

Romemu Dvar Torah November 11 2016

It's hard to believe. It's hard to believe that it's only been a week since last Friday night. It's hard to believe that I stood here, or maybe I ran around here, last Friday night, talking about the great Noach, the great Savior, who built an ark to sustain the world against the Mabul, against the great flood after the flood, what's left of that ark.

We stood here together, many of you, and spoke about a marathon, about a long distance run, about not seeing the finish line when we start, but knowing that if we had the courage to support one another, to give each other chizuk, to give each other strength, that we could make it to the finish line. And I shared with you a story of my dear friend whose name I did not, I didn't out him, he was here, he just kind of jumped up to New York. But my friend, who couldn't jump up because he's paralyzed from the shoulders down, completing three marathons in the last couple of years, his strength of character, his determination, his never say die. His effulgence, his spirit, you know, bubbling everywhere. My friend Alan Brown, whom I love very much.

It was just a week ago, and I can't help but think, as I was praying here, about a story that I told in the home of a Shiva a couple of weeks ago, a story about a great sage named Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Akiva was the most important Talmudic sage, and the story, as it's told in a number of different places in the tradition, the story has it that two rabbis, one was Rabbi Akiva, and the other one was, were on ships that could see each other. And the great rabbi who saw Rabbi Akiva, he saw Rabbi Akiva's ship go down. And as he was telling the story in the Talmud, he said, I saw the great Rabbi Akiva on that ship, and the ship went down. And I made it to shore, and I worried about him. I was wondering what happened to Rabbi Akiva. And then, as I walked on the beach, I saw him sitting and learning Torah. And I said to him, Akiva, what happened? The ship went down. And Akiva said, נדדמנ לי דף של ספינה. I have it upon a little plank of wood. And I held it onto it, he said. וחל גל וגל שבא אלי נענסי לו אז ראשי. And with every wave that came, I nodded my head at the wave. With every wave that came, I nodded my head at the wave. Holding on to one plank of wood from that ark. It felt like that for a lot of us this week.

For a lot of us, not all of us, this was a week that was devastating. Today, November 11th, Veterans Day, as we honor and remember the men and women who gave and who give so much to uphold the freedoms that we cherish, the values that we seek to embody. Many of us are scared to death, wondering if we will be safe in that America. The great high priest who passed yesterday, Aryeh Leib HaCohen, whose songs we sang, Leonard Cohen. He's been a part of my heart and part of my soul's journey as long as I can remember. And certainly a part of the musical, memetic memory of the Romemu community.

That's a lot of M's. Leonard Cohen's songs have been gathering steam, whether it's Who By Fire, whether it is the song If It Be Your Will that we sang at Romemu in 2012 together, the Hallelujah. Leonard's music has been such a powerful part of this heart and of this community.

His music often focuses on the presence of absence, of light, or the inevitable but no less tragic chasm between divinity and humanity, good and evil, what should be and what is. And often Leonard Cohen's music will lift us at the end even as he breaks us. The song that Rabbi Jessica sang, spoke, sang, from Anthem.

The birds they sang at the break of day start again, I heard them say, don't dwell on what has passed away or what is yet to be. The wars, they will be fought again. The holy dove, she'll be caught again, right? Bought and sold and bought again, the dove is never free. So ring the bells that still can ring and forget about your perfect offering. There's a crack in everything.

That's how the light gets in, right? There's a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in. The broken places, say our tradition, Karov Adonai li nishbirei leh, if God is close to the ones who are nishbirei leh, the broken hearted ones. Cohen doesn't seek to explain, does light have to come through broken places? Do we have to break first? Does it have to get really dark before the light? Is that a given? Is that a priori? Is that just a way of things? Doesn't light come from any other place? You might want to ask him.

Or you might want to say, you know what Leonard, thank you so much for the crack in everything. But I prefer not to hear anything redemptive at this moment. Don't prematurely evacuate me from my grief. I'm in it. I'm in my pain. I'm in my suffering. I'm in my dashed dreams. I'm walking on the broken glass of a ceiling that didn't shatter on a week of broken glass. You might say that. But then Cohen comes this past September 21st, his last birthday, and releases an album. Some of you might have heard it.

