

Romemu Dvar Torah November 4 2016

It's been a big week, a long week. I feel like that's my preamble to every sermon on Friday night, is it's been a long week. Weeks are long.

Weeks are long. And so much happened this week, unbelievable things, miracles happened this week. And if I could, one theme, right? One theme would be Cubs, right? That would be Cubs. Seventy-one years of pain and anguish. More. Seventy-one years of the penitentiary. Oh my God, it's too many. I gave them like a shortened... It was, you know... I shortened it, you know. It was a long time, a lot of misery came to an end. Finally, they win the World Series, tears flowed and mixed with champagne, a cocktail of celebration and relief. Redemption. And we witnessed for a moment, of course, in the artifice of athletics and sports, the power of will, the power of that which can't be broken.

A hope that springs eternal, and even though it's artificial, it still doesn't stop moving us to witness that desire, that drive. This weekend, of course, is also another test of endurance, another test of the ability, of the will to endure beyond pain and despair and disappointment to get up when one falls down. Of course, we in New York are very proud to welcome those who are here for the marathon weekend, this weekend. It might not be 71 years or 100 years, but every mile in New York City feels like an eternity. So anybody here going to be in the marathon this weekend? Any marathoners? Wow. No. Anybody else? Okay, a couple more people. I see people. Marathoners.

Wow. I'll tell you something. My highlight, my highlight of the marathon every year is going to Fifth Avenue and watching the marathoners make their way down. And I went last year with one of our congregants, Robert Gedalia, and for Robert, it's a sacred pilgrimage. I have never seen anyone on Fifth Avenue the way that Robert Gedalia is, and now I will be for the rest of my life. He's out there in the middle. Those who don't know Robert, I wish you could see him, but trust me, I'm going to try to do my best to give you a little Robert Gedalia, okay? I don't know if you guys, can anybody see me? Can you see me, Theo? Okay. So she's going to do, you're doing, she's playing the marathoner. Okay, ready? Whoa.

That's Robert, right? He's like, hikes up his pants. He's like there. He's like, here you go. And he's pointing to all the, it's like, there you go, there you go. And he can't stop running out. He's like, hey, here you go, here you go, here you go. Hey, everybody, you keep going. It's like, Robert Gedalia, I love it. I cry when I see that. He's amazing. And there are others like that all along New York City streets. I think to myself, wow, what would it be like if it was like this on an average Wednesday? You're going to work, go, you go. You got it, let's go. Going to Sloan, all right, let's go. Guitar player, you do it, you go. You got it. Total stranger on the subway, you should be like, hey, how you doing? You go. Only two more stops on your local, you're going to make it.

You know, and of course, not only is it a marathon weekend, but another marathon will come to an end, not this weekend, but in a couple of days. The year-long marathon of insults and invectives. A year of political divisions and divergencies and distractions. And lowest common denominator politics or civic discourse that is uncivilized. All of that hopefully, hopefully, prayerfully will come to an end. And amidst all of this, elections and

chaos and marathons and as we will see tomorrow, the bat mitzvah, the celebration of the power of a young woman.

This week's installment of *As the Torah Turns*, the weekly wisdom, will bring us a story of Noah. Noah is the protagonist of the story of the Mabul, the Deluge, the Flood. The Torah's take on a common message about the destruction of the world, its reversion to chaos and *tohu vavoh*, of confusion, of unformed pre-creative potency. The erasure of all that is to start again. And so this Noach, in another moment of election, is elected to be the sole survivor of the reality show known as the Flood. He and his entire family and the full retinue of animals, as you all know, maybe the most famous biblical story, movies have been made.

This big, not boat, but box. This big box, this teva, that will have no direction, no front, no back, no starboard, it's just a box floating in the midst of the unleashing of primordial waters. This Noah is elected to become the progenitor of the future. What is it about Noah that makes him worthy of election? What was his platform? What was the Noachide platform? The Torah tells us, above and distinct from any other biblical figure, he is *Isht Sadiq hayah tamim hayah bedorosav*. *Isht Sadiq*, he's named as a *tzaddik*. What's a *tzaddik*, everybody? A *tzaddik* is a righteous individual. Someone who is righteous. He's so righteous, man. He is righteous.

