

Romemu Shabbat February 10, 2107 Sermon

Special Shabbat is Shabbat. Special Shabbat. We have the very talented team of rabbis and educators from Hebrew College, rabbinical students, colleagues, good friends, and of course, as Rabbi Jessica mentioned, her alma mater, rabbinical school.

Great to have them here. It's a special Shabbat because tomorrow morning we'll read Parshat Beshalach. V'hi Beshalach parot ha'am.

Parshat Beshalach is the reading from the book of Exodus, where the Israelites finally cross over, really cross through. They finally leave the evil Egypt behind and break out of the most famous, in the most famous biblical poem slash song, the az yashir, what is known as shirat hayang, the song from the sea, of the sea, in the sea, the sea song, shirat hayang. The entire Shabbat is special because that poem slash song is so important that the Shabbat is called Shabbat shira, the Shabbat of song, that great song.

Important Shabbat. And if we want to add, let's add another special moment of Shabbat, it's also Rosh Hashanah tonight. Y'all have heard of Rosh Hashanah l'Ilanot, right? The new year for trees. Tonight is the new year for trees. Jewish Arbor Day, known as Tu B'Shvat, the 15th day of the month of Shvat. Chag l'Ilanot. Tu B'Shvat yigiyah. Chag l'Ilanot. It is Tu B'Shvat tonight.

So we have it all going on. A trifecta of goodness. As I also mentioned, this weekend is special because on Sunday we'll be launching a yeshiva. In a nascent form, a seed will be planted here in this community for a yeshiva, for an institution of higher learning devoted to love of the divine, love of presence, spirit. A spirit school. So one of the core teachings though, if we focus on Shabbat shira and the Shabbat of the song, is that one of the deepest pedagogical moments in Jewish history is the rabbis telling us b'chol dor vador chayav adam lir'ot et atzmo ki ilu hu yatsa mi mitzrayim.

Two years ago on the first, and now I understand, only Hebrew College Shabbaton, some of you might remember that we spent an entire Yom Iyun. Part of the Yom Iyun was spent just understanding what it meant to imagine yourself as if you literally left Egypt. Chayav adam lir'ot et atzmo. Like you left Egypt. Each and every one of us is enjoined to experience that in our flesh, in our own bones. It wasn't something happened in the past, a historical event. It's something that's happening right here, right now. Or as Michael Walter wrote, Egypt wasn't once. Egypt is everywhere always. And if there's one lesson of Egypt, it is its perennial demands upon our conscience as Jews and as human beings.

Chayav. Obligated are we. Chayav. We have an obligation to see ourselves. And so I have to say, yatsati yidei chavati I feel as though I experienced what it is to fulfill that obligation in my own experience, my own body, in the most real way in my life. This past week.

This past week was a profound event for me. And I just want to begin by saying that it happened simply. For most of us walking down Broadway, I'm sure for many of you, or any street for that matter in New York City, it's an interesting experience in public anonymity, right? You're surrounded by noise and insulated by silence. Very rarely do you see people just walking down the street, chanting or yelling. Or if you do, you've learned to tune them

out. It's very rare that someone pierces our gate with a yelp or a chant. But on Monday night, that's exactly what I did, we did. About 250 rabbinical colleagues and friends, we found ourselves out on the streets of Broadway. It happened because the Chua, an organization devoted to human rights, was convening a conference Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday at B'nai Jeshurun for rabbis to work with what's happening now in this country, where we are. And I had planned to go with the other parts of the clergy team. Rabbi Jessica was there and teaching along with Rabbi Josh Buchan. And I was planning to come and to participate. And when I arrived, I was told that there would be an action that night. I was told there would be an action. And that I had been asked, amongst 18 other rabbis, to participate in an action of civil disobedience.

And so it's not the first time I had been asked. It's not the first time that I had contemplated a sit-in of some kind. And the moment showed up. And they gave me about a half hour to make a decision. I had to make sure with my wife that date night could be postponed. So I ran home the two blocks to drop off all of my stuff. And I had to be very careful not to mention to my boys that I might be in prison that night. But they were curious because I was leaving everything behind. I wasn't allowed to bring anything, no shoelaces, nothing, no keys. When I told my wife to make sure not to lock the bottom lock because I won't have my keys, my little boy Tal promptly ran out and wanted to give me his keys.

