

Shining Light on Our World - Rabbi David Ingber on Parshat Bereshit 5777 (10 28 16)

It was just last week when I stood here with all of you on Shabbat and I discussed the desire to escape from what I call the tyranny of circles. The tyranny of circles, repetitions, that seem to belie any possibility for emergence or novelty or creative eruption. I shared with you in the name of my dear friend Dr. Erin Laib-Smokler, who is a teacher at Yeshiva Maharat, and she taught in the name of the wisdom masters of our tradition, that the last eight verses of the entire Torah, the last eight verses which describe in detail the death of Moshe, of Moshe Abeno, our teacher Moses, the impossibility of Moshe ever writing those.

Of course, how could Moshe write his own death? And that some wisdom teachers within the Jewish tradition say that he did indeed write them but with his own tears and his tears mixed in together with the ink, yeah? That that mixture, the admixture of ink and salty water, the tears of Moshe as he wrote his own demise, his own inevitable demise, mixed together with the ink, that that was, as it were, a way to acknowledge surrender to that which is impossible to change, an acceptance and a giving in to what is true. And that that ingredient of the tears mixed together with the ink helped to shift a pattern of circles, allowing the circle of the Torah, as it were, to become a spiral, allowing a repetition compulsion to become a repetition propulsion, as it were. Halavai, I wish if that were the case, I wish it on all of us that we have that capacity.

Because here we are again at the beginning of a year and we're going to do it again, everybody. No sooner do we finish the Torah but we start it again tomorrow morning. We circle and we circle and then we come back where we began.

And quoting T.S. Eliot last week, we said, we arrive at where we began but we hope to know it differently this time. Somehow something is hadash, something new happens. There's novelty, there's something unexpected.

So here's an unexpected thought that occurred to me as I was driving to Yeshiva last night with my dear student friend and rabbinic fellow, one of the rabbinic fellows at Ramu Zohar Atkins. We talked, if you remember, about how the end of the Torah and the beginning of the Torah, if you were to open them up, right, if you could open it up, it's not a scroll, it is a circle, but we did circle it, remember, we circle it and we bring the beginning of the Torah all the way to the end as if they're about to touch. And imagine them as a closed circle.

Remember we did this? If you were to look at the Torah as that circle, then what precedes creation, of course, is the end of the story of the Torah. And that the last word in the Torah, which is really the pre-first word, which is the last word, does everybody follow that? The pre-first word of the Torah is the last word of the Torah in that, is the word Yisrael, the Israelites. This is what the rabbis might have been alluding to when they said that Israel came first.

Israel precedes Torah. The whole Torah precedes the whole Torah. And if we were to look at it slightly less abstractly, we might say that before there is creation, there is a we.

We are already born into, created into a Yisrael, a community, a culture, a language. We're already pre-given, as it were, into a world that although we'd like to imagine we come with a tabula rasa, with an empty slate, it doesn't exist. The creation of the world, ex nihilo, which is the fancy term for something out of nothing, is really not so true.

The something comes from something that came from something. We arrive into a world prepared for us, limited for us, defined for us. Before the creation even begins, Yisrael.

And maybe more beautifully, community, we, is a prerequisite for creativity itself. The birth of the self itself needs a we. We are not born alone, even though the Torah says, lo tova yot adam levado, we are never really alone.

Not good for man to be alone, but we're not. We know who we are because of the we that we enter. And in some ways, that obviously limits us, but in other ways, it gives us wings.

The Torah begins with Yisrael. Even before it says, in the beginning. And then the Torah starts.

B'reishit bara Elohim et ha'shamayim et ha'aretz And in the beginning, God creates, in the beginning of God's creating heaven and earth, Ve'ha'aretz hayta tohu vavoh, ve'choshech al'pnei terom And the earth was unformed and confounded and void, and there was darkness on the face of the depths. Va'yomer Elohim hi'or And God said, let there be light. Va'yi'or And there was light.

First thing you notice when you read those verses in the Torah is that darkness precedes light. Before there was light, there was already a pre-given darkness that we entered into. And God responds, as it were, by creating light to counterbalance that darkness.

And maybe the second thing we notice is that God spoke light into being. There is an anomaly, there is something strange about light in the Torah. Because in the creation story, the sources of light are actually not created until the fourth day.

The sun and the moon don't appear until the fourth day, and so it leads the rabbis and bar mitzvah and bat mitzvah students to ask, wait a second, what's up with this light? What is this light that precedes the luminaries, the sources of light? What is the light that is pre-existent to light itself? And like the Yisrael, like the community that precedes creation, there is light that precedes luminaries. And say the rabbis, there was a great light. It was consciousness itself.

