

Romemu Dvar Torah December 16, 2016

Every year in November, for the last, I think, four years, I've been invited to do a full-day workshop at an amazing interfaith seminary called the One Spirit Interfaith Seminary in New York. And this year, I chose a particularly, for me, an interesting topic, something that I've taught about before, and various titles. It's kind of a sexy thing to talk about. When Moses met the Buddha. Or, like, I sometimes say, when Judah met the Buddha. The integration of Eastern and Western philosophy, looking at the two stories, both the essential teachings of Judaism and what is called sometimes a Judeo-Christian tradition, I'd say, the Buddhist tradition and some of the Eastern religions, and how they share in various places and some of the things that are dissimilar about them. So one of the things that I love to talk about, of course, is the misunderstanding that most of us have in the West of what the Buddha meant when he gave over the four noble truths, the four basic truths of reality.

The Buddha said, the first truth of life is suffering, is dukkha, dukkha. And, you know, when I was growing up with a vast misunderstanding of Buddhism, it was kind of like, oh, they're so negative. We Jews are positive. Usually said before Yom HaShoah day, but anyway, Buddhists are always on the downside of things. It's always negative, and that's a complete misunderstanding of what the Buddha was saying. Buddha was saying that life as we know it, whether it's pleasurable or painful, always leads to suffering. Pain is not suffering, but suffering is the clinging or the aversion to what is, or the creation of a story about something that has no story or a self where there is no self. Essentially, life is suffering because of the things that we add to it, the ways that things move from one cause to an effect and cause to an effect.

Another moment of Buddhism is, of course, the introduction of karma. The rule, as the Buddha articulated, that there are natural effects to the causes that we put in motion. And we Jews have a very similar notion of that, skharva onesh, reward and punishment, that for every cause or every action, there is a reaction. There is something out in the world that is conscious and that we, as we interact with that world, we are ourselves in a dynamic dialogue of devotion, as it were, with those details. Cause and effect, cause and effect. Maybe the entirety of Judaism, Yom Kippur, right? Nobody would miss Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur is the sum total of your causes set in motion that you have come to try to do tikkun, to fix in some way. Karma, on the one hand, and on the other hand, tikkun, fixing. Or what is known also in our tradition, in the Jewish tradition, as tishuvah, to return, to make better. Or to reap what you sow. To reap what you sow. And one of the things, one of the insights of the Buddha was that reality is moving with such rapidity. There's so much that happens so quickly, right? That the moment's cause is the next moment's effect, and the next moment's cause, and so on.

And there's this causation, this causative chain, that makes it almost impossible to break. It's almost impossible to break the chain of suffering. Or we might say it's almost impossible to do tishuvah, to change a pattern. Patterns seem to come so quickly, and with such force. And I know, because I'm a fast guy. I'm fast, I have always been fast.

My whole life has been fast. And one of the things that I remember as a kid, my mom saying to me, is that you have good reflexes. You have good reaction time, she would say. You're

fast. Right, when we say you have good reaction time, we think, oh, that person is quick. Right, you're fast. I was a goaltender, many of you know, in hockey. And sometimes, out of nowhere, I haven't played hockey in years. But sometimes, out of nowhere, out of the corner of my eye, something will be falling off a table. And before I know it, I'm like this. I got it, I'm fast. And fast is not good when it comes to breaking patterns. In fact, fast and patterns, or reaction, and the perpetuation of suffering, and the perpetuation of something unhealthy, something that isn't leading to your, my, our nourishment, our flourishing in the world, something that increases suffering. One of the core elements, everybody, is speed. We move through things so quickly.

One thing happens, another thing happens before you know it, there you are again. I was walking down the road, and there was a pit. I'd seen it before, but before I could even think twice about going around it, I went in, fell down again. Speed and breaking patterns don't work well together. I found that out again this week. It's not like I needed to learn a lesson, but I found that again. Because in haste this week, I fell into an old pattern, and there I was in the midst of creating and perpetuating suffering. It was something that I've seen a million times, and a million times I've fallen. And I met with a friend of mine, my friend Peter Bregman, board member, great teacher, author of a number of books on basically living a more wholesome and more efficient, more productive, a better life, basically.

And Peter said, you know, you gotta go read my book. I said, here's what it looks like, he said. Life is basically an event or a stimulus. There is the reaction, and then there is the outcome that you want. There's the stimulus or event, there's the reaction, and then the outcome. Sounds like Judaism, Buddhism 101.

We all know this to be true. We have a stimulus, we have an event, we have some moment, right? We want the bus to come, it doesn't come. We wanted that seat on the subway, we didn't get it.

We wanted, we wanted, we wanted, we thought, we thought, we thought, we had something, there was an event, it met us, and we had our reaction to it. And that reaction sometimes is coming from compassion, sometimes it's coming from wholeness, sometimes it's actually fresh, it's new, but more often than not, our reactions are not new at all. In fact, reactions by definition, usually when they happen so quickly, there's nothing new under the sun.

We react the same way we reacted last time and the time before and the time before and the time before and the time before. Event, reaction, and outcome. And great leaders, you said, great leaders and great human beings have what the Buddhists might call a wedge of awareness, what we might call a moment of stopping and reflecting and pausing right between the event and how we react to it.

