

Shabbat 01 12 17 Sermon

You know, some patterns start really, really early in our lives. For many of us, if we were to find the roots and dig deep, deep, deep to the place where we think things begin, El Hasharashim, El Hasharashim, into the place of where it all starts, we couldn't go earlier maybe than our own birth, or maybe we could, perinatal, transgenerational, but at least for me, we'll start with my birth. I was late then, and I've never stopped.

Two minutes, so the myth goes in my family, although I don't believe it at all, it must have been more than that, my poor mother, I have a twin brother, two minutes later than him. Being late is frustrating. Being late when the thing you're late for is so urgent and so profoundly important that you'd be on time for it. I found myself there this past week when I was desperately trying to make it back for our dear Carol Hart's funeral. I was rushing to say goodbye.

I wasn't planning to be in Boulder when the amazing Carol Hart passed away. And so there I was, wanting to have a chance to offer words, stories, reflections on what it was like to be in her orbit. The gravitational pull she had was profound. I wanted to talk about what it was to be the beneficiary of her loving gaze or her very gentle word of rebuke. After all, as I like to jokingly say to her, you, Carol, were really my rabbi. I wanted to share that.

And so there I was, booking a very early flight this last Monday morning, desperately trying to get back, knowing that there was a very short window and almost everything had to align, all the stars and all the planets. Made it in to JFK, thought I was going to do it, but then, of course, the bag carousel. And the endless petitionary prayer that I offered for my bag to be the next one. And then the obligatory traffic on the way back into the city, and so I was late. Maybe too late.

Is there ever such a thing as too late? My dear brother, Dr. Martin, spoke in his famous speech beyond Vietnam, the time to break silence, spoke of a fierce urgency of the now. Of a sense that a moment in history, a moment in culture, a moment in society might actually be at hand and we might be late to it or might find ourselves, because of our lack of urgency, in deep regret, in deep remorse. A sense that something was there and now it's gone and the ship sailed.

The bag didn't come on time, the funeral was over, and all we're left with is an intense sense of missed opportunity with its gravity, with its burden, with its nagging and gnawing at us. Can it be too late? This is the question that our wisdom scroll wants to place directly at our feet tomorrow morning around the world, around the globe, in every synagogue where there will be read the story of Vayera, where God will appear to Moshe in the ongoing saga of everyone's resistance to be free.

Everybody doesn't want to be free. Pharaoh doesn't want to be free, Moses doesn't want to go, the Israelites don't want to be free. Moses has already come to them and said, hey, I'm here, I'm the guy, let's go, hey. And the Israelites are like, no thanks. You, you, you are the prince of Egypt. We don't know who you are. And as for God, we're not really sure either.

In fact, there was a crisis of redemption that is at the heart of the Yitzhak Mitzrayim story, the story of the exodus from Egypt. At its core is the fundamental truth that we don't want to be free. Or maybe we do.

But what's at stake for us, what's absolutely radically at stake is a sense of trust. And the Israelites have no reason to trust either Moses or the God who sent him. And so the Parsha of tomorrow morning will begin with God's exasperated argument with Moses, his prophet. He'll say to him, Moses, you're wondering why I sent you? I appeared to the prophets, I appeared, excuse me, to the Avot, to the patriarchs with a name, El Shaddai. I appeared to them with some unique logon code. But I haven't made that known yet to the Israelites who are in Egypt. O Shmi Adonai, lo non dati lahem. I have not made that name known to them. They don't know the power that I'm about to unleash.

And the commentaries ask, what is going on here with God and Moses? A name, they didn't know this name, that name. What's the difference? What's in a name? One very interesting commentary says here. You see, the patriarchs were made promises. We promised God, said, I made so many promises to them. I promised them that they would have land and they would have progeny, it would be great. Bitcoin, everything, they got it all. But they didn't see it through to the end. They have every reason, and so do their descendants, to wonder whether or not I am someone who can see the job through all the way to the end.

When Moses arrives, the Israelites are saying, it's too late. You see, there was this intense urgency of the now about 200 years ago, Moses, when we were already in slavery. And you've come about two centuries too late, or two decades too late, or two minutes too late. The bags in the carousel in Midian were not happening fast enough, and you arrive here in Egypt, and you think it's all going to be good, and then we reject you, and then you go back to God, and God says, tell the Israelites, here's something to remember.

And Dr. Martin, I love him, and love you, but you know that you weren't absolutely right about this, because here we are again, and it's not too late. Here we are again, as a country, as a culture, as a society, here we are again, and the urgency of now is now, and we're not too late. For many, we are. Not for the children. Not for those who come from S-hole countries. Not for the men, and the women, and the transgender, and the intersex. Not for me, for you, for all of us here, it's not too late.

Martin, oh Martin, we still feel the fire of your heart in our bones, and God said to Moshe, go back and tell the Israelites, I'm the one who made a promise, and I will see it through to the end. I will see it through to the end. Ne'man ani, I am trustworthy. Tell them that their cynicism, while warranted, won't help them. Their sense of timing, while justified, won't release them. There is a fierce urgency of now, tomorrow, and yesterday, and next week, and we can live with that tension between what we must do today, and what will be left over next week for us to continue to do. So let me just move through this for another moment before we come in for a landing here.

