

Mezuzahs and Doors - Rabbi David Ingber on Parshat Bo 5777 (2 3 2017)

You all know this one. I know you all know this one. If you've been in New York for a minute, a half a minute, and you've walked down to a subway, maybe it's the 1, the 2, the 3, the 4, the 5, the 6, the alphabets, it's the new one, it's the old one. Everybody here, I think, is familiar with rush hour on a subway platform in New York City. And so there I was with my new routine, bringing Bear, my eldest son, every day to school, and we get on the subway at 96th Street, and it is packed. And we squeeze into the subway car. But there's always that one guy, that one person, who knows, I've been that person, they don't want to move from the door. Right? So we all know this, this is part of our culture, you move from the door, you step out of the subway so that others can get on to the subway. But no, he wasn't having it, because he wanted to stay next to the door.

You're all nodding, because I know, how many people have done that? Come on, come on. I'm not even going to ask how many people did it on the way up here. You know, there's Tal in the back. It's just common courtesy. But something happens, right? Something goes like, I'm not stepping out, because then if, well, who knows, am I going to be able to get back on the train? If I get off the train, and I let you on, there might not be any room left for me. See, the door that was open for me, and now open for you, might close for me, and not for you. And then I'll be waving as you go. So we just stay there, right? And so there I was on the subway this week, and it was almost an altercation. How can you not move out of the way? So rude.

Doors and doorways. Entering and leaving. Coming and going. That's been on all of our hearts this week, right? How we get in, who gets in, who doesn't get in. It's been a long week, thinking about gatekeepers, and those who are left behind gates. Doors and doorways. Entering and leaving. How we accommodate those who want to enter or not. It's an essential core piece of our human story. Boundaries, permeability, relationships. All of that is what it means to be human. And it is certainly part of the Jewish self-understanding.

Part of what we tell ourselves as Jews in our narrative. Doors and doorways are fundamentally about liminality. About the in-between, about the spaces, whether they are physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, where we are literally in-between.

We are betwixt, we are transitioning, we are moving or not. Doors have all of that. And here in this crucial difference between what is inside and outside, where that is delineated, where boundaries are made and crossed, we as a people have been known from time immemorial as those who cross over.

We are the children of Abraham, of the Ivri, the one about whom it was said, He is on one side of the world and we are on the other side. We know what it is to be boundary crossers. We know what it is. And the intensity of that human reality is such that Adam Phillips, the great psychoanalyst when he was writing about Freud, the great Jew who bequeathed to us in the 20th and 21st century a theory of human development said, every child who is born into this world is born an immigrant. Each and every child is a boundary crosser. Each and every child is a boundary crosser.

Child of glory or not comes into an unknown world whose culture will have to be learned. We begin life as immigrants, as boundary crossers, as those who leave and who enter, who come and go life's doorways. And so it should come as no surprise to anybody here and if you have been at Romemu for maybe 5 minutes in the last couple of years, know that I have a big thing with doors. And I have a big thing with doors because the Jewish tradition has a big thing with doors. The Bible has a big thing about doors. In fact, tomorrow morning in the weekly wisdom the parsha, the way that we that we glean what we need to know in order to live life in a healthy, flourishing way, right? The parsha, the biblical portion of the week is called Bo.

It is, in the book of Exodus, it is the last three of the ten plagues. And it brings us right up to chapter 12. We're in chapter 12 of the book of Exodus. We are given the right of the Paschal Lamb. The right of the Paschal Lamb, which almost everyone I can imagine has heard of on some level. The right of the Paschal Lamb is that Moses is given a commandment by God a chodesh hazeh lachem, rosh chodeshim. Everybody, tell all of the Jews who are living in the land of Egypt to take mishchul kechul, take a lamb into your house. Take the God of Egypt into your house on the 10th day of the month. And leave it in your house.

And as our wisdom master said, all of them from the sefer hachinuch to the Rambam and sefer hamitzvot and to the kuzeri, all of them say four long days for you to hold in your home the God of Egypt. That's scary. Four days to come close to that power that you don't believe in, but that others empower. Four days of waiting and wondering will they find out. Four long days of fear and anxiety and I don't know and uncertainty and what will be. Four long days from the 10th day of the month of Nisan to the 14th day of the month of Nisan you have this lamb.

And then says the Torah in chapter 12, slaughter the lamb. Slaughter the lamb and catch its blood in one of the most pagan and deeply shamanistic rituals in our tradition. Take that blood and bring it to the door post. And put blood all around the door post, not just on the sides but on the top. Make it a full entry, exit of blood. And that will be a sign for you, say the rabbis ,not for the Egyptians because it's on the inside of the home. It'll be a sign for you it'll be a sign for you, me, all of us that at that doorway is the blood of the thing you feared the most that you slaughtered. And now go through it. Go through that fear, go through that God that isn't really a God and find freedom.

That becomes in our tradition the mezuzah. That is the transition from blood to ink. We write on door posts everywhere we go a protective amulet that reminds us that we must pass through fear to find freedom. That we must be willing to be reborn. That is of course, right, that is the birth canal every doorway is a birth canal. Can you leave behind what you knew even if it was really crappy? For what you don't yet know and can't be guaranteed will be great. And don't think it's going to be easy. And don't think it will come without a cost. And don't think that you won't be anxious. And don't think that the ground underneath your feet will continue to rumble. Don't think for a minute that doorways are smooth passage. Doorways involve courage, heart.

