

Shabbat 03 22 19 Sermon

The number 50 has been on my mind a lot this week. And not only, because a week from yesterday, and we've got a really nice weekend, I'll be turning 50. Going the way of my ancestors, yes, indeed. But 50 has been on my mind because 50 is a number that isn't generally associated with the holiday of Purim. And given that we just celebrated Purim on Wednesday night, and then all day yesterday, and more precisely because of today's Purim celebration that many of us might not know about. Today is known as Shushan Purim.

The Purim of the city of Shushan. A second day of Purim, as it were. A day that most people don't know about, but if you live in the Land of Israel and in other places around the world, Shushan Purim is your Purim. Not the day that we celebrated, kind of two different Purims. One right after the other, and Shushan Purim has everything to do with the number 50, as you'll see in a moment. So I've got 50 on my mind, and it's a complicated number because 50 in our tradition, the 14th letter of the alphabet, the Nun. Nun is a numerical value 50. The 50, Nun, Nun, 50, is a number that appears in our Torah as the end of a process. At the end of a 49-day counting on the 50th day, there is a holiday known as Pentecost, the holiday of weeks, the 50-day holiday.

In the tradition of the institution of slavery that existed in ancient Israel after 49 years, in the 50th year known as the Jubilee year, or the Yovel year, the 50th year, the Nun year, was it? Freedom year. All slaves, all property went back to the original owners. Freedom was proclaimed to the land. There was even a bell, broken as it is, that represents it here somewhere in our country, a bell of freedom representing Nun, the 50th year in the Bible that represented Jubilee, freedom, liberation. The number 50 holds within it both the thing that came and the thing that is going. It holds within it the culmination and the interpenetration of 49 days of counting the entire process. Everything that is past is included in 50, but 50 goes beyond the 49 and proclaims not just what was but what could be, not just what we've received but what we might add. 50 has in it a lot of contradiction. So you can see why I love it.

It holds so much. And as someone reaches, you know, as I'm reaching 50, I'm thinking about the past, I'm thinking about where I've come from, I'm thinking about the 49 years that are part of my journey and all of the things that I want still to do. And I ask myself the question, how is it that I am to hold this? This freedom that is connected but is yet altogether different. How is it that I am to hold the complexity of the number 50, the noning of my life? Maybe some of you are not there yet. Maybe for you it's not when you're going to be 50, it could just be where you are in your life, thinking about the past and the present and the future, thinking about what it is to be free, what it is to be in a relationship with the past and in an honest and truthful integration of the present as you imagine the future. Maybe that's where you are. Maybe you are beyond 50 and it's still relevant. Maybe this question is universal. I'll tell you something remarkable that takes place in the Torah.

Just a little bit of context about Shushan Purim, as I began saying, Shushan Purim is the second day of the holiday Purim. But where did Shushan Purim come from? If you had never heard of Shushan Purim, please raise your hand. Shushan Purimers, wow, there you go. So I

got a video from my sister in Tel Aviv, my nephew walking around, and the party was still going. Friday afternoon, still going. Cities around Israel.

Apparently, if you look in the Megillion, if you look in the Book of Esther, Scroll of Esther, here's what happened. We know the story and hopefully we'll think of it as a fantasy, might not have historically taken place, but let's just hold that for a moment. In the story of Purim, we defended ourselves, or we were given a right to defend ourselves, and we did, we took to arms, and we defended ourselves, and on the 14th day, in most of the land of Persia, we achieved victory, and we celebrated on the 14th day.

But on, in the city of Shushan, in the capital city of Shushan, the fighting continued until the 15th day of Adar, the next day. Today, Friday. And because the fighting continued, and they didn't really achieve victory until that day, that was the day that they celebrated as their victory day. You all have the 14th day, and we have the 15th. But something amazing happens. Around the same time that this story begins to be a part of our tradition, our canon, the men of the Great Assembly, the Anshei Knesset, the people that codified and gave us the holidays that we live to this day, they decided when they were going to let everybody know about this distinction between, you know, the rest of Persia and the world and the Shushan people, they wanted to memorialize Shushan and say that any city like Shushan will also read on the 15th day.

But what does that mean to be like Shushan? The capital of Persia? No. What quality did they lift up out of all the qualities that Shushan had that made it unique? And then they said, oh, we're going to extend that to any city like Shushan. Follow me here for a second. So there are walls. The rabbi said the walled nature of the inner city of Persia, of the capital city, the walled nature, the building of the wall, build the wall, the wall, the wall, the wall. That wall around the city of Shushan becomes the signifying element of a city. And they want to give that to any city that is like Shushan and walled. Any walled city like Shushan reads on the 15th day. You tracking with me so far?

But when the rabbis came to write down the laws of reading Megillah, when to read it, the 14th or the 15th day, they didn't say any city that was a walled city like the cities of Shushan. They said something else. Any city that is a walled city, they said, not from the time of Shushan, but much earlier. The rabbi said, cities that were walled at the time of Shushan, that's not our criteria.