Moses doesn't take God's advice. God reassures him, and Moses says, me, I can't speak. And then the text interrupts with a long lineage of who Moses is and where he comes from, and then we come back again in the Torah to yet another moment, Moses will go to the people, they will reject him one more time as if to say, wow, it is really bad. And once again, Moses

will say, I am not worthy. He will resist. I can't speak. You got the wrong guy. Go find someone else.

And at this point we're thinking, wow, if God promises to you that it's going to be okay, you still? We still? And then this amazing moment, and this is what I want to unpack for the next five minutes, and then we're going to sing our way out. Chapter seven of the book of Exodus begins, Behold, God says to Moses, now after all of your resistance, all of your no, all of your doubt, all of your, I have placed you, Elohim, the Pharaoh. Anybody who knows Hebrew is going to be stuck here. I have placed you, Elohim, the Pharaoh, literally means, I have placed you as a God above Pharaoh. And Aaron, your brother, will be your prophet.

This is it, folks. When I grew up, I thought Moses was the one who takes the Jewish people out of Israel. I was the one. I thought, Moses finally got it that he's the chosen one. He's called, and it all works out. It's a happy ending. It's only one person that takes the Israelites out of Egypt. It's just one. Good old Mo.

And all of a sudden, at this pivotal moment, a moment where Moses has essentially convinced God that he is incapable of leading the Jewish people out of Israel, out of Egypt. God makes a pivot. God does this crazy God thing. He says, now, Moshe, you're God. And Aaron will be your prophet. I've placed you as God above Pharaoh. Elohim. I'm placing you above Pharaoh. And Aaron, your brother, will be your prophet. No, it's not you alone, Moses. It's going to be you with someone else. Someone that in Biblical story up to this point is the very epitome of the enemy. Your older brother who was not chosen.

The entire Exodus narrative now will pivot on a remarkable relationship between a younger brother who was chosen and an older brother who wasn't chosen. And the two of them become a team, a tag team for love. I will place you who think that you can't do it. You can't. You will go with your brother. The very one in every Biblical story who is your enemy. The one who is jealous of you. Who is contemptuous of you. The one who wants what you have. The one who is fighting with you. We won't get out of Egypt unless you take my hand and we see that the only way to be free is you and me. Just you and me. Not free to be me. Free to be I. The redemption story pivots on a relationship between two people who have every reason Biblically not to like each other.

We can imagine Aaron the priest on the couch in a therapist office in Egypt going there's my brother again. First he made it up to the palace. He didn't have to struggle the way I did. And then now he's going to be God's prophet. Re'eh, God says. Re'eh, look Moses. You're right. You have speech impediments. It's all good. But you can't do it alone. Re'eh Nesatichel Elohim. I'm making you God over Pharaoh. And Aaron he is going to be your prophet. Hand in hand you will lead them out. Hand in hand you will remind the Jewish people of what it is to be together hand in hand.

So let's imagine a world like that where in every Egypt in every exile in every narrow place we say take my hand. To our Haitian brothers and sisters take my hand. To our African brothers and sisters take my hand. Pharaoh doesn't want that. Because Pharaoh understands that the ultimate immigrant in this world is God. The ultimate immigrant in this world is a God who said welcome me in and I will come wherever you welcome me that's

where I will be. But until you welcome me in we are the people of the door. I said last year. We are not the people of the book.

That's nice. We are the people of the door. We left Egypt through the doorway that every people after us will also walk through and we are invited enjoined required obligated to be the ones who remember the door. And stand by that door. In our homes in our communities in our country in this world to say let me welcome you into this place. Moses and his brother together brothers holding hands sisters holding hands cousins holding hands communities of faith holding hands cities of trust holding hands sanctuaries holding hands those who resist the tyranny of pharaonic egotism and instability hold hands.

Those who call on all of us to remember brother Martin's words when he said this is the calling of the children of God. Our brothers and sisters who wait eagerly for our response. He said let us not imagine that there is something that can keep us from molding a recalcitrant status quo with bruised hands until we have fashioned it into a brotherhood. There is nothing to keep us from molding a recalcitrant status quo with bruised hands until we have fashioned it into a brotherhood a sisterhood a world that is built upon ecumenism rather than sectionality. There's never been a better Shabbat. There's never been a better story than this story in which to lift us up this week a week in which we as Americans can hang our heads in shame for a leadership that that seeds divisiveness and enmity between us but welcome a king a king who invited us to dream and a woman who sat right here and shined her heart on mine and all of yours for years in a Parsha that is built upon names.

Carol Hart sat in our midst, brought her indigenous faith, her belief in the power of the mothers and grandmothers to bring healing; and will be remembered forever in cultural immortality for her belief in the words of scripture lest ye be as little children you shall not enter the kingdom that the children will lead the way. Sorry Carol it's not appropriate to give a eulogy on Shabbat and I'm sorry I was late but I thank you I thank you for reminding all of us that if we take your hand then each of us can be free to be you and me in a land that is great from sea to shining sea. May Carol's memory bless our lives and may each and every one of us be inspired and lifted up by the memory of a great woman and a king and a stammering stuttering brother who was told to reach out a hand for the sake of freedom. Amen.

Please rise