

Romemu Shabbat April 07, 2017 Sermon

So I want to talk tonight about something that I wish I had known back in 1982. Back in 1982 when the Parsha, the weekly wisdom that we'll read tomorrow morning coincided as well with the great Sabbath, the Shabbat HaGadol, the Sabbath that precedes Passover, which happened to be my Bar Mitzvah. And I wish I had known this, I wish that I could have given this Torah over back then, but I want to give it tonight.

And I want to connect a little bit with you around the theme that we began last week, which was about connection itself, about what it is to connect with people above principles and loves above lines. What it might look like connection when connection is paramount. And not just when connection is paramount, but when a certain mindset, which is Gedulah, which is greatness, when that is present.

Maybe give us some food for thought for the Passover Seder. But first I want to start with the Parsha tomorrow morning. The Parsha tomorrow morning is Parashat Tzav, which is the beginning of the instructions that Moses gives.

Parashat Tzav, which is the beginning of the instructions that... ...has to come and scoop the ashes, place them here by the side of the altar. And then the Torah tells us, And let him then strip his clothing and wear new clothing, clean clothing. Let him then take it out of the camp.

Now a couple of years ago when I talked about this, I talked about the Hasidic insight, the Hasidic masters who masterfully lifted up this verse and read it not as a local verse having to do with a time or a moment in Jewish history which most of us I would imagine don't want to return to, when the sacrificial order was the way that we prayed, where it was about animal sacrifice. But the Hasidic masters lift this up and say, the point is of course to lift up ashes. You can imagine where they go, mystically, spiritually. The point is to lift up the things that are destroyed, the things that have been in some way deconstructed and find some way to elevate them. That's their psycho-spiritual read.

But I want to read it tonight a little bit differently than I did then. I wanted to say how amazing it is that the Torah tells us about a change of clothing for the Koan. The Koan, the priest is engaged in cleaning up the altar and the Torah says, set instructions, let him now change clothing and have new clothing on to take the ashes out. So one moment is taking the ashes, getting dirty, putting them by the side of the altar and then I'll take the ashes, clean yourself off, get new clothing on.

What a profound Torah that is, alone. The rabbis comment on the reason for the change of clothing, why the priest says to change clothing, of course it's not appropriate to come, they say, dirty to the king. But without getting into that, how amazing is it to know that that the spiritual life is dirty and messy. How truthful, how honest it is to hear the Torah telling us that if you want to do the holy work in the world, you're going to have to get messy. You're going to have to change your clothing a couple of times, maybe 5, 6, 10, 20, 30 times. Maybe you'll have to come back and forth. Maybe you thought getting into a spiritual practice is going to clean up your life. Maybe you thought as Rav Nachman of Breslov taught

in one of his Torahs, that you begin the spiritual path and it's going to be all roses. And here it is, you are schmutzed from head to toe.

This is what I got myself into, the koan is saying, I could have been a doctor. And we say, no, if you were a doctor, it would be even messier, right? This insight is profoundly simple yet, and obvious, but deep insight, that the spiritual life is, part of it at least, part of it is that we get messy. That life is messy. That the Buddha said life is suffering. We know that to be the case in our experience. We know that to be the case, it makes sense.

And it has profound implications for Passover itself, and the seder, and the Haggadah, and the way that we tell the story on Passover. And profound implications for the meaning behind the name we give this Shabbat, Shabbat HaGadol, the Great Shabbat. Tomorrow morning in the Haftorah, which is the prophetic reading, we'll read from the last of the Jewish prophets named Malachi.

I remember as a little kid reading this in that little shul in Jerusalem, in Yimin Moshe, in the artist colony on some Saturday morning, dressed in my finest, my brother, my voice cracking from my adenoid issue, and my brother, my twin brother, reading it above in the main sanctuary. I was downstairs in a smaller grouping as twins. We had to split the Haftorah. And I will never forget these words. The words that are the last words of the entire Bible, according to the Jewish people, the Hebrew Bible. הנה אנוכי שולח לכם את אליה הנביא לפני ב. יום השם הגדול והנורא. Behold, I will send to you, the prophet Malachi says, Elijah the prophet, who will usher in, will be the harbinger for Yom HaGadol, the great day. The day that is Gadol, great. Some say that's the reason why we call this Shabbat HaGadol, because it has a prophetic vision of a Gadol day, a day that is great. The Shabbat HaGadol reads Malachi's vision of a universe that will be one day Gadol, great. And then the Torah says, וְהָשִׁיב לִבָּאֲבוֹת וְהָשִׁיב לִבָּאֲבוֹת וְהָשִׁיב לִבָּאֲבוֹת וְהָשִׁיב לִבָּאֲבוֹת. And in that day, says the prophet Malachi, I will return hearts of children to parents and the hearts of parents to children. I will unify generations.

