

Romemu Dvar Torah September 30, 2016

Language is so beautiful. Language is so ornate, intricate, so profound. One could argue that the 20th century and the 21st century are an extension of the Western's understanding, the Western mind, the Western intellectual traditions catching up to the power of language. Its construction and its deconstruction, the layers of meaning that are hidden in slips and jokes, in terms of phrases. For 2,000 years, the Jewish tradition said that language was not arbitrary. Language wasn't a chance. It was fructive, it was ontic, it created worlds. Language was the very thing that our deity used to bridge the unbridgeable gap between being God and being human being. Language and body language is important too. Not just what we know from what people say, but how their bodies tell us that what they're saying isn't really aligned with what they're feeling. I'm so angry at you. I'm so happy.

Anybody see that New York Times report right on the front page right after the debate this week where one of the reporters was given the task of just watching the debate without any sound on. Anybody see that? Amazing, right? You saw that? So much about how we hold our bodies and how it lies or doesn't tell the truth and Martha Graham of course famously said that the body never lies although we know that's also a little bit not true. But body language, right? So Rosh Hashanah, right, the head of the year, big deal.

Torah gives us a descriptor, a Rosh, a head of the year. A head of the year. And tomorrow morning in shuls around the world and temples around the world, tomorrow morning we will be reading the same parshat we've read every single year from the moment we decided when we would begin reading the yearly cycle, how it would be divided. We have always read tomorrow morning's parshat right before the head of the year.

Nitzavim, atem nitzavim hayom kulchem. The Torah tells us you are all standing. You're still standing better than you ever did. Here you are standing, atem nitzavim. It's something important in the rabbi's choreography of meaning in the way that they set up phrases and tones and moods that they want us to walk into Rosh Hashanah every year not walking but standing.

And so in the service of language I'd like to focus on two words in that first phrase that I'll repeat that are so essential to being able to stand together. All of us from our water drawers to our lumberjacks. Nitzavim hayom. Moses standing before the people of Israel says to them atem, you all, atem, A-T-E-M, alef, taf, mem, which is also the word emet, atem, emet. This is the truth he was about to tell them. Here's the truth. Here's the emes. Atem, you're the truth. When you're together, when you're unified, when you are one.

But stand nitzavim hayom. Standing together today, nitzavim is the word. Can you all say that? Nitzavim. One more time. Nitzavim. Standing firm.

It doesn't just mean la'amod. La'amod in Hebrew means to stand. But yitzivut means stability. Stand firm. To be solid. Everybody's all sitting up. Everybody's like, oh, Alexander technique. But don't tighten. Head's pulling me. I'm not doing it. It's happening. Atem, nitzavim, you're standing tall.

And then the second word, hayom. Can you say hayom? Hayom. Hayom, the Zohar in the tradition of the Midrashim, of the Jewish folklore and the Zohar, the mystical commentary Torah, the word hayom, which means ha-yom is the day. You are standing here on the day. Whenever the Torah says hayom with the definite article, the day, the day, the Zohar says, that's Rosh Hashanah. The day.

Hayom harat olam. You are all standing hayom. And that word is significant because saying hayom, the day, is significant because each and every one of us balances two different days in our life. One of them is the day of Rosh Hashanah, and the other day is the day of Bayom. Not the day, but on that day. The pachad Yitzchak, Yitzchak Kutner, the great rabbi of my alma mater, Chaim Berlin, a great sage, what a beautiful teaching that I had the pleasure of studying with our rabbinic intern, Zohar Atkins.

And in that piece he talks about hayom, the day of Rosh Hashanah, as a day where we come to terms with both din and chesed, with both judgment, or constriction, or pain, or limitation, or the boundaries on our life and chesed, which is boundaryless. And we unify them in a way on Rosh Hashanah. We say, we are human.

We were born just like the world is born, and being born, being a being that has boundaries means to live with dualities, all of them, and to try somehow to hold both of them. Hayom means, on that day on which we will blow the shofar, on which we will celebrate, we also are being judged. And that duality, and by judgment here I don't mean judged by a finger wagging God, I mean judged meaning we come up hard against the places where we can't, and didn't, and should have, and would like to.

