

Rabbi David Ingber's Kabbalat Shabbat Sermon

January 23, 2026

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I gave a sermon in 2017. Remember that? 2017. It was called the people of the door.

It was immediately after what was later became known as the Muslim ban. I've just been arrested in front of Trump Tower, and I wish I didn't have to give that sermon a second time. But here we are.

Parshat Bo contains one of the most visually arresting and morally demanding moments in the entire Torah. On the eve of the exodus, just hours before liberation, before revelation at Sinai, before the splitting of the Red Sea, the Israelites are commanded to do something strange, almost theatrical. They're told to take the blood of what is known as the Paschal Offering or the Pesach Offering, Korban Pesach, a lamb, and mark with that blood the doorposts, the outsides of their doors.

Ala mezuzot v'ala mashkof, on the doorposts and on the lintel, not hidden inside, not carved into their hearts, not written in some metaphor or allegory, concrete, on the door. Public, exposed, vulnerable. And what strikes me every time I read this passage is this.

This is a strange ritual. But that this strange ritual is the very first religious act that the Israelites perform before their freedom and as a people. Before Sinai, before Shabbat gatherings across America, before Dath Yomi, where we learned a page of Talmud every day that gathered us together as a people, all of us together as one, on the same night, orchestrated perfectly.

We were told, mark your doors with blood and stay inside. Don't cross the threshold and don't step outside, just wait. And then the most haunting Pesach, the most haunting verse in the whole commandment.

And none of you shall go out from the door of your house until morning. None of you shall go out from the door of your house until morning. Because the Torah tells us there's a force moving through the land.

The Torah calls it Mashchit, the destroyer. And our ancestors are not immune. They're not spectators, they are at risk.

Hiding in place, hoping to survive the night. Hoping the force that moves through Egypt will pass over their homes. Not because of their power, but because of the risk that they took and the vulnerability that they showed.

And now, today, this is not a metaphor. The Torah goes out of its way to make it clear that what happened that night, behind those blood-marked doors, is not just history, it is the beating heart of Jewish ethics. Again and again, the Torah will command us, do not wrong or oppress the stranger.

For you were strangers in the land of Egypt. Not once, not twice. No fewer than 36 times does the Torah repeat this mitzvah, this commandment, more than any other mitzvah or commandment in the Torah.

Something noticed by the Gemara, the Talmud and Baba Metzia, which makes the point explicitly there is no command more often repeated than the obligation to care for, to protect and to empathize with the stranger. Why? Because we know that experience. Not intellectually, not politically, but bodily.

Historically, spiritually. We were there, we stood behind those blood-stained doors. We waited for a knock.

And we prayed that it would be merciful, not terrible. That's why the great commentator Nachmanides, the Ramban, says that the reason the Torah demands compassion towards the stranger is precisely because the stranger has no protector but God. And God, Ramban says, watches closely for how power is used, or misused, against the powerless.

And here's what's truly radical. The Torah locates this moral teaching not in the synagogue or the church, not in the temple, not in the priesthood. It puts it at your door, my door, the door.

Because the door is the place where power meets vulnerability, where the insider confronts the outsider, where someone waits trembling to find out what kind of world they are about to walk into. And the Torah shows us both of those possibilities. In Genesis 18, Abraham sits at the entrance to his tent and he scans the horizon.

And the Torah says, And he lifted up his eyes and he saw three strangers were coming. And what does Avram do? What does Abraham do? He runs to greet them. He bows.

He invites them into his tent. He offers them water and rest and cleans their feet. Avram's door is wide open.

Not just physically. Physically, he is open to encountering the vulnerable, the stranger. He is open to interruption and to the moral risk inherent therein.

But just one chapter later, Genesis 19, and Avram's nephew Lot stands guard at his door in Sodom. The city has rules but no compassion. When the men of Sodom come for his guests, the door becomes a place of violence, of threat, of moral failure.

We find Lot holding back the hordes, protecting the door. Lest the door become an altar upon which all morality and ethics are sacrificed. He offers the unthinkable.

He bargains. He begs. Because in Sodom, the antithesis of the Jewish world, the door is not a place of welcome, it is a place of siege.

And so the question this Shabbat isn't just what kind of people are we, it's what kind of doors do we build. And so when I see what is happening to the doors of this country today, families being ripped apart, raids in workplaces, children taken from parents, being treated as contraband that must be removed, I don't see a policy dispute. I see a moral collapse.

We know that door as a people of the door. We know what it is to wait for that knock, to shrink ourselves in the hope of passing inspections, to carry papers lest we get stopped in the street, to rehearse our explanations, to beg the state not to crush us. And so when we see others living that fear, that indignity and that threat, we are not neutral observers.

