

The Man With No Place

Rabbi Ingber's Sermon 05/01/26

Our wisdom this week, the weekly wisdom, the parasha, Hashevuah, is called Emor. Emor, speak. Emor, speak.

And it begins with one of the strangest formulations in Torah. Emor l'koanim b'nei Aaron v'amarta aleihem. Speak to the priests, the children of Aaron, And say to them, Emor v'amarta.

Speak and say. Say and speak. The doubling of that verb, to speak, Appears nowhere else in Torah in quite this way, and it's odd not only because of its uniqueness, But odd because of the placement.

What about this conversation? The content of the speech might require this double verb. The parasha begins, Emor v'amarta, Speak to the children of Aaron and say to them, and then begins to tell the Israelites, the priests, All of the laws that concerned the priests, the unique status that was conferred upon them and the things about them That made them uniquely Destined to have those who could be excluded from the high standards of the priesthood. And so this opening, Emor v'amarta, this double verb, is noticed by the mechilta.

And the mechilta, the rabbinic midrash, the rabbinic expansion, catches something important. It says why of all the words that the Torah has for speech, The adage about words and their proliferation in various cultures saying that there's a very nuanced understanding to the thing being described. We have a lot of words to describe speaking.

Amira, Haggadah, Dibur. The mechilta asks, why Amira? Why Emor? V'amarta and not Daber v'Dabarta. And answers the mechilta, because Daber, The word used to speak, is forceful.

Like a command. Like a hard rain. Emor is like dew, soft, gentle, almost a whisper.

The Torah is saying, When you speak about holy things, speak softly. The irony of this parsha is that a parsha that starts with a whisper will end with a curse. And that journey is the message tonight.

Parsha d'Emor ends with a curse, a story that interrupts a long legal section. The Torah will describe after the priestly responsibilities and those who are blemished and excluded from the priesthood. It will then go on to talk about the holidays and the menorah and the shobred, the lechem hapanim.

And then suddenly out of nowhere in a long litany of legal conversation, a story, a narrative interrupts the story. The son of an Israelite woman, who was also the son of an Egyptian man, went out amongst the children of Israel. And he fights with an Israelite.

In anger he curses. He curses. He uses the name of God.

Likely that he used the name of God asking God to please defeat whomever he was fighting. He curses in the name of God and he is brought to Moshe. He is held in custody and ultimately the Torah tells us that he is stoned.

Who is he? The Torah gives us his mother's name, Shlomit Bativri from the tribe of Dan. But we don't know his name. We don't know who he is.

We only know, the only thing we know about him is that he's from the tribe of Dan and that his mother's name is Shlomit Bativri. Peace, the daughter of hard speech. He's known by his origins.

An Israelite mother and an Egyptian father, he belongs to both of those worlds like Moshe, but he's not in either of them fully. The Midrash, again, the Sifra and Vayikraba fill in what happened before the cursing episode. The Midrash expands upon this terse kind of what's going on here.

We don't know much and the Midrash says that he tried to pitch his tent with the tribe of Dan, his mother's tribe, and the men of Dan, of tribe Dan, said to him, what right do you have here? The law says that to camp with the father's tribe, that you have to camp with your father's tribe, and your father was an Egyptian. You have no place with us. He then went to Moshe's court.

He went to appeal to the greatest prophet, the one who was born to an Israelite woman also, but grew up in the house of an Egyptian, and in Moshe's court in the rabbinic mind. You all catching this? This is the rabbi's expansion. Maybe they shouldn't have gone in this direction, but they do.

They say he went to Moshe's court, and there was a ruling. There's no standing for your claim. The law is indeed that tribe goes by the patrilineal descent, and you're only Jewish on your mother's side.

You're only an Israelite, and the ruling stood no tribal affiliation, no camp, no land, and he is left with nowhere to go, and so the Midrash says, he went out, and that verb is so strong. He went out. He went out of the courts.

He went out of his world. He went out of his mind. He went out.

He's gone. This wasn't theology or argument. It was the cry of someone with no doors left to him.

Blasphemy became his last language, and so now here I want to make a turn, because most sermons, and certainly I probably over the last 20 years, my sermons have gone in a particular direction at this moment, typically, and it's a direction that I'm not going to go into tonight, because most sermons will focus now on the blasphemer. And the tragedy of exclusion, about the system that failed him, about the tribe of Dan's cruelty, and that is a very real reading of this story. The Torah does force us to trace that path.

The Torah does name his mother, which is an invitation to this feeling of exclusion. The Torah does show us how exclusion can produce despair, how expulsion can lead to explosion. But here's what I want to say tonight in the most honest way that I can.

The tribe of Don was not wrong. The tribe of Don was not wrong. Tribal identity followed the father's line.

