

Shabbat Sermon 12 01 17

That word shalom is a really powerful word. It could be related to the word shalva, which means... content or at peace, or restful, shalva. Chill. Chill. It could be related to the word shlemut, or shalem, which means wholeness, to be complete, to get complete, to finish. In the form of shlemut, which is what I want to talk about tonight, shalem. Shalem means something whole, something complete and contained. And it's a word that's often associated with Jacob, which we'll get to in a moment, but it's a word that I struggle with a little bit. It's not just a word, it's an experience, it's a phenomena that I feel... If you're someone who likes to finish jobs, which was certainly not anything that was remotely close to me the first 20 years of my life.

I love to begin things, finishing them, forget about it. I was a beginner, I like to start stuff. I'll leave it to the other people to do the middle part and do the finishing. That's what you get when you're born in Aries, that's it. I just like to start things. And at a certain point in my life, I like to also see them through to the end, maybe around the time that I had kids, who knows. It kind of does that to you, you kind of start something and then you want to also be there in the middle and at the end. But ending is hard in a world where things that are very complicated and very complex and very painful often, or very big projects don't necessarily lend themselves to that feeling of, oh, I'm done, right? Oh, I've arrived, I've finished, it's over. And maybe even more strongly, what do we do? What do I do? I struggle with this, thinking about this.

What do you do in a world where there is so much healing that has to happen? So much needs to be completed. So many systems that are broken need to be re-broken and then re-constituted. What do we do when there is a sense that we don't know if we'll see it to the end? We don't even know if from one moment to the next that there is an end to it, it feels interminable. Maybe you feel that way sometimes too in your lives, maybe you have that experience sometimes of thinking, will this ever end? What if I can't complete this? What if no one can complete it? And what if it's really true that Shlemut or completion is out of reach? What's the secret to those who don't give up? What's the secret to those who, when faced with something that feels as if it can't be completed, continue to plug away?

And I'm thinking about this so deeply this week because we had a Romemu healing service this past Monday night at the JCC of Manhattan, and it's an incredible experience for me personally. We were there with Nadav and with Laura, and as I was preparing myself to do a healing service, the question as a rabbi and as someone who holds prayer services pretty regularly, every day and week, what's a healing service? And that's what people were asking. Like rabbi, they were calling out and saying, what's a healing service? And the more I thought about it, you know, is it a healing service, is it going to be laying on of hands, are we going to put yarmulkes on people, are people going to speak in tongues, what's it going to look like? It became uber clear to me, super, super, super clear that every service is a healing service.

Every service is a healing service. So I took out my trusty book that took me through my 20s, by Stephen Levine, Aleva Shalom, blessed be his name, he was an incredible teacher, another Jew-Boo, Jewish-Buddhist, who wrote a book, the first book I wrote was Who Dies,

the first book I read, and this book, Healing Into Life and Death, this is a book to have by your bedside. And I opened up and I, I heard him talking about what it was like for him to work with cancer patients and friends, friends and family who were terminally ill. People who were, without a doubt, looking at the end, there was no shlemot in their healing. They would come and say, when will I be fully healed, when will I come to a place of refuah shle-ma? Refuah shle-ma, complete healing, healing in body, heart, mind and spirit, complete. And when that definition won't include being cancer-free, what do you say, he asks.

And he answered very simply, he said healing must move, he said, from being something you complete to something you find where it is available. The question is not when healing will be complete, but what healing is available now? What is the healing context in this moment? And we can't know. For any one person, what healing is being invited at that moment? What healing can be found now? What healing can be found now? And he walked into people's rooms and he said, what healing can be found right now? And he invited them into an exploration of their illness and exploration of their pain and vulnerability and he asked them, invited them to reframe healing as completion, where you are completely healed, to healing as invitation to meet it where it is.

Man, Jacob, our forefather Jacob, the patriarch Jacob Yaakov, knows this so well. And I said earlier that Jacob is associated with the word Shalom or Shalem. Vayavo Yaakov Shalem. Jacob comes to a place called Sukkot. Shalem says the Torah tomorrow morning. He comes whole to a place called Sukkot. It's the only time the word Shalom is used with the patriarch. It's with Jacob. And can you imagine? There is nothing about Jacob at that moment that is complete. In fact, a couple of verses before this in the great wrestling match that Rabbi Meyer alluded to in the beautiful Emily Dickinson poem Pin the Ale at a place called I have seen God face to face. Jacob has come face to face with that which he has been running away from his whole life, that which is behind him. It's the angel of something, some encounter, literally an encounter. They are face to face and Jacob wrestles with something, someone. Some say it's the angel of his brother Esau who was having a wrestling match on a spiritual dimension in order for him to be able to meet Esau. Something in Jacob moves from running from to facing forward. And in that great moment of the wrestling he gets wounded in the sciatic nerve. And then the Torah tells us Va'yizrach lo ha'shemesh ka'asher avar et pinnu el And the sun shone for him. And he was limping from his thigh. The sun shone for him. Va'yizrach lo ha'shemesh The sun shone for him. See the Rabbis, did it only shine for Jacob? All of a sudden the sun is shining only for Jacob? Va'yizrach lo ha'shemesh And the sun shone for him.