We are witnesses and we are responsible. Let me be clear tonight. Judaism is not naive about borders.

The Torah has laws, sovereignty and systems. It does not demand anarchy, but it does demand that laws serve dignity, not desecration. Rabbi Jonathan Sachs wrote so beautifully, he said, memory in Judaism becomes moral command.

What we remember is not for the sake of nostalgia, but for the sake of responsibility. We remember in order to be responsible, we don't remember Egypt so that we can feel sorry for ourselves, we remember Egypt so we can see it when it starts happening again. And here's something else the Torah gives us.

Thank you, Torah. The Torah gives us mezuzah. The Torah gives us a mezuzah.

We place the mezuzah, that little amulet, not inside our homes, not tucked away in our studies or in our sanctuaries, we place it on the doorpost at the threshold. The shema that's inside the mezuzah begins, V'yahavtas Hashem Elokecha, love the Lord your God, and write these words upon your doorposts and your gates. Why the doorpost? Because the mezuzah is not just a personal reminder, it's a moral declaration.

This house is bound by something higher. This house remembers. This house does not turn away from the knocks on the door.

I heard Rabbi David Walpe say that the mezuzah is the Jewish way of saying what happens at the border of your life, at the edge, at the vulnerable space where the outside meets the inside, that's where your values live. Your real values. And so I want to say plainly and without any apology whatsoever, when force is used to dehumanize and to degrade, to destroy the dignity of those who stand at the threshold, that is not governance, that is not enforcement, that is sacrilege.

That is not governance, that is not enforcement, that is sacrilege. The foundational text of Chabad Hasidus, the Tanya, teaches in chapter 32 that the love of the other person is not about our external sameness, we're different. It's about recognizing that the divine in each and every one of us is in each and every one of us.

That divine image, that Selem Elohim, and to violate that, to turn a door into a weapon, is not just unjust, it is a desecration of God's name, it is a Chilul Hashem. And so this week, Parshat Bo says something profound. It teaches us that redemption requires vulnerability, redemption requires visibility.

And the blood on that doorpost wasn't magic, it was protest. It was saying, we are here, we refuse to disappear, we refuse to consent to our own erasure and the erasure of anyone else. So that today, when others are standing at the door, others without power and

without protection, seeking nothing more than a better life, we are commanded as Jews to not just feel empathy for them, but to act for them.

Not because they are Jewish, but because we are. Because Jewish ethics doesn't begin with, are they one of us? It begins with, what does our power do for the vulnerable? And so we have to imagine a society where that is taken seriously. If we lived in a world in which that was taken seriously at this moment, a country where borders existed, but dignity was a non-negotiable, we would live in a better world.

If we lived in a country where enforcement was guided by compassion, where war was not a sight of fear, but a sight of moral clarity, that would be a better world. We have been there before. We've waited behind those marked doors, and we're still standing.

When someone stands at the door, we have to ask ourselves, do we remember Egypt, or do we become Egypt? We are a people of the door, and history is watching to see how we answer that question. Americans are also a people of the door. Y'all remember back in 2017, some of you were here.

I suggested that the Statue of Liberty is a kind of mezuzah for this country, a symbol that is placed at the threshold of a nation. It faces the world and reminds us of who we said that we were to the world. And written on that copper scroll in that mezuzah is a poem by the Jewish poet Emma Lazarus, whose words echo the theme of Torah, giving your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.

That poem was not a metaphor. It was a promise that we made. It was our version of blood on a doorpost, a public declaration of dignity, of risk, and of welcome.

It was a national mezuzah etched not in ink, but in metal and in hope and in memory. And the question all of us, all of us, must ask ourselves now is, are we still the people of the door here in this country? Do we still know how to answer that question given what we've seen this last year? Can we say, watching how the thugs who call themselves law enforcement terrorize and criminalize and dehumanize our brothers and sisters who are here in this country, whether illegally or not, it's a question that we have to wrestle with. I'm sure that those of you here tonight would answer, we might be slipping, but we still are.

I would hope and pray that on this Shabbat of the mezuzah, on this Shabbat of that remarkable moment in time when we were forever branded as the people of the door, that we might double our efforts to keep that promise. That we might lead the way in spoken word and in action to bring about that promise not only for us, not only for this country, but for the world at large. 36 times we are told to treat the stranger as we ourselves wanted to be treated because we were once strangers and we know better.

May God bless each and every one of us with the courage to act in small ways and large to remind ourselves and others that to be a people so called the people of the door is to be a part of that legacy of hospitality and love that we have been bequeathed. To be part of that solution and part of the answer to that question, the question that is hanging over all of us are we free truly? Are we out of Egypt yet? May it be so. And we say Amen.

Please rise for the Aleinu.

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