And he's *tamim*. He's not just righteous, he's *tamim*. What is *tamim*? He's wholesome, he's pure. I mean, those are pretty good CV. I mean, he's got it. The Torah tells us, without any ambiguity whatsoever, *tzaddik hayah*.

So you're thinking, okay, the story's over. I know that he's a *tzaddik*, but it doesn't tell us what made him into a righteous person. It doesn't say he was a righteous person because he gave in his income tax returns, let's say, and he was giving or not, or that he was always working on behalf of children or not, or any of those other things. It just tells us he was righteous. He's a righteous man. So we're left to wonder what it was that made him righteous.

In fact, not only we're left to wonder what it was that made him righteous, but the rabbis themselves in the Talmud, other than Rashi, the great commentator here, at this moment in the Torah, says, There were some who said that he was a righteous man, and when that says righteous, it means there were some who said he was really righteous, like the Torah says, he was righteous, which means he was righteous, but only in that generation. Had he been in another generation, he wouldn't have been so righteous. Cutting him down.

But I don't want to cut him down. I want to know what it was. Is there a clue in the text, for those who say that he really was a righteous individual, he really deserved to be elected, he really deserved to be the one who passed it on.

He was the one. I want to know if there's a clue in the text. And I think there is. I'm not the first one to say this, but I want to explore this for a moment. Before Noah was born, when there were animals, they were crooked. Not when there were animals, they were not crooked, but there were crooked animals, and crooked, crooked, and crooked. What you sowed. But instead, there were thorns. There was thistle.

There was no way to bring forth a yield to produce before, Noah says, the Midrashic, mythic mind. Noah was this incredible figure who actually stands on the precedence between a pre-Noah world and a post-Noah world. And here's where the Midrash that I just read, which I will explain, is getting all of this from.

Who is Noah? Let's go back to chapter 5, verse 29, in last week's reading. Introducing us to who Noah is. Because Noah's name is vital. Noah is born to a man named Lamech, who names him. His father's name is Lamech. He names him Noah Limor, saying, this is what he said when he named him Noah. Zed, this one, Ye'nach ha-meinu mi-ma'aseinu u'mitzvon yadeinu. This one will comfort us from our ma'aseinu, from our work. U'mitzvon yadeinu, and from the toil of our hands, the sadness of our hands, the toil of our hands, min adama asher erira adonai.

Noah's name, the name he is given is connected to this notion of a curse of the earth. The earth is cursed. It doesn't provide. And Noah is named for the word Ye'nach ha-meinu. He will comfort us. He will relieve us from the sadness and from the pain that our hands can't produce what we want them to produce. Noah will become that figure, says the Bible, says the myth of Noah's origin. And now the rabbis go one step further. They say, what does that mean exactly? How will he provide relief? Just because you named him doesn't mean he will do it.

What relief did Noah provide for the agricultural crisis of a pre-Noachite world, says the Talmud, the Midrash, crazy idea. Noah is the first one to create a till. He creates an instrument or a tool that will allow seeds to be planted in the earth for produce to be procured. Noah creates an agrarian system, some way of working with earth. Now you're saying, wait a second, I don't believe the Bible. I don't know if you're saying this. I'm saying this. I don't believe the Bible exactly this way. I don't know exactly what it means.

How many years ago does this mean? Should I revise my history book? What is going on here? The myth that the Torah is telling us, the story the Torah is telling us is this. The elected official, the elected individual who can help a world move beyond the flood, move beyond chaos, beyond destruction, beyond hopelessness and despair is someone who knows how to work with the earth that is cursed. Someone who sees a cursed earth, a closed situation, a closed reality and says, I know how to plant seeds and I know how to incubate them.

What do you think he was doing in that seed box that he lived in for over a year with all of those animals and all of the seeds he was incubating 40 days is a number in the tradition of the weeks of gestation. Noah is the gestator. Noah knows how to turn something that looks like a curse into a blessing.

