

Romemu Dvar Torah Jan 1, 2016

Shana Tova. This High Holiday Sermon is brought to you by the Gregorian calendar, thank you. We finished the book of Genesis, we finished B'reishith, and for 12 weeks during the book of B'reishith, we discussed fundamental principles of leadership, of life.

I mean, what's the Torah other than Eitzchayim? It's a tree of life, right? Which is another way of saying, as the Zohar says, Etan tabin, good Eitzah, Eitzah Tova. Eitzah Tova, Melefanacha, good advice. 12 weeks, 12 pieces of good advice.

We disclosed, we discussed the most important word in Genesis, in B'reishith, the word Achi, remember that, Achi? Achi, brother? Remember that the Torah of Genesis is the Torah of an unanswered question by Cain, that God doesn't answer but leaves hovering above the book, as my friend Rabbi Sharon Braus says, HaShomer Achi Anochi, am I my brother's keeper? And nobody answers until maybe Yehuda, until Judah says, Anochi ha'ervenu miyadi tevakshenu, Im lo avienu eylecha vechatati becha kol hayamim. Judah, the hero of Genesis says, all of the brothers together now, no one left out. We move from the book of Genesis and the book of familial dysfunction and functionality to the book of Shemot.

And what I'm saying tonight is important, so I really appreciate if we can have the kids playing in the back, it's great, let them make noise, but just so we can focus, because it's not anybody's fault. They're kids, we gotta look at them, right guys? How can I not look at you? Yummy little people. I have a vision of like, you know, the kid catcher from Chitty Chitty Bang Bang. Come here, little kiddies.

So we move from the book of responsibility and familial inclusivity to the book of Shemot, to the book of names, and ironically, of course, the book of Shemot, which means names, not exodus, Sefer HaPikudim, the Sefer HaGulah, excuse me, Sefer HaGulah, the book of redemption, has no names. The book of Shemot, the book of names, begins with no names.

The fertility, the fecundity, the procreativity of the Jewish people is alluded to by yifetzu vayirbu v'yatsmu b'maod maod v'atim alai arzo sam. There are thousands of them, says the Midrash. Each woman gave birth to 600,000 babies.

What an image that is, huh? Not one name. And then the most amazing moment in the book, maybe, vayyei lech ishmi bet levi, there was an unnamed person who goes and connects and lies with a woman, with an unnamed woman, and they have a child, and this child becomes, of course, the one who is unnamed until he is found and named by his adopted mother. This whole amazing story of the savior of the Jewish people called Moshe, whose name, literally, Moshe, is the letters Hashem, the name.

The one with the name in the book of names who comes from the nameless, anonymous ones who do what needs to be done in order to create justice. Thank you, Abe. The savior of the Jewish people is an adopted child of the daughter of Qaddafi.

The savior of the Jewish people is an adopted child of a non-Jewish king who wanted to destroy and genocide all of the Jews. Growing up in a house where his father, his adopted

father, wanted to kill his own family. He is the adopted one who is chosen, the scorned child, as it were, the one who is left, who grows up to be the hero.

Can't imagine the tension in Moshe's personality. I was watching a documentary about Steve Jobs last night. What else do you do on New Year's Eve? When do you have two small children? And one of the most poignant moments of Steve Jobs' biography is when his parents, when he realized that he had been an adopted child, and he came home screaming to his parents and said, you didn't tell me that I was adopted.

And he said, no, no, no, you don't understand. We chose you. And he lived his whole life, said his biographers, with the sense that he had been both abandoned and marginalized, was on the outside, but yet he was special.

Sounds like a whole tribe to me. Marginalized and on the outside and yet special. This amazing savior grows up by the graces of a woman who was willing to be civilly disobedient to her own father.

At risk of her own death, she was willing to take in this Hebrew child. What might have been in her mind that she was willing to sacrifice for this? We can imagine so many other Hebrew children thrown into the Nile, but this one, she sees. And the women of the beginning of the book are so full of civil disobedience.

Shifra and Pua, the maidservants who were refusing to listen to the edict of Pharaoh, and then of course, this incredible woman, Basia or Batia, the daughter of Pharaoh, who becomes the daughter of God. All of this happening for Moshe, and in less than three verses, he grows up. In two verses, Moshe goes from being the adopted, scorned, yet chosen child.

Va'ida la'yeled, va'igamal, and he's older. And then out of nowhere, just like the story of the Genesis Abraham, who is called from nowhere, Lech Lecha, something in Moses awakens, Va'yitzay el echav. That same word, achi, from Genesis, reappears in chapter three of the book of Exodus, and he went out to his brothers.

This leader knows where his brothers are, even though he's never grown up with them. He's got an inner GPS for his brothers. Va'yar b'siv lo'tam, and he saw their suffering.

This is the introduction to the great leadership of Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses, our teacher, someone who is motivated. Moshe is motivated by his identification with the suffering of his brothers and sisters. This bodhisattva, this great, illumined, compassionate being, himself scorned, yet chosen, identifies and leaves a place of absolute beautiful chosenness.

The first Yitzi'ah of Yitzi'at Mitzrayim, the first Exodus of Exodus, is when Moses exodus the house of privilege to identify with those who have, who don't, who suffer. Moshe himself is personification of Exodus. He embodies the willingness to identify with suffering and release, and it doesn't end.