I said, Abba, don't go without your keys. I had to leave them with the doorman. And I made sure as I was leaving, as a good rabbi I have a lot of different prayer shawls for different occasions. And I chose the one that my father gave to me, the one that he used to wear when he would hold his two sons under his talit. I needed protection, I thought. I thought I needed walls, a sukkah wall of talit, of energy, of the prayer shawl.

So we left and we started marching down Broadway to the tune of, this is what theology looks like. This is what theology looks like. This is what prayer looks like. This is what justice looks like. This is what leadership looks like. I was learning, I was watching, I was imbibing, I was buoyed. And one couldn't, I couldn't, I couldn't but notice the walls of people that had lined up on both sides. Here we were, a group of rabbis and others were marching down Broadway. And on our left we had a police escort.

And on our right, all the people that were coming out of the stores and were waving and saying, go, go. On our right and on our left, as we went through on this march, this protest, this voicing, this simple act of not being silent, of nevertheless persisting to speak, to say it, to name it. And there we were, until we arrived at our final destination.

I'll get to that in a moment, but I want to get back to the walls, because the walls were so profound for me, and it reminded me of a moment tomorrow morning in the Shirat HaYam, the Song of the Sea, that exultant moment. Before the Israelites spontaneously erupt in song, there is a verse that is repeated twice for no good reason. We're not going to go into it now, but here's the verse. With important differences in the verse, but... וַיִּבּוּ בְּנֵי יִסְרָאֵל בְּתוֹךְ הַיָּם And the Israelites went into the water, kum land, dry land, וַהֲמַיִם לָהֶם חֹמָה And the water was for them a wall. וַהֲמַיִם, water, וַהֲמַיִם לָהֶם חֹמָה became a חֹמָה Can y'all say that? חֹמָה A lot of talk of walls these days. וַהֲמַיִם לָהֶם חֹמָה There was a חֹמָה, there was a wall on each side of the made of water.

It was a water wall. And there's a kind of unique way that we sing that tomorrow morning. I want us to sing this together. So I'll do the first part, then we'll just divide. Okay, ready? It goes like this. When every reader gets to this moment, they go into a beautiful little sing song. It goes, **וְהַיְמִין לַהֵם חֻמָּה מִי מִנֶּם וְאִי שְׂמֹלֶם** Can you just do the right and left? **מִי מִנֶּם** **וְאִי שְׂמֹלֶם** So the right and the left. The wall of water on each side protecting the Israelites as they went through. I couldn't help but think, and this is in honor of Rabbi Art Green and Rabbi Nehem Yapol and teachers and friends and the Hasidic tradition in the Kabbalah.

The right is chesed, loving kindness, expansion. The left is always constriction or coming back, passivity, interior, one extends, one intends. These two, right and left in Kabbalah become markers of a balanced world. To balance the right and the left. To balance the right and the left. So if the right is activism, if the right is marching, if the right is protesting, if the right is strength, if the right moves from here to there, if the right is a series of resources and actions that friends and members like Devorah Stoll and others have been saying, when is Romemu going to be active? Let's get out there. Let's make a difference. Let's use our voices. That's **מִמֶּנֶם**. Can we say that? **מִמֶּנֶם**. Can we sing it? **מִמֶּנֶם מִמֶּנֶם מִמֶּנֶם** That's showing up on Sunday for Chaias, for the refugees. That's the work of strength and extension.

But there's the left. **אִי שְׂמֹלֶם** Can you say that? **אִי שְׂמֹלֶם** There's the deep work of pruning our egos. There's the deep work of not just being an activist but being someone who cultivates love. Someone who cultivates the natural accretions of self-righteousness and anger and various elements that might be important in **מִמֶּנֶם**. But if they're not cared for, they can become very dangerous. Activism can become rage.

There's a certain way of marching that others... My dear friend Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum who was marching with us, she said, no matter what happens tonight, there are no others. There's just love that hasn't yet reached. Love that just hasn't yet reached people. And we're standing up for love. And the right and the left come together. That right wall of activism and that left wall of love form together the necessary ingredients for making our way through. For making our way. Raising our voices and protesting and interior work, interior design. On Sunday we'll be launching a yeshiva that is not marching, but sitting.