That's the last verse of the Hebrew Bible. Did you get that? I want something else. I want fireworks. I want something bigger. I want a bigger vision. But the vision of Elijah, the prophet is, there will come a day and I will make it a great day. And you know how I know it's going to be great? Because it's going to be great. וְהָשִׁיב לִבָּאֲבוֹת וְהָשִׁיב לִבָּאֲבוֹת וְהָשִׁיב לִבָּאֲבוֹת וְהָשִׁיב לִבָּאֲבוֹת. I will return the hearts of children to parents and parents to children. There will be a generational reproach. There will be harmony once again.

That is Gadol. That is great. It's hard not to think at that moment about, The primary mitzvah of Passover. The primary mitzvah, the primary practice of Passover, is to teach your children well. So they can tell. The word Haggadah, you can hear Gadol in it. The ability to tell a story that holds multiple pieces. The capacity to tell a story that will unify and harmonize parents and children and children and parents. The ability to have Gedulah is when we are able to hold tension between what is messy and what is clean in one place.

Parker Palmer, in a teaching that we're going to explore tomorrow, writes five basic teachings for democratic revitalization. He says, An ability to hold tension in life-giving ways is lesson number three. The ability to hold tension in life-giving ways. He writes, Our lives are filled with contradictions. The gap between our aspirations, our behavior, observations and insights, we can't abide because they run counter to our convictions. But when we

allow our tensions to expand the heart, we can open to a new understanding of ourselves and the world.

The genius of the human heart lies in its capacity to use tensions to generate insight and energy and new life. Yom Haggadol says the Prophet Malachi will be when parents and children can get together and hold each other in each one's vision of the way the world should be. That's what gadol means, that's what it means to be great. The word in Hebrew for child, katan, is from the Hebrew word keta, which means a little piece, something that's cut, something that is nikta or katua. Didula means I can hold the light and the dark, I can hold the healthy and the unhealthy, the functional and the dysfunctional, I can hold all of it together. That's what Passover models for us.

We don't begin our seders on Monday night with a resume of all the amazing things the Jewish people have done and have been and will be. We begin every seder for 2,000 years from the time that the rabbis in the 2nd century created the seders with mignut l'shevach. We begin with shmutz. We begin with the messiness. We were slaves. Maybe we were idolaters according to another opinion of the Talmud. We don't start our story with it was all roses. We get ourselves messy on seder night. And I'm not just talking about meeting family. I'll come to that in a second. But we acknowledge, right? You're with me here? We acknowledge that to be gadolim, to be adults, means to hold the story on both sides. To be able to hear the things that aren't working as well as the things that are working. We acknowledge that unless we acknowledge that things are broken, they won't get better. We begin the seder with holding up a whole matzah and nothing but the matzah, so help you matzah. And then we do something radical. We should keep it whole because we arrived. It's a good moment. There's that perfect square or round, depending on whom you are, perfect matzah. So delicate. So beautiful.

And then we break it. And we're not allowed to start telling the story on Passover until we break that matzah. It's broken. Everybody knows it. It was broken. It's still partially broken. And we're not gonna get over here until we acknowledge what is, is. Until we get ourselves enough courage, enough of the spiritual vitamins we need to get ourselves into what's messy.

I don't know about you guys, but I'll tell you something. When I go home to my family, I can write a 10-page letter that would describe everything to my family that I just saw and I want to send it every year. Anybody else have that experience? Maybe three people? Maybe four? Maybe all of you? Maybe one? You see things and you say, you know what? If I write it now, then it'll change. And then a week goes by and you don't write it. You're sitting with your mother, you're sitting with your father, you're sitting with your child. You say, you know what? Let me finally articulate what I've wanted to say for 25 years. Let me finally connect with that person and say that it's broken or it's broken in this way. And I got to do it now because I know and I know. And then, life happens.

The Haggadah is a Haggadol. It's about adults. It's about adult mind. Mochin digadlut. A mind that can hold nuance. A mind that can hold mess. And then make it mesudar. And then now organize it. It doesn't matter what community you belong to or where you go now in America or in Israel or wherever Jews gather. You cannot find anyone that will not acknowledge that where we are now in the Jewish world is messy. Whether it's the issue of

Israel and Palestine. Whether it's the issue of here with what is happening in our country. Whatever the issue is, there's a yearning to be small. To be tanim, to be children. To make it all good or all bad. Passover doesn't begin with a story that is easy. It's not like we arrive and we say, when do we eat? And by the way, aren't we free? Isn't it great? Freedom is a journey. Freedom is a continuum. Freedom is a spectrum. Freedom is something that we yearn for, that we fight for, that we work towards. And the Torah tells us tomorrow morning, both in the Parsha and then in the Haftarah, it says, start with the mess.

The Zen paradox is that nothing changes until it becomes what it is. Nothing changes until it becomes what it already is. So wherever this finds you, tonight and tomorrow, and on our journey towards freedom on Monday night and the seders, I implore each and every one of you in your own personal work, in the work of the community, in the work at large, in your families, in this country, we need a respite from everything that's happened. But it doesn't stop us from saying what's broken needs to be fixed and being able to hold that truth. Being able to get messy.

Ve'hirim et ha'deshen, lifting up the ashes, getting ourselves dirty. Have a great Pesach, everybody. Please rise.