That was the rule. That was the law. The court ruled correctly.

The system was not arbitrary. It had its own logic, and the blasphemer, whatever happened to him, still crossed a line. That was a real line.

He cursed the name. The Torah holds him accountable, and so should we. And so the easy sermon, the one that says, if only the community had been more welcoming, none of this would have happened.

I don't think that's actually what the Torah is teaching us, but neither is the hard sermon either. There's another sermon that this isn't. It's the sermon that says the system was right, case closed.

Tribe of Don was right. There's a teacher named the Ishmetzer Rebbe that I've already spoken about in the shul so many times in the last two decades, Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Lehner of the 19th century Hasidic lineage from the town of Ishmetz. He was one of the most radical and psychologically astute and honest readers of Torah that we had, and he looks at the structure of parashat and more and sees something extraordinary.

He says that the parasha contains five sections before the mo'adot, before we get to the holidays in the parasha, and each one of them, each one of the sections, I'm going to show you two, but there are five, each one of the five sections that preceded the holiday cycle that's in the parasha, each one of those five sections is connected to one complaint that one can lodge against God. Listen to this. He says the first section, which is in the parasha, deals with priests and not allowing them to come into contact with death.

He says there's a grievance, there's a grievance against God, a protest that a human heart must have before God. A Kohen, who is not allowed to be in contact with death, must ask, why is there death at all, like all of us? Why do you, God, allow for absence and loss in the world? The second section is about b'ale mum, those priests who are born, not by choice of their own, but they're excluded from the priesthood, and they have a tar'omas, they have a complaint against God, says the Ishmitzer, Lama bara b'emum, why did you create me with a blemish? If this person was built for the altar, if he was born into a priestly family, why block the door for them? Listen to what the Ishmitzer is saying. He isn't judging, the system is cruel.

He didn't say that the blemish priest is an injustice. The blemish priest can't serve, and the rule remains, says the Ishmitzer, but the Ishmitzer lifts the painful protest as a real, deeply felt wound, a wound that can coexist with faith. To voice it is not immaturity or betrayal, it's the heart's authentic pain, honored as spiritual courage.

The question is not whether the grievance is real, it's certainly real. The question is what happens to the grievance? Does it become prayer, a tar'omet, a holy protest brought before God? Or does it become a curse, the sound of a person who has given up on being heard

inside of the system? So the Ishmitzer says sometimes the right line leaves a holy wound. Sometimes the right lines can still produce a holy wound.

Sometimes the right boundaries can still produce a sacred scar. And the balance and question for all of us is that both can be true at the same time. And how do we hold that and? This and that.

I went to a debate this past week. Two Jews, three Jews, but two Jews debating with one moderating on a stage, arguing about Israel, about what the right posture is for American Jews in this moment, about what constitutes serious engagement with the threats facing the Jewish people and what constitutes dangerous naivete. And I have to be honest with you, I think those of you who know me, you know that I have a position.

I watched one side of the debate and I thought, you are not reckoning with what is actually happening on the ground. You are not seeing things clearly and the cost of your confusion is not abstract. It will be measured in Jewish lives.

And I really believe that. And I also believe this. I don't want that person outside the circle of my care.

I don't want them exiled, even when I feel angry. I want disagreement and I want connection all at once. I want my heart to stretch, not to shrink, even when disagreement hurts me.

And this, holding disagreement and connection, is the hardest spiritual practice that I know. Harder than the open-hearted welcome that is always open-hearted, with no boundaries. Harder than cutting someone off because our boundaries are too rigid.

To look someone in the eye and say to them, I think you're dangerously mistaken and I still refuse to let you go. That is my honest struggle. The tribe of Don kept the law.

The tribe of Don kept the law. This unfortunate reality is like many unfortunate laws or boundaries that have their own reasoning and their own rationale, their own internal coherence, and yet the Torah still names his mother for us. The Torah wants us to know the context in which this arose.

The Torah wants us to feel the pain of this person, to know that he is our father. That he met a boundary, but it wasn't his fault, and we can feel the pain. We don't have to condone what he did.

He didn't need to curse. But the Torah is demanding from us, and I deeply believe this is both a critical read of the text and the story. Critical, not traditional, critical reading of the text, is the Torah wants us to hold both of these things.

The inaccessibility on the one hand, and also the human on the other. This is the Torah's impossible and. The Parsha opens with Amor, speak softly, be responsible for how people hear you.

The adults are responsible for the children, they will watch you, says the Torah. Speak softly, and then the Torah gives us the holidays. These are God's meetings, says the Torah.

These are the times when the community will gather, when everyone has a place, when the calendar will hold you. And then at the very end, the blasphemer. A man who was not wrong to want a place, and who was wrong in what he did, when he didn't get one.