You Want It Darker, he writes. You want it darker. We kill the flame. Magnified, sanctified, be thy holy name. Vilified and crucified in the human frame. A million candles burning for a love, for help that never came. You want it darker.

Hineni, hineni. Cohen leaves us, all of us, with this readiness, hineni. It's darker.

Many in this community, but not all, feel that. The despondency, the confusion, the fear, the apprehension, the anger, the full spectrum of emotions. Many of those with whom I've spoken say this week felt to them like a Shiva, or like an Onenut, the stage before you sit Shiva where you're completely lost and you don't know where to go.

Some people didn't go to work on Wednesday. They didn't even know should they go on with business as usual. Some in this community and many across this nation feel that this week pushed us back. And there are some in this community and other communities, many across this country, 50 million strong, who feel that they finally have been heard. That even if they disagree with the misogynist, racist, xenophobic, anti-Semitic, anti-immigrant, Islamophobic statements that came out of some camps, one, their needs weren't being heard by the establishment. And so here we are.

Whatever we're feeling, whatever we need, above all else, we are at a profound moment of national crisis. And I, for one, could use a little Torah right about now. So let's get some Torah going.

This past Tuesday, at the Romemu office, I sat with a group of little people, part of our Seekers program, and I was invited in to come and talk to them. And of course the election was looming large on Tuesday night and so I sat down and I said, hey guys, let's talk about an election. So they said, oh, we're going to talk about Hillary, let's talk about Donald, I said, no, no, no, Abraham.

Because tomorrow morning, Abraham is elected. It's actually called an election in scripture and in Christian theology, the divine election of Abraham. Lech lecha me'artzecha, leave your homeland, mo'oladetecha, where you were born, beit avicha, the house of your father, el ha'arets asher eka, go to the land that I will... Say it again, go to the land that I will... Come on guys, get it on.

The land that I will... Abraham hears the call. And Abraham, at least according to scripture, we have no reason to believe or know why Abraham is so blessed with a divine conversation. Unlike Noah, whom we discussed last week, there is no descriptor of the behavior of Abraham. He is not called tzaddik, righteous, in his generation. Abraham, out of nowhere, seems to be someone that God deigns to speak to and the midrash, the rabbinic commentaries, the rabbinic filling in of the story is rife with reasons. For Abraham's specialness.

One midrash that we've studied together here in Romemu says something like this. Abraham, oh Abraham, he was a seeker, you know. Amar rabbi Yitzchak mashal, le'echad shaya ober mimakom l'makom ve'ra'a bi'ra echad do'leket amar tomar sh'a bi'ra azu b'lo manik.

Abraham is compared to someone who is walking along the way, says the midrash. This is what happens before the divine call. It's not in the black letters of the Torah, it's in the white space, in the white fire. Abraham is walking from place to place saying, I'm an itinerant. I'm on a search. And he comes across a bi'ra do'leket. Can you all say that? Bi'ra do'leket. One more time. Bi'ra do'leket means a palace that is lit up. Bi'ra do'leket means to be lit. It also means to be on fire. He's walking along and he sees a bi'ra do'leket.

He sees this big fiery palace, this big, big place. And he says to himself, is it possible that this bi'ra, is it possible that this palace is on fire and it doesn't have someone who runs the show? Or is it possible that this palace has its lights on and no one turned them on? Must be someone either lit the fire or somebody turned on the lights. And how you read that, what it means that the house is on fire or the house is lit up, says Abraham Joshua Heschel, is fundamental in two different ways.

Two ways that we approach God or discover God or spirit or meaning and purpose. One, says Heschel, in God in Search of Man, is we come to God through a lit palace. The world is lit up, it's beautiful. There's a flower. There's a child named Theo who's in the synagogue. There's a grandchild. There's something gorgeous. A friend, a lover. Something soft, something that has the glow of, oh, how beautiful is this. Say that's meaning, that's purpose. I'm dedicating myself to that vision. Of transcendence, of beauty. That vision of light.