Our limitations. The fact that we have to exhale, and then wait for an inhale. The fact that there are pauses in love, and we drop in and out of being awake.

Rosh Hashanah is the day where we actually hold where we've missed the mark, not yet, but where we hold that possibility, together with our joy of newness, and the possibility of something being reborn. But the other Yom, the other day that we hold, is the day of Bayom, says the Pachadi, it's like the day when it'll be all good. The utopic vision, how it could be, would that it would be, the Halavai, the Bayom, you could walk around and say to people, what's your Bayom, Hachu? What would it be like on your Bayom? On that day.

On that day, I'll never be sad again. On that day, no one will ever be poor. On that day, no one will ever go to bed hungry. On that day, heads of state will care more about making peace, and they will be about winning elections. On that day, everyone will have health care. We all have our Bayoms, and we live between those two places, the world as it could be, and the world as it currently is, and we're asked to hold both of those.

But every year, before we go into Rosh Hashanah, we read, Today's the day to be real with what is. With what is in your life today. Not Bayom, when it will be on that day, but where it is today, this day, this Rosh Hashanah.

Where are you? Where are we? And Moshe, in the portion, will say, Make sure that you are That you are standing with where you are. That you have resilience. That I have resilience.

The language of English, right? Understanding, standing other, standing up for, standing up to. To have the resilience to live with that oscillation. The resilience to hold firm.

It's like one of the great lines that I, I mean, I don't know if it's a great line, but I love it in Bruce Springsteen's song, The Promised Land. He says, Blow away dreams that tear you apart. Blow away the lies that keep you going. Lost and brokenhearted. And you have to stand firm. Blow it, that ain't got the strength to stand its ground.

That ain't got the strength to stand its ground. Each and every one of us is Nitzavim Hayom. If you are here, in some way, shape or form, you, I, we have the resilience to navigate the Hayom of our life. We have within us the capacity to be Nitzav, to be present, to stand firmly rooted in the deep knowing that we have. Knowing that we go back and forth, and that's the way of it, but be resilient. The poet Mark Nepo writes about resilience, that in Homer's epic poem, The Odyssey, Odysseus is on his way home from the Trojan War, and he's instructed to pass by the island of the sirens, whose call, the call of the siren is so compelling that no one hearing them will ever leave the island. And so he has himself strapped to the mast of the ship, right? And wax placed in the ears of everyone around him, including himself. And even with that, he has a hard time resisting the call of the sirens. But he resists, and says Nepo, this ancient story warns us of the power of seduction and addiction, but it also applies to any pattern of energy that is against our true nature.

Insecurity is such a siren that appears in many guises. We can't deny the feelings that overtake us sometimes as we oscillate between the world as we want it to be and the world as it is, but if we stand firm, his words, in our true nature, then like Odysseus, we can withstand the siren.

This week, the Jewish people and the world lost a beloved statesman, Shimon Peres, whose Polish name was changed to Peres, meaning a nest of eagles. And throughout his long and consequential life, dying at the ripe old age of 93, he spoke of being a dreamer, with one's feet firmly rooted on the ground. History will judge whether he was successful. History will judge whether or not he and all of the governments that he was involved with, whether they did what they promised, all of those different judgments. But one thing that I would like to end with tonight. When I heard Shimon Peres speak, I was listening to a poet. When I heard Shimon Peres speak, there was a way that in his language, in the firmness of what he held to be true, there was lift, there was something that could take off.

I want to bless each and every one of us as we walk in, standing, to Rosh Hashanah, that we are firmly rooted in our true nature, knowing that it is only when we are connected with that deep place, that we can have the wings that need to give us to fly, to fly, to fly. And as we say goodbye to Tavshin Ayin Avav, to 5776, a blessing that we hold firm together, supporting one another, resilience, in the face of many seductions and many distractions, to hear the truth and to understand it. Please stand.