It's interesting, Va'yizrach ha'shemesh And the sun came up. But instead the Torah tells us that the sun shone for him. Why would the Torah need to tell us it shone just for Jacob? Says Rabbi Akiva, because at that moment the sun met him exactly where he was. Va'yizrach lo ha'shemesh says Rabbi Akiva Va'yizrach lo ha'shemesh And the sun shone for him. And the sun shone for him. There's a sun that comes out to meet us where we are willing to be met in the healing that is being requested in that moment. That only we have access to. We are the only ones. Someone sitting right next to us in this room right now.

Who's going, wow, I can't believe the Rabbi is still talking. And right next to him, her, you, whom I know. Someone's having a healing. They've invited in a healing. Will it be a complete healing? No, Jacob's going to be limping for the rest of his life. That limp that is his actual

gate. It's his actual honest place. But it's the healing that he invited in. His story is not over yet.

He will still struggle with issues. He will still struggle with his own nature. He'll be Jacob and Israel, but something happens here in this moment that is absolutely radically significant. It is Shalem, even if it is not Shlemut. It is whole in this moment, even if it isn't complete. Healing in moments is significant. Relinquishing the idea that we will finish this work.

My teacher, Rabbi Zalman, has a recording called Into Your Blessed Hands, and as he was coming to the end of his life, he made this meditation where he said, you know, there's so much more work to do in this world, God, but I leave it in your blessed hands. I did the work that I came to do. I invited the healing that I thought I could heal. I healed what I could. I was healed by what I could be healed by, and I let go of the notion that it could be completed or that it would be.

Lo alecha ham l'chali g'mor. It's not up to us to finish the work, but we're not free not to do it. Now, if you think about this in terms of our country, of our community, our country, every single week, we feel as though is there going to be another revelation of something diseased in our culture? And there's a moment where you say to yourself, wow, could it get any worse? And it's like, yes. It could. Him too. That's the hashtag. Him too.

There's a healing going on in our country, and we don't know when it will be over. And with each day, there's another moment of healing that we invite in, and we say, this is a healing context. This small amount of healing will heal what needs to be healed. Shadow will come up. We will face what we have been running away from. And the Torah is telling us, and Jacob is telling us, there's a wholeness that comes in parts. There's a wholeness that comes in parts. There are minor victories.

Each and every time I go home, and there's a particular issue that I'm working with, with my family or with my constellation, there's a moment of vulnerability where I say to myself, is it going to be like this forever? You all know that moment of pain. You're in a conversation you've had one million times with your beloved partner, and the mind goes to that story and says, will it always be like this? Is this going to be the same pattern of our conversation? I want it to be once and for all finished. It's done. We already fought that out. It's over. And there it comes again.

So there's Jacob limping every time that happens, and the sun shone on him. It shone on the healing he needed at that moment. It would shine again for someone else differently in another moment.

Stephen Levine, healing isn't complete because it's finished. Healing is complete because we find it where it appears to us. So while we're looking for the cure to every known disease and social and physical and everything else, we could walk by the healing that is needed on that street corner. The healing that was needed in that encounter in this shul. In our rush to finish the service, we might miss someone who needs service. In our rush to get where we need to go to finish what we need to finish, we might miss exactly what the sun was shining for in that moment.

Thank God for Jacob. Thank God for the limp that was incomplete but that pointed towards all of our vulnerabilities. All of those places in us that are in need of healing because every service is a healing.

So what needs to be healed in you? Tonight, tomorrow, next week? And what might be the very next invitation you send out to that healing? You are invited to a party. It's not to celebrate the completion of my healing but the healing that I invited last Tuesday at 10.05. I found the sun there. It shone on me, for me.

May the sun shine on all of us where it needs to shine. May healing proceed one invitation at a time. And may all of our services point towards that greater healing that we all yearn for. May it come soon. And we say Amen.

Please rise.