Moshe is caught, as we know in the story, and he runs, he escapes, he flees, he's on the move, he's a fugitive, he goes to the land of Midian, and in Midian, in the land of Midian, he really becomes a Jedi Knight. Then he goes to Midian, and he studies with Yeter, or Yitro, he

marries his daughter, and he has a nice, good flock of sheep, and that's where he's gonna live. Even though he went out to his brothers, he pulled back, he ran away, it was scary, he was terrified, he was playing out on the margins, the only Jew to ever actually, literally, Exodus comes, right, he's hanging out in limbo.

And then this moment that Rabbi Jessica quoted from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's beautiful poem, he is, in the language of the Torah, he's just going along one day, hanging out in the Midbar. And all of a sudden, Vayer alav Adonai, he has a visitation, in a sneh, in a burning bush, and he says these words. Vayomer Moshe, Moshe says out loud, Asura na ve'ereh, Madu alayif ar hasneh, he says, I'm gonna go see why this bush is not burning.

Those of you who wanna do a little parenthetical work in your dissertation, the usage of vision in the book of Genesis, and the use of vision in the beginning of the book of Exodus, in the book of Genesis, when people see, and they see wrong, they're morally and ethically compromised, in the book of Exodus, when you see, what you see, how you see it, Vayar, he saw, here he sees the sneh, he sees the burning bush, and then God says, I will show myself to you, kisar li rot, because you turned to see. The Ramban, Moshe ben Nachman, Nachmanri says, what happened that day? It's clear from the text that that burning bush was there 24-7 for many decades. Moshe must have walked along that street maybe 1,000 times, he must have gone to that restaurant maybe 2,500 times.

There must have been other Moseses, Davids, Avis, Karens, there should have been many people who stopped to look at this incredibly profound phenomena of a burning bush that would not be consumed. There must have been thousands, they could have set up a whole tourist attraction, they could have sold tickets to this burning bush, you see, here's a burning bush, it won't burn. We'll come for New Year's.

Says the Ramban, Moshe was unique, Moshe, because Moshe knew what it was to leave privilege, he knew what it was to be distracted by what didn't make sense to him, and so it was alive in him, and he said, oh no, no, I saw another area, this doesn't make sense to me. A great attribute of a leader is that something, something that bothers them, it hovers. It can't sleep, it can't make sense of it.

And then God says to him, stand there, sha'al na'alecha me'al raglecha, take off your shoes for the land you're standing in this holy ground, you're standing in this holy ground. It's all of one piece, says the Kedusha Slavey, the Berditcha Redravi says, it's all one piece. The way of the bodhisattvas, of the human beings who aspire to evolve in consciousness is that they are willing to acknowledge that deep spiritual work is being able to notice what was always there right before our eyes, that which we habituate ourselves not to see, not to look at, not to be distracted by, not to be taken off our paths, for they stand in ground that was always there and acknowledge here in this bush there is a burning phenomenon.

And leaders, each and every one of us, are called upon by the Torah says the Berditcha Ver, to live with hearts and eyes that notice what is before us, that are awake to the miracle of the present moment. Leadership is tough. I had an experience this week that I alluded to last weekend that reminded me of how tough it is to be one who steps out of a place of privilege and out of a place where the habitual had blinded me to what was before me.

Last Friday evening, I spoke in cryptic terms about an individual who was once a modern Orthodox rabbi who had gone off the way as it were. He always really gone off the way. He was a severely psychologically damaged individual.

His name was Marc Gafni. Marc Gafni's appeared in the New York Times last Saturday morning. And this week, I began a petition which was signed and now is signed by almost 2,000 individuals in order to awaken us to the dangers of this individual's teachings, this individual's way in the world.

But I had known about him for 11 years. And every time I thought to myself, you know, I'm gonna speak out about this guy, I got scared. And you can imagine how scared some of his victims were.

Men and women who had studied with him for 35 years, when they would be approached by a reporter or by a rabbi and asked, will you speak out about your experience? They said, no, we can't. We wanna go on with our lives. You see, he takes all of the energy out of your life.

You wind up being on Facebook and on email. He wants to survive, that's his way. And so in decade after decade, as this teacher made his way through the Jewish world and then eventually now into the new age world, people didn't speak about what their experience was.

And that gave him power. You see, he had emails about consensual adult relationships, emails that would maybe put people not in the best light and people were afraid. God forbid I should be known as someone who was seduced by this person.

And the reality is that a burning bush was there. It was a phenomenon that needed to be seen and habituation, fear, all of it held us in check. And so this week, a lot of very courageous people spoke up.

This week, a lot of very holy people, a lot of holy people said, we're gonna go out of our little privileged place and we're gonna stand up for our brothers and our sisters mostly who had been wounded. That's leadership. Leadership is, it's not comfortable, but I have to do it.

Leadership is—I can't remain aloof when others are suffering. And all of us are leaders, all of us. Not me standing here and not rabbis and not priests and not imams and not presidents.

All of us can do the things that are difficult because we each have a little mo in us. So in the end, how do we know if our motivation is the right motivation? How do you know if you're acting for the sake of the holy, for the holy ground that you stand on? If you are motivated by suffering, if your motivation is to alleviate your own or others' suffering, then you're with mo. Yeah, does that make sense? You're with Moshe every time you see a burning bush and you say, as Rashi says, the burning bush is God saying, even in suffering, I'm with you.

Imo anochi b'tzara, imo, imo, I'm with you. That's my motivation, to be imo, to be with you. So I wanna bless each and every one of you here on the beginning of the book of freedom to be Moshe.

Be like mo, be like mo. If you feel it, if you connect with it, take a chance. Take a step out and towards the pain, towards the suffering, trust your heart.

And don't forget that if you had eyes to see and all of us have eyes to see, the place we're standing in is holy ground. Please rise.