Noah is chosen because in order to be a comforter in chief or anyone in chief, you need to know, we need to know, one, all of us need to know how to work with situations where seeds don't gestate properly, where there isn't proper irrigation, where something is wrong in the system, where the nutrients are not being met, where something is awry and Noah is the man. Noah stands in for anyone who knows how to get it flowing again. Noah is the one who knows how to create a till.

He knows how to take that scorched earth, that dead, and lift it up. That's Noah. Noah builds an ark in which, as the rabbis point out, the fullness of the messianic vision in the prophets is fulfilled. Lion is lying with lamb. There's peace on his little boat. It's got three floors.

If he was a rich man, it was all the way up. The first floor humans, second floor animals, third floor was, well probably animals and the top floor humans and then there was all of the garbage and other things were on the bottom floor but miraculously, they lived harmoniously. They all lived in that boat of many colors. That boat of many colors. Noah knew how to comfort and to comfort meant that he could include all of it and he knew how to restart a broken engine. He knew what it was, the words that were necessary, the inspiration that was required to get something that was not yielding to yield again.

I remember being 19 years old and I had just come back from a year in Israel and I was invited. I'd heard about a friend of mine who had had an accident and traveled back from Israel and I landed in New York and they told me about my friend and he was in hospital down in Florida and I went with another friend of mine. We went down to Florida to visit him. He was in a very, very serious accident. They were concerned about his life, worried that he would never make it and I sat there that day and I remember it like it was yesterday because my dear friend was an incredible athlete. He was the epitome of earth that gives forth fruit. Everything he touched was full of color. He was full of life and as I sat at that bed looking at him, there was something profoundly unbreakable in his eyes, profoundly unyielding in his ability to imagine a world of hope beyond the despair that he was experiencing. I knew then, as much as I know today, I know that he's not in the marathon on Sunday but he came up here to do the marathon and he's done the marathon and continues to, in the most remarkable way, find the presence to not only root himself forward and take the next moment, to build tools, figurative and literal, in order to inspire others and say that those seeds that you've planted will become fruit.

I know how to do that I'm a Noachide but he brings others along and cheers them and inspires them and so I'm feeling the anxiety of this community and all the communities that I'm walking in over what will be this week and I'm not weighing in either way but there is anxiety, there is fear but there is also tremendous hope. There's tremendous potential, there's tremendous... Am I using tremendous? There's a lot of hope. There's only one race that really is the most important race.

It's the human race. The Midrash says that a group of people were traveling in a boat and one of them took a drill and began to drill a hole beneath themselves. All of those who were on the boat said to him, why are you doing this? And replied the man, what business is it of yours? Am I drilling under your place? I'm drilling under my own place. And said to him, but you will drown all of us. We're all in this race together. Noah is the one who's standing on the sidelines in the Jewish mythical history and saying to the giraffe, there's a future. You got two miles to go. Noah is the one who is the great gestator, the one who knows that all of us are in it together. Noah is that archetype who never lived, I'm sure, but who lives in all of us.

Tonight, tomorrow, Sunday, next week. The great promise of our democracy on a weekend of Kabbalah, a weekend of talking about the one reality called God, spirit, Yahweh, love, is

that that one reality is reflected more beautifully and more there in more color and more possibility the more we allow to rest in this great little boat that we live in. From the one, the many.

I'm sure on that boat there were no blue states and red states. On that boat there were no like you're in, you're out. On that boat, on this boat, there's just human beings trying to make it to the finish line. Human beings needing to pick themselves up each and every day and each and every one of us has that Noah inside. These are the ones, you and I, all of us, standing together, giving each other chizuk, strength, and saying, I see you. I hold you.

It's a long, long, long journey. Every week, every month, every year. Thank God for the Noahs amongst us. There are those who expound upon him with praise. I'm one of them. Let's be each other's Noahs. Let's be for each other. Create spaces where seeds can once again flourish, where hope can once again be powerfully expressed, each and every one of us. Let's continue to go high.

Let's rise.