And another way, Heschel says, another way to come to religion or to God or to truth or to meaning, is that the palace is on fire. It's burning down. There's chaos everywhere. And

Abraham says, I gotta get to work. There's work to do. The thing is falling apart. There's pain and suffering. I'm called to respond to that pain and suffering. And I will be that respondent. I will be a first respondent to the pain and suffering of a birad olekin, of a palace that is on fire. Those two approaches.

The world is on fire. The world is aglow, is, I think, the way that we have to move forward. We have to move forward knowing that joy of being is unconditioned. The joy that you and I and all of us share as being alive here in the present moment with drums going, and joy in this room is the joy not only of a world that has beauty still in it, but of a country that has so much beauty. A country that is full of opportunity, full of light, full of color, full of freedoms. That's true.

And the world is on fire. The world is on fire. We got a rude awakening call for those who feel that way. For those who feel as though some of the most base and ugly elements of the human condition were on display over the past 18 months, and that there is fear that in the coming years what has been unleashed, what has been stirred, will continue. Let us say clearly tonight that though that fear is something we hope from the deepest place will not come to pass, we must pledge ourselves with absolute determination and absolute radical self-sacrifice to ensure that it doesn't. A letter written by a group of rabbis is a letter that I signed on to today and that I want to read tonight to the millions of immigrants, Muslims, and people of color, to the LGBTQ people, women, people with disabilities, and everyone who feels threatened by the rhetoric and actions and words of the president-elect and his administration.

We want you to know we are with you. We are with you now, and we will be with you every day for the next four years. American Jews are a multiracial, multiethnic community, and 76% of them voted for Donald Trump. Against Donald Trump. Against Donald Trump. We felt in our bodies and in our bones that the vision and the rhetoric were at odds with our Jewish and American values.

And so together now, we face a time of profound uncertainty. We hope that our worst fears will not be realized, but we don't know what will happen. So please know that in the event of any attempt by our government to wrongfully abridge your safety, liberty, or dignity, we pledge to stand with you in solidarity, to work alongside you using all of the spiritual, political, and intellectual resources we possess. You are not alone. We are with you. And now to turn to this, maybe the most difficult thing to say, but the most important to hear.

I was listening to Brian Lehrer, I think it was two days ago, and he was speaking about the vote and the phenomenon that 56% of white women voted for Donald Trump. And he had two academics, two women who wrote, and he had them on the show, and they were giving their explanations. And a woman called in, her name was Elizabeth, and she had graduated from Tufts University.

She identified herself as a feminist. She identified herself as someone who is pro-everything that I believe in. And she proceeded to tell everyone that she had voted for Donald Trump. And the women who were on the Brian Lehrer show asked her a few questions, but they were very clearly triggered. And they didn't ask her questions that I was dying to ask. And

then last night at a Romemu membership event, someone else who heard the show, a woman said to me, I had the same experience.

So we must pledge that in a world that is beautiful and in a world that is on fire, that we pledge to listen deeply. We pledge to understand. We pledge not to jump to conclusions. We pledge to increase dialogue, not shout it down, no matter what side or position we stand on. That as long as we believe in human dignity, and that is upheld, we also believe in the possibility of dialogue to increase compassion, love, and understanding to find the best way forward. Leonard Cohen, I want to lift him up now as we finish, coming in for a landing here with Leonard, because he wrote a song that we handed out that immediately, I thought about it immediately when I thought about what it was that I was going to speak about tonight.

He writes, If it be your will, God, that I speak no more, and my voice be still as it was before, I will speak no more. I shall abide until I am spoken for, if it be your wills. And in the last stanza of If it be your will, he writes, draw us near and bind us tight, all your children here in their rags of light, in our rags of light, all dressed to kill. End this night, if it be your will.

My dear friend Rabbi Misha Eltzion wrote a commentary on the song, and it reminds us that Leonard Cohen was a Kabbalist, he was a mystic, and for him, the phrase rags of light is meant to remind us of this body that we are in. The famous phrase in the Talmud that says that we are not made of skin, but of light. We are rags of light, this body, this person. And so end this night, end this darkness, end this enmity, end this confusion. Help our brothers and sisters, our brothers and sisters to feel safe in a country that has now become darker.

May we spread light, all of us. May we find sources of light, and when we're ready to find the cracks that let that light in, if it be your will.