

Romemu Dvar Torah September 16, 2016

One of the most amazing things that happens to me, I think, I want to say for anyone, when they go on a silent retreat, or some retreat where you really retreat, where you really are pulled away from all the things that are the habitual, day-to-day, ordinary, ordinary life, is that you get a chance to really see how tender the heart is when it's not covered and you get a chance to see how so much of what happens moment-to-moment in our life is covering over something else that happened before it and that we don't notice until we've covered it. And you go on a retreat and some of those things are removed and all of a sudden, there it is. It just says, hi.

Remember a couple of weeks ago when we spoke about do. Tal, the power of do, which is so gentle, so profoundly soft, and so ever-present. And the do is a metaphor for tshuva, the process of repentance, but poorly translated, tshuva.

Can everybody say tshuva? Tshuva. It's the Torah's way of saying return. In modern Hebrew, it means to give an answer.

A tshuva is an answer, it means a response, an ability to respond, a responsibility. Ah, tshuva, return, I find what was there all along. I had a chance to have that last week when I took five days.

Went on a prayer and meditation retreat in upstate New York. And when I came back to New York City, it's like, wow. So many things.

But there was still a residual element of that heart's tenderness. This morning when I dropped off my eldest son, Bear, at school and walked into a coffee shop on the corner of 71st Street and Broadway. And in line, we were standing to place an order.

And ahead of us, there was maybe a 24, 25-year-old young woman who looked like she had put on very beautiful clothing to go to work. And ahead of her were a group of three tourists, I think who were from Korea. And as the tourists reached for their very large iced coffee in slow motion, she grabbed it and, no, and then, yes, and it was everywhere.

But mostly on this young woman who was prepared to go to work. And she stood there with her mouth agape. Can you imagine? I mean, imagine.

Who knows where she lived? Did she live close by? She was just looking at herself going, oh, my God. Like, did that just happen? And I'm standing with my son, Tal, and we're looking at her going, oh, my God. Wow.

And what was going through her mind and the mind of the tourist who was just standing there also wondering, oh, my gosh, I can't believe I just did that. I don't even know how to say sorry to this woman. And everybody was standing there, so people started rushing to get napkins.

And she was still in shock. She was like... And they were cleaning her off and cleaning the, you know, and she just... And so she takes, she steps out of her shoes, which are soaked

with cream, and something great happens. First, something not so great happened, is that someone started saying to her, well, it's not so bad.

Everybody have that? Right? Yeah, it's not so bad. And then when she had the audacity to say, please don't talk to me right now, to which this very New York person said, God bless her, fine, I won't talk to you. And this whole thing was like escalating, because she's beginning to lose it, because you're thinking she's about to scream.

And then the owner of the shop behind, you know, starts looking, goes, don't be a baby. And then Grace descended on a coffee shop. Someone with their wits about them looked to her and said to her straight in the face, you are being amazing.

I would have lost it by now. Wow, you really are incredible. And the woman began to cry.

And she sat down and this person put her hand on her shoulder and said, I can't, like she said there with a little bit of humor, but a lot of empathy, she said, you must not know what to do. But you're amazing. And she kept saying that over and over and over again.

For like three minutes. And you saw this woman melt. She softened.

The shock of it and the pain of it didn't become anger, it just became wow. This hurts. The Torah tomorrow morning in the Weekly Wisdom will raise this question.

Tomorrow morning will bring us into full view of what it's like to live in a world where we are all connected. Where each and every one of us has a responsibility to the other. The Torah says, if you are walking along the road and you see your friend's ox or your enemy's ox, or maybe they've lost something and you recognize that it belongs to them, says the Torah these famous words, lo tuchal lehit aleim, it says it three times, you are not able, you shall not, you aren't to, lehit aleim, from the word olam.

What is olam? World. But funnily enough, the word olam, the word itself means to ignore. To be indifferent to.

Lo tuchal lehit aleim, the Torah says, you can't, you shall not, you are enjoined not to ignore what is happening to the other. To ignore is to forget what tshuva, what it means to return a lost object. Lo tuchal lehit aleim means we are responsible to build a world where we are not indifferent to what happens around us, not only because we're told so, but because on a metaphysical, on a deep structure, each and every one of us is united and what happens to one happens to me.

