

Sermon Shabbat 09 28 18

I went into walking in Midtown this week with my amazing wife and partner. We were just hanging out in Midtown on the way back from a meeting downtown and we're walking through, I think, some park down there. I don't know it that well. Just walking through a park and we just found ourselves following a group of Chabad look like Chabad kids, who had been out like on a mission with a Lulav and a Netrog and they're kind of bounding about and we just kind of followed them. And there was, in the park, there was a sukkah down in the middle of somewhere. Just walked in, blessings on a wall and free marble cake and people just coming in for a drive-by mitzvah.

It was a drive-through. Just kind of went through to get some kind of good merit to accrue some kind of goodness. Sat down, had a little piece of Lekach, a little honey cake, made a mitzvah, gave them a Lulav, they shook a Lulav and they're off. And what struck me amongst a million little things, which is, we should get in on the racket, I mean, that was one thing. Liberal Judaism should have sukkahs everywhere. But besides that, there was something anomalous about this sukkah that really cut to the core, something that really caught me and then I didn't forget.

The whole thing was thickly covered with tzkach, with all kinds of branches. And then there was a huge gaping hole in the tzkach, in the covering, in the otherwise thickly covered roof. It was strange. It was breathtakingly weird. Of course, because I grew up with these laws, I understood that there must be a tree above that part of the sukkah which would otherwise invalidate someone from standing under that little piece of the sukkah. So they kind of very glaringly made it obvious to anybody for whom it would be Jewish law would prohibit them standing under that sukkah and thinking, oh, now I'm in a sukkah. You're not allowed to be underneath a tree when you make a sukkah. It has to stand under the sky. And so they made this hole.

But imagine that feeling of being thickly protected by this thick tzkach and over there, there's a glaring hole. I imagine that that image is not very far off from where many of us feel we are tonight. That that thing which is intended to protect us, to cover over us, to hold us, to contain us, to provide shelter and safety and security somehow has this odd, weird hole there.

Does it invalidate the whole sukkah? Should we just close up shop? Is there something unseen but implied by that hole that we intuit is there but we can't quite see it? We have to have inside information to know exactly what that hole means? Why there's a hole there? And more generally, when we think about the sukkah, the sukkah itself and the covering of the sukkah, what gives the name sukkah to a sukkah is the covering, not the walls. We call a sukkah a sukkah not because of its walls but because of the thing that is sukkah-ing, the tzkach, the very thing that hovers and holds. And one of the more interesting halachic categories or I should say obligations or requirements of the tzkach that is, in the Mishnah, in the 2nd century, what it means to create a sukkah is that the tzkach has to be mirubah mechamato, we have to have a lot of tzkach and very little sunlight.

But there it was, that big hole and sunlight streaming in and I couldn't help but think, exactly, there it is. Here's our metaphor, here's the thing contained in this year's 5779 sukkah, right smack in the middle of sukkot. The word in Hebrew for the coverings, the relation between the covering and sunlight is we can't have too much sunlight, we have to have more sail, more shadow.

And isn't that what's happening everybody? Hasn't the shadow now, in our sukkah collectively, now, we're in it. And so we began our Yom Kippur journey, our entire Rosh Hashanah Yom Kippur journey was stay in the room, stay in the room. The truth is painful, the truth is difficult. Everyone wants to bury the truth because they're afraid of it. It threatens power, it threatens patterns, it threatens lives. We bury it because it's painful and it really is painful. It's inconvenient, inconvenient truths. And then our rabbis give us a holiday right after truth, Yom Kippur, and say, now go sit in a vulnerable hut that has to have more shade, more shadow than light and work with that. Work with the shadow. And then there are Sukkot where the light comes pouring in as a blessing, as a reminder that that's what dispels darkness as light.

We have to lift up tonight the power of two remarkable women who today, in another metaphor that I can't stop thinking about, another moment, stopped power from either going down or up in an elevator, trapped power in a contained space and said these words, look at me. Look at me. Look me in the face. Could we have had a starker symposia on what strength looks like? The tremors of power that vulnerability can bring with it, that truth-telling and vulnerability and a willingness to open versus anger, petulance, entitlement. But let's lift these two amazing women up, Ana Maria Arquila and Maria Gallagher, two courageous young women who found power in an elevator and said, look at me in the face.

It's that hole in that sukkah, right? It's shining in. Look. Maybe you need a hand to look at what's here in this shadow container. We are blessed. As a community, we are blessed as a people to have this tradition, this powerful framing of a sukkah with all that it implies. But one of the things that they were doing today and what Dr. Blasey Ford was doing all week was saying to this country and to me and to you, usually we think in terms of fight or flight or freeze. And Dr. Ford sat there and said there's another option. It's called feel, the power of her truth, the power of her vulnerability, the power of her voice, the power of her example, the power of her modeling. She didn't fight, although there's room to fight. She could have run. And there were plenty of people who were running. She could have frozen, but she felt it. She stayed in the room. She took a breath. She felt the consequences, and she inspired millions and millions of people, including me.