A light so pristine, so bright, so luminescent, that one could see, the rabbis say, from the beginning of... Adam could see from the beginning of creation to the end, from one side of the world to the other. It was a light that was so profound and so deep, that it had to be hidden, say the rabbis. Says the psalm, there is a light that is sown, a light that is buried for the righteous to find.

But that this light is the only real light that can counter darkness. And that the evening, and the darkness that we see when the luminaries recede, that's not the real darkness. The darkness is the darkness that we find, and that we bring consciousness towards.

After a week like this week in the Romemu community, a week with two deaths, three deaths in the community, and shivas on the Upper West Side and in Westchester, it's hard not to believe that the beginning of this year started also with that choshech, with that preceding darkness, awaiting light, awaiting those who have eyes to see, to find the hidden light. I heard once from one of my teachers, that when God says, let there be light, it actually isn't God speaking it, but the Torah is telling each and every one of us. Vayomer Elohim, when you say Elohim, when you say things get dark, one should say, let there be light.

That each and every one of us is enjoined, is invited, is commanded, before any other religious obligation or spiritual practice, to be light savers. To be those who actually articulate, there is darkness, let there be light. Vayomer Elohim, a person says to himself, and then we say, Vayomer Elohim, then you say, oh Elohim, it's dark, let there be light.

Vayomer, you should say it, let there be light. I was reading Mark Nepo today, and he was talking about Claude Monet, he was talking about Monet, and he spoke about how Monet, at least many of Monet's most beautiful paintings were painted when he had cataracts. And he writes, I think that his cataracts increased his soul's capacity to reveal light that is inherent in all things.

He goes on to say, the question that life puts before us daily is, how do I keep my heart open and my mind from hardening into its cataracts of opinions and suppositions? How can I surrender years of work and hard-earned conclusions for a greater, fresher engagement in life that suddenly becomes clear? And when I fail, how can I persevere and see what is true through the film of my cataracts? For me, faith in life, that life is leading me into ever deeper waters, into greater awareness, is what I consider the primal religious obligation.

Before there was Torah, there was community. Before there was light, there was dark. And the answer to the darkness was saying there is light. And the answer to community is saying, here I am. And so I want to say that the 40 to 60 people that showed up at Karen's home were light savers.

The 40 to 60 people that showed up two days and three days, and the people that showed up last night at Marci and Scott's home, light savers, were saying, let there be light in the darkness. And they're also expressing the profound truth that before there is creation and rebirth and renewal, there is community. There is Yisrael.

Those two truths are the cornerstone of this community and of any spiritual community, I would argue. And they are the litmus test by which we can measure whether or not a spiritual community is really living its mission. Are we light savers? Do we sow light? Do we look at matter, Ha'aretz, and we say, look, Choshech ha'pnei techom. There is that darkness on the face of the depths. And I step in and say, v'yomer y'hi'or. I say, let there be light here. There is despair over there. Let there be light. There is pain. There is brokenness. There is confusion and confounding. I don't get it. But my role here right now is to be a light saver. V'yomer y'hi'or. Let there be light.

And where do we do that? We weave that together in community. When we show up for each other. When we put aside the things in our lives that we think are so important, or to be there for someone else who desperately needs us to turn on the switch.

So we were all together on Yom Kippur, and each of us received an awakened stone. If you were here, if you didn't, we have plenty left. Awaken, let there be light. Awaken, let there be light. I was just, you know, as I was leaving tonight, you know, it's Halloween, so of course, what do you, my kids are into, you know, everybody here knows my kids are into Star Wars. So literally five minutes before I'm leaving, I get a package from Amazon, and there are these two flashlights that are lightsabers.

And both of my boys are running, well, two of them are running around, not Or, not the one whose name is Light, but the other two are running around with these lightsabers, pointing them. You know, and I don't make this stuff up. Life is so powerful.

From the death of Moshe and his tears, and that infinite abyss between the end of the story and the beginning of the other, we are held in that chasm between ending and beginning with the power of we. And then it starts, and the full throttle of life pushes us forward, and we see darkness, we see obstacle, we see pain, confusion, and then we find the strength, or we ask someone else, we say, I need a little light. Shine some on me, please.

That's what I'm here to do. So as this vicious cycle of darkness in our own country comes to a glorious end, hopefully next week, maybe we will all turn towards the work of healing. Maybe all of us will turn as a culture, as a society, as a community, towards places that need light more than anything else.

We've harnessed, right, fossil fuels, and we talk about alternative energies, but here's an energy that we've spoken about over and over again from the great Christian mystic Teilhard de Chardin, who said that one day after human beings have harnessed gravity and all of the other forces of nature, after we've harnessed wind and solar, we will once again harness love. And when we find love, we will have discovered fire for the second time. I want to bless each and every one of you to find the light that comes before the sun rises and the moon comes out, and to be lights for the sake of a world that is so desperately yearning for that energy.

Let's rise.