And so we're enjoined by the Torah tomorrow morning to hold each other. Lo tuchal lehit aleim, you are not permitted, says the Torah, lehit aleim, to simply act as if it didn't happen, to ignore, to stand by, to walk by. A primary concern to our Torah is that tshuva, what it means to respond and to return, is to be for.

To be for. There's no greater act of being for someone than to be with them. The power of holding each other is so profound, so powerful, that when we do, we give back a lost object to our friend, maybe a lost subject themselves. To be able to be with someone in a way that says, I'm with you, you're amazing. I'm with you, I see you, I'm with you, I won't look the other way, I see you.

Last night at ABC Carpet in downtown New York, I was on a panel with my dear friend Stephen Dinan, who wrote a book called Sacred America, Sacred World. And to my left was an incredible woman, a pastor named Teddy Jackson, and a grandmother from a Native American tribe who was sitting to my right. I was there between these two shechina, these two deeply wise women. And the reverend said, you know, sacred and scared are the same word.

Sacred and scared. And when we are scared, we want to look the other way. When we're feeling fear, we say, nope, not for me.

But when we step in, we turn scared to sacred. When we step in, we say, I see. You can't look the other way because lihit aleim is to destroy the olam.

To ignore is to destroy the world. To ignore the genocide of Native American peoples, it came back to bite us. To ignore the racism inherent in systems of justice in our country has not gone away, ignoring it didn't make it better.

The xenophobia and the militantism and the... You go on, none of those things go away. And at the root of tshuva, at the root of returning is a courage to look at what is and to see it with love, with patience. To step into it and not around it.

You've got a lot of coffee on your shoes. Wow, you are courageous. If each and every one of us is connected to each and every one of the others, then we rise together or fall together.

And how we use our eyes will determine the depth of our commitment to change, the depth of our commitment to growth, the depth of our commitment to evolution is dependent on the courage we have to not ignore. I heard a story once, and we'll end with this. There was once a great Hasidic Rebbe, a great Hasidic master, who was known to be able to give blessings that if you received that blessing, you could have a child.

And so he would be visited by hundreds and thousands of couples from around the country looking for his blessing for that child. And one couple came from far and wide. They traveled for weeks to receive a blessing from this holy man.

They arrived and they were ushered in and they gave the situation. They wrote it on a piece of paper of what they wanted to be prayed for and so on. And he went and prayed.

He did his thing. He prayed on it, he prayed in it, he prayed around it. He was praying and nothing happened.

He came back from his meditative trance and said to the couple, I'm sorry, I can't help you. And they began to weep. He said, we've come from so far, great rabbi, great master, will you please give us a blessing, try again.

So he tried again and it didn't work. And he tried a third time and it didn't work. And finally he said, you know, I have nothing.

And so with tears in their eyes, they left his study. They made their way out and they alighted. They got onto their carriage and they began to leave the town.

And all of a sudden they heard behind them a voice, wait, wait. It was the rabbi with his talis running. Yes, rabbi, do you have it? You found a way in, you found it, you found a way. You found a blessing. He said to them, no. But my dear friends, I made a huge mistake. I told you the bad news, but I didn't sit with you. And so he climbed up to the top of the carriage and he sat with them as they cried and he held them. And as he held them, his heart opened, his eyes sparkled and said, there's a way.

Etzchaim hi l'machazikim va. Says the Midrash, the Torah is a Torah that is a tree of life for those who hold her. Says the Midrash to those who are held by her.

May our holding of each other give us power. May our patience and our responsibility give us hope. And may we walk out of here tonight and into the Rosh Hashanah Yom Kippur of this year awake, promising not to ignore, not to avert our eyes from the pain, the joy, the problems, the possibilities of those around us.

Together we rise. And together we fall. Don't all rise.

That would have been a great ending right there. Ask all of those, with that intention in mind, all of those who are in mourning to please rise for the mourner's kaddish.