And as someone, for all of you who have been to Romemu know, as someone who has spoken openly about my own childhood and about my own experiences, including last year on Kippur, I am not only a survivor of physical abuse, but I'm also a survivor of sexual abuse. And it didn't surface in my life until I was 25 years old, at the age of 25 years old, in ice-lipped New York, sitting in a chair, thinking back to camp when I was 7 years old, remembering. It came in waves, inchoate in the beginning, a little dreary, you kind of couldn't remember. But over the course of my life, as I struggled with the truth of that experience and the truth of what it meant in my life and how to understand that, it became abundantly clear to me, as it is to anyone here who has ever experienced this, that there are

plenty of good reasons to fight, to flight, and to freeze. There are plenty of reasons to stay quiet and to be silenced. There are plenty of reasons to be afraid to own this.

Whether people will know how to hear it, whether people will know how to assimilate it, whether people will ever think it's the right venue, whether or not we will ever have a way to talk about what it is that human beings endure in this country and carry in their bodies. Whether it will ever be safe enough to be both powerful and vulnerable, to be both honest and contrite, we as a community, we as a nation, have to model what it is to hold the shadow and the light of each other, the shadow and light of one another, the shadow and light of our history, of our present, of our possible future together. It's all there.

Remarkable as it is to hear it, remarkable as it is to know it, we all walk around with scars. And what Dr. Blasey Ford did this week was gift us. She punctured a hole and said, let light come through this place. She sacrificed her own privacy. She sacrificed her own safety. She sacrificed her own anonymity. She sacrificed for the sake of each and every human being that ever felt that there's something wrong with having once been victimized. For each and every one who was afraid to tell the truth, I imagine for many of you here tonight, you heard, as I did as a victim, as a survivor myself, you heard within your own heart and mind the desire maybe to say this is too much. It's overwhelming, I need to turn it off, which is also cool.

Maybe some of you are sitting there going, okay, this is the truth, I'm crying, it's okay, we're going to breathe into this as a country, we're going to breathe into this, we're going to fight for what we need to fight for. Maybe, who knows, but we can hold this. We can hold this.

And if these two amazing women who stood in the breach today like Shifra and Pua and midwived truth and midwived a change of mind in power, a reversal in power, at least for a moment, something happened in that moment. Something happened. Something happened in feeling and expressing feelings. Something happened. It's remarkable too. In all of the incredulity and all of the disbelief that happened this week, there was this moment today where it looked as if one thing was assured and then two amazing people stepped into the breach and told their story and said, look at me in the face. We need to do that in this country writ large. Look at me in the face as I tell you the truth. Feel this feeling. I'm not here to fight you down. I'm not here to shout you down. I'm here to stand in my truth.

And we as allies and also as people who work to create a Sukkot Shalom in this world, we say, okay, here you go. Let's make this place safe. So tonight I'm not discouraged even as I cried all day and yesterday and the day before. These two women and Dr. Ford. says the Midrash, to righteous women that we were redeemed from Egypt. To righteous women and righteous, courageous people who stand in the breach and who feel the feelings, make room for the shadow and the light. We stay in the room. We are being born. Coming in for landing. Just so you know, I know what I told you might have been surprising. No need to come over to me. I'm good. I really am. I shared it because it's important for people in positions like mine to share these stories. I am so mindful of how you hear these things and hopeful that it didn't in some way, God forbid, disrupt your evening. I hope you take it in the way that it was intended, which is a piece of information about me that you might not have known, but that I'm happy you hold now with safety and with love.

The Trisker Magid was a great Hasidic teacher. Trisker Magid was once learning that it is, according to Jewish law, not permissible to bring a broken vessel into your sukkah. It's mukso. You can't carry a broken vessel. And as he was preparing to walk into the sukkah on the holiday of joy, he stopped by the entrance to the sukkah. And his Hasidim, his devotees, saw him standing at the precipice and wondered why he wasn't entering into the sukkah. And as he began to cry, they said, Rabbi, it's sukkah. Be happy. It's sukkot. Come on. Let's be happy. He said, No. We just finished Yom Kippur four days ago. And on Yom Kippur we were singing, Mashul kecheres ha-nishbar. We are all compared to a broken clay vessel. How can I possibly enter into the sukkah as a broken clay vessel? It's not permissible. And then he said, But it also says in the Torah, That God thinks that a broken heart is whole.

And so, I'm whole, he said. I can walk into the sukkah broken. We walk into the sukkah tonight, into Cholamoit Sukkot, a little bit broken from this week. But it's a brokenness that is whole. It's a brokenness that's whole. May God bless the courageous truth tellers. Those who don't fight. Those who aren't quick to run. And those who are not freezing, but who are feeling.

Let's rise for them.