf, who is the refugee who is being chased, the one on the run, Moses. And the way that Jethro took in Moshe, saving him, just like Moshe had been taken in by Pharaoh's daughter, that moment is so profoundly important for the Torah that it has to interrupt this broadcast and let you know that there's somebody who put his life on the line to save Moshe. And for that reason, Moshe has to now receive his father-in-law before he receives Torah. Before Moshe can receive Torah, he has to receive his father-in-law. That's the first reason.

The second reason, it's even simpler. The prerequisite for receiving Torah from God is receiving Torah from another person. The Torah interrupts this synesthesia, this LSD trip that's about to happen where the Jews hear what can be seen and see what can be heard. They interrupt that to let you know that even though supernatural divine revelation is powerful, there's something that is even more important, more primary, more important for the understanding of Jewish mission.

And what it means is that there's this non-Jew who shows up into the camp and tells Moshe, here, I have something to teach you. And Moshe says, oh really? Let me have it.

Before Moshe hears, I am the Lord your God who took you out of Egypt. Before Moshe hears, don't have another God before me. Before Moshe hears, keep Shabbat. Moshe hears his father-in-law giving him advice. And the Torah thinks it's that important. It's that important. It's that important to receive Torah, whatever it is given. From whomever, Kabil Ha'emet Mimish Amiro. It doesn't matter if he's wearing priestly garments. Doesn't matter who's teaching Torah.

Torah comes in many forms. Sometimes you hear it from a mountain and sometimes you hear it from someone who's sitting next to you on the bus. The Torah preempts Mount Sinai to bring you an even more subtle vibration of Torah that comes in the form of Jethro. And for me, maybe the most important reason for Jethro's interruption of song and revelation with his own arrival is to teach us a principle that the rabbis codified in Pirkei Avot, in the ethics of the fathers, in a very pithy and beautiful statement. Derech Eretz Kadma LaTorah. Derech Eretz Kadma LaTorah means the way of the land, literally being a mensch comes before Torah.

Being a mensch comes before Torah. What a radical idea. That there's a Torah that comes in the way that Moses receives his father-in-law with great honor. Torah says that Moshe bows before his father-in-law. He bows before the priest of another tradition and says, You are family. Welcome, dad.

Here we are, all 600,000 men and 3 million men, women and children. We are a nation. We are Jews. But the first thing we do before we receive our Torah is to receive your Torah, Jethro. Jethro has so many names, right? The Torah tells us, the Midrash says that he has 9 different names. Get there, 9 names. He's this shape-shifting individual who comes like Shams to Rumi or like a Chum. He comes and he says, Here I am. Call me what you want, but I'm here to give you something. And from this, the Torah says, and from the Rabbis, Derech Eretz Kadma LaTorah. Or as my father used to say when he was angry, Derech Eretz. Derech Eretz. Be civil. Be a mensch. Is it so hard? Even in a climate as acrimonious and as difficult as we find ourselves in, is it so hard? I've heard reports in the last two weeks that there have been people who supported someone other than Hillary Clinton on the way to the White House, who have come to Romemu and other synagogues and have been looked at differently.

Really? Do they no longer have Tzelem Elohim? We might disagree vociferously. We might be scared and afraid and we may be able to say those things. But what happens when we look at people and we don't see them anymore, but the ideas and the ideology, then where are we? Derech Eretz Kadma LaTorah. Before you receive Torah, turn on your mensch-ometer. That's the litmus test. Because truth without beauty is ugly.

We need both. We need to be able to say what we feel. We need to be able to download what we need to download. We need to be able to fight for what we need to fight for. But we need to also remember always that Derech Eretz Kadma LaTorah. To be a mensch is before Torah. It's its own Torah. I can't tell you how many times I've done funerals for people who ate bacon on Yom Kippur. But one eulogy after another had me crying and saying, what a religious human being. What an amazing, amazing human being. To be able to speak the way that she spoke, the way that he did. Never a word. Never a gossip word. Our work in the world, my work in the world, is to remember at all times what's most

important. And not to allow myself into a place of reactive, hyper-reactivity. Where I lose my makom, I lose my place, I lose my sense of what's right and wrong.

I'm standing on a doorstep and I'm screaming, when do I get into the Mikveh to become more ritually pure for Shabbat as the holiest thing that I've ever been a witness to is taking place. I turned to the man and I said to him, you know, how dare you? Do you know who's in there? He's the high priest. That's the high priest in there. And I wasn't kidding. I wasn't laughing. And he saw that I wasn't laughing. I said, that's the high priest in there. Do you know what he's doing? I said, God is giving him a new soul right now. You want to cleanse yours? Well, he has. Why don't you get a blessing from this young man? Why don't you get a blessing from him? And he was angry with me. Closed the door. We went back in.

We cried. We danced. And then we opened the door and he came down and he saw what was going on. Oh, he saw what was going on. He saw what was going on. It was in the house. It was palpable. It was thick. It was holy. It was real. And I looked at him and I smiled. And then I held out my hands and we all started dancing and he smiled too. And he got it. I know he got it. He got derech eretz kadmalah torah.

God, is it not possible for us to reach across divisions? Is it not possible for us? Well, you know what? In my shul devorah, I'm saying we can. And you can have your own opinion. And anybody here can have your own opinion. But in this shul, and this is important tonight too. In this shul, that I started with a drum by myself over here with three people in the room. In this shul, we will balance protest with rest. We will balance awareness of what needs to be done with how we need to do it. We will balance in this shul, a focus on Shabbat as restive and restorative and Shabbat as redemptive and a political moment because Shabbat is both. We don't just come to shul to feel good because we sing, but we come to shul to wake up.

And as long as liberal Jewish communities come once a week to shul, they will have to get all of that in one 20 minute sermon. They will have to get both the arm of truth and the breath of love in all its entirety because we can't, we can't come into shul and say, you know what, whatever's happening in the world, as long as we're blessed out and we're okay, it's all good, yeah. And we can't go all the time. We can't go all the time. We need, we need all of it. So here's my message tonight.

It is really, really possible if we talk the right way to move from anger to dancing, not with everyone, not with you, not all the time, but if we maintain a level of civility and we honor what is good, what is true. When Martin Luther King was marching, he would always tell his people, justice and protest is trying to remove everything that gets in the way of love. Let's go straight to love.

We're here. Look around this room at all these amazing people. You don't have any idea what they think. You don't have any idea what their ideology is. And tonight, look around. Each and every one of them want love. Each and every one of them want meaning. Each and every one of them want purpose. Each and every one of them want to be known. We gotta do this dance together, everybody. It's a one-two. But if we step together, it's a dance that will save us.
Please rise.