Sitting and cultivating. **וּמִשְׂמֹלֶם מִמֶּנֶם וּמִשְׂמֹלֶם** So I wanted to talk about walls. But I also want to talk about carobs. Because Tu B'Shvat, Tu B'Shvat, the holiday of trees, as a kid I remember more than anything eating carob. Or I should say buxor. Or I should say not eating it. Because it smelled and it was hard. Carobs are eaten on Tu B'Shvat tonight and tomorrow. As part of a ritual of remembering the trees during the winter when nothing yet has bloomed. During the winter when everything around is not yet fertile. One of the reasons given for that is that the name for carob, **חֲרוֹב**, is the same as the word for destruction, **חֲרָבָה**, or **חֲרָבָן**.

The carob reminds us, says the Lubavitcher Rebbe and the Nazir, Rabbi David Cohen, that it takes 70 years for a carob tree to grow. 70 years for a carob tree to grow means that we plant and we cultivate even though we don't see fruits for 70 years. Even though the future is what we are working towards. And the word for carob in an odd way appears right before the verse about the walls of water. Verse 22, **וַיַּסֵּךְ אֶת הַיָּם לְחֲרָבָה** And God made the water a **חֲרָבָה** dry. Maybe God made the water into a carob. Maybe God said that the entire way

with the wall of love on the left and the wall of activism on the right will only work if you recognize that the whole path of dry land is one step at a time. And that Exodus began in Egypt but isn't yet done because it takes 70 generations, 700 years. It takes time, it takes effort, it takes continuously being willing to go to the right and to the left and to calibrate our balance with our perseverance, our persistence. Nevertheless, we persist.

So we arrived in front of Trump International Hotel and the rabbis made two walls and gave us a blue blanket to symbolize the waters and we started walking into the middle of the street בתוך הים בחֲרָבָה We went into the חֲרָבָה We went into the dry land that represents that we're not yet there. And we sat down. And I was scared. I was scared but I recognized, and I think all of us there recognized, that it's going to take two kinds of sitting, two kinds of yeshiva for us to go forward. The yeshiva that is the right wall of activism. Sitting down, stopping the flow because we're not there yet everybody. You go on with your life but we're not there yet. It began over there and we gotta make it over here but we're still stuck over there so we sit down. There's a yeshiva right there.

We sat. Adonai l'mabul yashav We sat. And then there's the yeshiva of cultivating love, of cultivating compassion, cultivating and pruning. And so as we sat, we began to sing O ziv zimrat yah One of the most important songs of that spontaneous combustion of song of the Israelites. O ziv zimrat yah. My strength, my right arm and my zimrat yah and my left arm. The pruning of my mind to love and justice love and justice love and justice and carobs. It's gonna take a long time but we're not going anywhere because until everyone is free the exodus is still going on. And I speak that tonight knowing full well that you don't have to get arrested to do this work.

I understand full well that there are those who are protesting and marching on both sides of every aisle who are looking out at a world that they don't recognize any longer and asking Is it a kharava? Is it destroyed? I recognize that 250 rabbis, most of us white, not all men, 11 women and 8 men but all of us, middle class, privileged, treated with dignity. None of the things we feared the most came true but we know that that isn't the truth for the majority of those who we are marching for. O ziv zimrat yah vay'hi l'lishuah My right, my left, my balancing, my walls of love and justice love and justice and my patience and persistence those are the ingredients together.

So I tell you, I came home at 1.30, I went to bed at 3 and at 7 in the morning my boys somehow knew that I had been arrested. And so they came in Abba, you were really in jail? Abba, you were really in jail? And I said to them I said, boys here's the story there are people in the world who aren't free. There are people in the world who don't have the choice and so I chose, along with those others. We gave away our freedom for those who don't have our freedom. And there are freedoms that we are going to have to roll back. There are things that we are going to have to use our privilege in order to awaken to be awake. There are things that each and every one of us can do and are already doing and will continue to do because it's a long road. So I said to them that's what your Abba did. The whole door of our door in every generation we are obligated to see as if we left Egypt. I said to my boys, I said this is where we are now. This is Egypt. We have work to do and we have love to share and it will take a long time. But Ozi Ve Zimrat Ya my strength and my song my strength and my song my strength and my pruning by Hili Bishwa Ozi Ve Zimrat Ya by Hili

Bishwa Ozi Ve Zimrat Ya by Hili Bishwa Ozi Ve Zimrat Ya by Hili Bishwa Ozi Ve Zimrat Ya by
Hili Bishwa Ozi Ve Zimrat Ya by Hili Bishwa Ozi Ve Zimrat Ya by Hili Bishwa.