That's our mezuzah. That is our shamanistic ritual enacted in every home for 2,000 some odd years we transform blood into law and into story. And for me in particular there is a

very, very powerful resonance. Because I happen to be a big Hebrew guy. I like Hebrew a lot. I like Hebrew in the letters and I find significance and my name, David from the time I was a young man and one of my teachers said to me, you know the meaning of the word David is beloved. And I said, yeah, thank you. And he said, but if you look at it it's two letters. It's just a dalet and a vav. The fourth letter and the sixth letter of the Hebrew alphabet. And every letter in Hebrew is a word. Every letter in Hebrew is also a word. So a dalet, the fourth letter the dalet of David, of DVD is door. Your name, he said, is door hook door. Because a dalet is a door and a vav is a hook.

He said, you have a door on the front of your name and a door on the end and in the middle you have a connection. And I can't help but think about that teaching when after the Paschal offering is offered and after we hear the instructions, the Torah tells us something radical about the door post and about the Paschal offering and about freedom about what it means. The Torah will tell us in chapter 12 of Exodus tomorrow morning, that after you will leave Egypt and you will arrive in the promised land and you will then do the Paschal offering every single year in chapter 12, verse 49. I'm sorry, verse 48. If you will have an immigrant who will live with you and will want to do the Paschal offering with you remember let them become let them join your people and be like an Ezra, be like a resident in your in your community.

And then the great line of the Torah, verse 49 Let there be one Torah one law, one one teaching for the resident and for the immigrant who lives with you. You can't imagine how profoundly radical that verse is in our Torah. You can't. If I'm running away from the Egyptians and the door closes behind me everything in me wants to say, this is about us. It's about Jews. It's about us against them and them or anyone who wanted to enslave us, anyone who wanted to hurt me or you my heart says, you know, I'm done.

I'm done. I made it on to the subway and I'm not altogether sure that if I let you on there'll be enough room for me I'm not altogether sure that the freedom that I'm speaking about is the same freedom that you are speaking about, you ger, you resident, you immigrant, you someone with a different culture who happens to be living three blocks away from me but also wants to participate and the Torah says, that ger, that resident alien that stranger, that immigrant Torah achat, one teaching, one law one rule for the one whom you know and the one you don't know. Make room on your subway, the Torah says. Make room. Make room. Make space.

And lest you think it's only in the Bible, each and every one of you I'm sure has been to a seder and every single Passover ritualized meal begins with an opening of the door. What's with the door? What's with the dalet? We open the door, we say you know, kol dikh vinyeseh v'yichol everybody who wants to eat, come in and join our seder. It's a family and then we open it again for Elijah the prophet.

The door it's so clear, it is so clear, thank you, it is so clear that the most natural human desire is to protect ourselves. The fundamental human desire is to make sure that I'm gonna be okay. It's Maslow's most basic human level of development. Every animal will protect itself, every culture will protect itself, every society will protect itself, every religion will protect itself, every marriage, I'll protect itself. It will be about me and us and the response to fear naturally is usually fear. I'm afraid of fear, I'm afraid to be afraid, I'm afraid of what

might happen. And the Torah says let me throw a wrench in your fear. You're gonna leave Egypt and you're gonna close one door you're gonna walk through that mezuzah. It's gonna birth you. You finished your deleting, you walked through vav, connect to another door. Open another door every Shabbat, which is a mezuzah itself. A doorway between the week that came and the week that's coming stands as a liminal space between what was and what will be. We turn to the door, we say come on in beloved Dodi. Come on in let me give you a hand that's at JFK or at the Brooklyn courthouse on Saturday night saying come on in.

You were probably thinking that on every single mezuzah throughout Jewish history there are the three letters of God's name—Shaddai the God of enoughness, Shomer Daltot Yisrael, the one who guards the Dalets, or maybe you were just doing what my friend Rabbi Ayelet Cohen did this past fall. Some of you might remember this story but I was brought back to it because Rabbi Cohen's father passed away and I went to pay her a shiva call this week, and her amazing father Stephen Cohen was a bridge maker a peacemaker. He brought peace behind the scenes in Israel, he never got credit for what it was to bring down the walls between Egypt, of all places in Israel and I was sitting with her and I remembered this story from this past fall.

Ayelet was on the very same platform that I started off the story tonight with she was on that platform and it all happened in an instant the doors opened and she got on the subway, it wasn't as crowded as it was for me this morning and a woman standing right next to her who was trying to control, she had a 4 year old and a 2 year old and the 2 year old ran away from her and broke out of her grip just as the 4 year old stepped onto the subway and the doors closed and everything after that happened in slow motion she said, the child started to scream the mother started to scream and everyone on the train froze but Ayelet. And I know this because I saw her after the story and her hands were black .she stuck her hands in the door she stuck her hands in the door and she started pulling the door she started pulling the door and she wouldn't let the doors close. She wouldn't let the doors close. Shomeret del Tok Israel she was watching out for those Dalets for that liminal space.

That is the hallmark of what it is to be a Jew, is to be the one who holds the doors open. Who doesn't allow those doors to close between mother and child. Between dreamers and those who live their entire lives in the safety and security of a land that has a mezuzah with a torch right at the door.

And saying, give me your tired, your poor. That's what it is to be enough. That's what it is to walk the walk. That's what it is for each and every one of us. Not just politically, but here in this moment. It's a busha, it's an embarrassment if we lose the high ground of fighting with love. For the simple regression into anger and hatred and othering. We are sons and daughters of Dalit. We are not the people of the book, we are the people of the door. So we take our hands and we say no. No doors closing here. We keep it open. We keep it open. Give me your tired, give me your poor. Shaddai, there's enough. There's enough. Refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, your homeless, tempests tossed to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door. Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free. Refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, your homeless, tempests tossed to me.

Please rise.