In order for a city to qualify to read the Megillah on the 15th like the original miracle in Shushan, you had to have been a walled city not from the time of Shushan, which would have made sense, but from the time of Joshua, the son of Nun. Rachel, I have a whole sermon to go. Joshua, the son of Nun. Who was Joshua, the son of Nun? Joshua was the next in line, Moses' student. He was the one that took the children of Israel into the land of Canaan in the Bible. In the book of Joshua, named after him, thought of you, Josh. Joshua, son of Nun, is a demarcator of what is a walled city. The 15th day of Adar today was a day that commemorated not the walled cities that existed at the time of the so-called miracle in our story, but of an earlier period, which begs the question, why were the rabbis so interested in doing this strange thing?

The Talmud in Yerushalmi says, in order to give honor and respect to the land of Israel that was destroyed and desolate at that time. Lest the land itself and the small inhabitants, the small settlement that exists in the land might say, you've just reminded us that we are not walled any longer, we are not protected, we are not inviolate, we are vulnerable, we are open and wide. And so the rabbi said, you know what, fine. Any city that was walled like the cities that were once walled. And says a great rabbi whose commentary on this touched me so deeply this week, this respect afforded and accorded to the land of Israel was not only a deep sensitivity to the feelings of ones who were once strong and are now vulnerable, but it acted as a goad. It acted as a motivator for those who lived in those desolate cities to say, if somebody were to come along and say, why are you reading on the 15th, you Jerusalemite, you Tel Avivite, you somebody in the land. And they said, well, we have a walled city like the walled city of Shushan.

And says this rabbi Elitamar in his book, he says, then someone would say, are you joking? You don't have a walled city. Look at your city. You call that a walled city? You call that a city that is noble and built and beautiful? And says this beautiful commentary, our rabbi Elitamar, in that way, someone would come to be motivated and say, you're right. We don't read because we are built. We read because we were once built. And in reading, we remind ourselves of a nobility lost, of a wall that once was, a wall that pointed towards our strength, towards what we were and what we could become. And it motivated them to say, let's go build it. Let's not settle for less. Let us settle in more. For me, for you, for all of us here, I've been sitting with this question all week.

Joshua, the son of Nun, Joshua, the son of a father named for the 14th letter, whose name represented freedom. Joshua, who was the conqueror, the one who entered the land, but who also was a falling away from the leadership of Moses. Joshua was a complicated figure, but he represented liberation and freedom because he brought us into a place where we felt our own power. And even if our power was lost, it still remained as an ember. And the 15th day of Adar, the day that we are standing in right now, is a day to commemorate power that each of us has, that we might one day recapture it, we might one day reignite it, we might one day relocate it.

What does it take to remember your greatness? What does it take to be reminded that rav lach shevet ve'imei kabacha, you've been sitting in the dust for too long, arise, arise. You were born to greatness, you have it within you. And though it looks as if life is bleak, it looks as if things are desolate, it looks as if there is a churban around you, there is destruction, you have within you because you once knew the seeds. And for that sake, you can read on the 15th, what does it take to rise from the ashes but just a glimpse of a nobility, of a power, of a courage, of something that we had at one point but have given up on possibly. We get injured and we become used to something. We don't rise to the level that we once were but we sink down to a level that we become comfortable at. Inertia sets in.

And before we knew it, an atrocity will come along, God forbid, and remind us of what a prime minister or president of a country should do in the wake of desolation. Something horrible will happen and we remember somehow how have we been living this way in this smallness for this long. And along came the rabbis and said, don't read on the 14th.

It's true, you don't have walls, but you once did. Can you remember when you once were great? Can you remember what it was like when our civic discourse was here and we complained and now it is here?

It happens so subtly, incrementally. We lived in a country as Jews where for decades, centuries perhaps, we could assume a certain level of safety, a certain protection. We could assume and slowly, slowly, slowly things erode so hard to lift ourselves when we have been living in the ruins of a castle that was once fortified, that was once the envy of the world. To remind ourselves that this isn't our birthright, that we have something greater that is being called from us. It is so easy to settle for less when we should be demanding more of ourselves, the world around us, our partners, of us and us of them. It's ruins around, but you know what it is to live in a fortified city. You know that feeling.

Every year, we celebrate two days of Purim. Those of us, all of us here on the 14th, but then on the 15th, there's a whole tradition of a group of people who get together in cities and they celebrate. And people come up and say to them, why are you celebrating on the 15th? And they say, well, we were once a fortified city. And they say, well, you're not anymore. I say, but we once were. We once were. And now we can never be at home in slavery. You redeemed us and we know that taste. We can never, ever be at home in the ruins.

So tonight, tomorrow, whenever, when you leave here, I want you to ask yourself a simple question. Where in your life did you know greatness? And where have you settled for less? Where in your life is Shushan Purim asking you to motivate yourself to rebuild what was once great? To rebuild what was once noble? To rebuild what was once powerful? That's the question Shushan Purim asks all of us because we are all a part of that story. And even if it was a fantasy, and even if it's problematic, its moral is profoundly important.

May the God of our ancestors, a source that is the one who reminds us that we, children of light, are born into this world and we have a trace of that original freedom. Remind us of the 49 years of slavery. And as we arrive at 50, together with Joshua, the son of Nun, the conqueror who brought us into a noble, safe, stable place. May that one give us a taste of freedom that is rooted in a remembrance of the walls that once sustained us, protected us, and empowered us. May that be true for me and for all of us tonight. And I ask you to say, Amen. Amen.

Please rise.