The Parsha doesn't resolve this for us. It doesn't say the community should have made room. It doesn't say the community was right, case closed.

It holds both of those truths side by side and asks us to sit with that discomfort. The Torah is not trying to comfort us. The Torah is aiming for your honesty, not your comfort.

There's a famous story that many of you know in the Talmud in Eruvin, about two schools of thought, one called the house of Hillel, the one other called the house of Shammai. And they disagreed often. They disagreed often.

And the Talmud says to us, that these and these are the words of the living God. Both Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel spoke the truth. But then the Talmud says the law followed Hillel.

Wait a second, they both spoke the truth, why do we follow Hillel, says the Talmud? You just said they were both true. And the answer of the Talmud is because Beit Hillel would teach Beit Shammai's position before it taught its own. It would teach the wrong position, the one it disagreed with vehemently and vocally, you know, just parenthetically.

They disagreed so vehemently that they didn't marry into each other's families. They wouldn't show up at each other's weddings. They were outside the camp.

But Beit Hillel found a way to include Beit Shammai. Beit Hillel found a way to not let go. Beit Hillel found a way to make the mo'adim, the holidays, which are appointed times, and to feel what it would feel like for someone to not be able to be at that appointment.

I don't have an appointment, I don't have a place. What we owe people when we disagree with them is *emor ve'amarta*, as we began the parasha. *Emor ve'amarta*, the doubling of this.

The only place in Torah this week where that language is doubled. Because *emor ve'amarta* is all about speaking in one way, especially when things are difficult and spiritual and sacred. *Emor*, say the truth, don't flinch.

Name the danger, teach the law, draw the boundary, and *ve'amarta*. That's not the content, but the tone that you use. How many people over the last two years have told me, Rabbi, I loved what you said, you're so passionate.

But their tone. Sometimes you were too angry, sometimes I wish you would have dialed it back. The volume, you weren't *ve'amarta*.

It was *emor*, *emor*, *emor*. And when I heard people say that, I said to myself, well, first of all, they could have said, I hated what you said and how you said it. So, at least I felt like, okay, there was a *bracha* there.

It was like, you know, thank you so much. But divrecha chamin benachas mishmayim. The proverb says that the words of the wise are received and heard when they are said gently.

Nachat. Or as a friend of mine used to say, of what use is a truth thrown like a stone into a glass house. To speak the truth, the Torah wants us to speak the truth.

The Torah doesn't shy away. When Moshe goes to find out the law, God gives him the law, okay? There are consequences, there are accountability structures, there are rules. There are philosophies that are naive in my opinion.

But as I sat this past Monday night, or I think it was Monday night or Tuesday night, to listen to this debate, with half of the room nodding when one person said something and the other half nodding when the other person said something. And I looked down the aisle and I saw dear friends of mine, who two, three, four years ago were mamash chavarim, tovim, good friends of mine. And then afterwards we went to a little, I don't know, some reception, kiddush, whatever it was, a reception.

And I saw a dear friend of mine and I really, really don't like what he says about Israel. I gave him a hug and I looked at him, and more via Marta. And more via Marta.

And it's not because softness means that I'm unsure. You know me, and you know yourself, sometimes we're not unsure. But softness is what holds a community together when disagreements are real.

And so, the Fas Emes, before we leave. The Fas Emes, the Ge'er Rebbe, teaches that each of the mo'adim, each of these appointed times, has a nekudah, has a hidden point of light, that returns every year. The same holiness that was present at the first Shabbat is present at every Shabbat.

The door opens again. We come back to the same moment over and over again. And that original spark, the original nekudah, that point, is there embedded in time.

And that's the same, I believe, of every conversation that is true. Every time we open our mouths, the door reopens. You can speak or you can shout it.

You can correct or you can exile. The nekudah is always there. That point is always there.

So here's what I want to leave you with tonight. It's not some big practice. It's just a simple question.

Tonight, over dinner, wherever you go, think of one person in your life that you disagree with. Not someone who's a stranger on the internet that you allowed yourself to really am more, am more, am more. Because, who cares? It's the internet.

But someone who's in your life that you love or loved. Someone whose position on something really matters to you. Political, Israel, how to raise your child together, how to make a band or a song, whatever it is.

How to be Jewish. And whenever you think of the way they think about it makes you want to scream. You just want to scream, tear your hair out.

And then ask yourself, can I hold the disagreement and the person? Can I say, I think you're wrong, without telling them that they're out? I think you're wrong, but you're not out. The Torah says to us, The first word is the truth that you need to speak, and the second word is the love you refuse to let go of. The truth that you need to speak, and the love that you refuse to let go of.

This week's challenge is to hold both of those. Please rise.

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