There might be a big gap that is opened, maybe not so big, maybe just this big, maybe a wedge, a moment, a stopping, maybe as he writes in his book, just one four-second period which allows for one breath. One breath that stops you from getting pissed off, one breath that stops you from being jealous, one breath that stops you from using power instead of influence, one breath that stops you from criticizing instead of understanding, one breath that stops you from speaking when you should be listening, one breath, one four-second

interval that can change the world. And at a time in our world when we're talking about temperament and about hands on devices and keys and all of what it means to be a leader, that's the conversation. Leadership is how much space is between event and my reaction to it and how I choose based upon the outcome I want. If I want fighting, I can get fighting. If I want anger, I can get anger. If I want love, I can choose differently, says every tradition. We are not trapped in a cycle of event, reaction, outcome that is unhealthy. If we don't believe that, nothing moves.

If we don't believe that there can be spaciousness between what was and what is and what could be, then what are we doing here? What's our practice? Our practice is to become masters of that territory, to put a flag of love there on that space. We know events will happen, but we don't know how they have to, like what the end of them, how they have to be. That triumph of hope over inevitability is the promise of every spiritual tradition that's worth anything.

The promise of hope over inevitability, of something that might change. In a world where we don't see change, really, we see change all the time. Peter, in his book, *Four Seconds to Changing Your Life*, told a story where he said he was walking down 48th Street one day, midtown Manhattan, and he saw a man well-dressed in a nice suit, shiny shoes, coifed hair, and a leather briefcase, and he brushed by Peter as he was walking down the street, and he saw him turn his head and spit out his gum.

He kept his eyes, Peter did, on the wad of gum to be sure that he didn't step on it. The gum flew maybe three feet, and it bounced off a tree, hit the wind, and it rolled back onto the sidewalk, landing right underneath the shoe of the man who spit the gum. And as the man's heel lifted off the ground, he saw this cycle, this cycle of having a reaction only to have it boomerang back, karmically, tikunly, into the foot of this man. Reflect, resist, replace. Reflect, resist, replace.

Reflect, resist, replace is the story of Jacob tomorrow morning. Every single year, we hear about Jacob, and we hear about his struggles. Jacob is me, he's you, he's all of us. Jacob is the man who is on the run. Jacob has been suffering from the moment he was born, grasping the heel of his brother Esau, the second one, the one who doesn't yet quite get it. The one who has to lie in order to receive the blessing of his father Isaac, the one who is running, running, running. Jacob is the man who can't stop. He doesn't stop for anything.

20 years passed from last year's, from last week's portion until tomorrow morning. 20 years, and Jacob has been busy every single day. In fact, the Torah says about him, *yo mam balaylah*, I didn't sleep morning or night. I was always on the run. I was a self-made man. I was Jacob. I know what came before me. I know what I had to do to be where I am today. I had to be Jacobian. I had to be holding the heel. I also had to be deceitful, which means to be crooked. The name Jacob comes from crooked.

I was a crooked man. And a crooked man with a life's goal, an outcome. But what outcome? Deceived by his father-in-law Lavan, marrying the wrong woman, finding himself tomorrow morning about to face his brother whom he cheated. Jacob's reaction to that stimulus is exactly the same reaction that he has always had every moment of his life. When he was about to hear what he needed to hear, Jacob goes on automatic pilot. It's automatic Jacob.

What do I do when things get tough? What do I do when I'm suffering? What do I do when I'm about to be confronted with the truth, the man of truth? What do I do? I run. Jacob runs until he can't. וַיִּוָּתֶר יַעֲקֹב לְבָדָּה. And Jacob finally is alone.

It's time to reflect. And when Jacob is finally alone, not with his twin brother, not with his two wives, four wives, 12 children, not with his retinue, when Jacob finally stops for a moment, Jacob begins to wrestle. And the Torah tells us in Jacob's wrestling, there is a moment when he's wrestling with an anonymous individual. That this anonymous individual, and if you read the text, you can't help but be blown away by the beauty of the literature, the literary structure of this text. Jacob is presented with exactly the same story as he had 20 years earlier. He's wrestling with this man and the man is about to, like, can't win and nobody's winning and they're wrestling.

And then the strangest thing happens, right? The man realizes whoever this man is, is he an angel? Is he Esau's angel? Who knows who he is? He's anonymous. And he says to Jacob, as he sees he cannot prevail over him, like, God, he couldn't prevail over him. He says to him, he wounds him. He wounds him in the leg and he slows him down, said my friend, Rabbi Jason Rubenstein. He slows Jacob down. He gives him a wound.

He says, now stop running. Where have you been running from, Jacob? And he says to him, Jacob says to the man, angel, I won't let you go until you bless me. And the man says, you want a blessing? Tell me your name.

Anybody who reads this text year in and year out knows what's happening. He's having an opportunity to do exactly the same thing he did 20 years earlier, the same mistake, the same reaction that led to outcomes he couldn't have imagined. He can make the same mistake. And Jacob wins. Instead of saying, I am Esau and lying and deceiving and becoming what he isn't, Jacob finally, and all of us as readers say, finally, Jacob, you said the truth. I am Jacob. He resists. His name will be called resistance. The new name he's given is Yisrael, resistor. The one who resisted and became noble through resistance. He resisted the urge to repeat the pattern. He broke it. He didn't reach for, he didn't raise the voice. He didn't hit. He didn't go under the covers. He didn't turn on the tube to zone out. He didn't reach for the bottle. He didn't reach for the book. He didn't reach for anything. He said, here I am. I'm Jacob. He reflected. He resisted. And then what happens? Right, you reflect and you resist. You replace. You will no longer be called Jacob because you have now, you won. The Torah tells us each and every year, at this time, as it gets dark, each and every time of the year as the sun and its beautiful warmth and light, as we could feel today, the warmth of the sun diminished. It says, as the light diminishes, we are to find our way in the dark. Jacob fought in the dark. Jacob succeeded in the dark.

And as we light our 36 candles for Hanukkah, we are reminded in the tradition that the numerical value of the word, ayeka, where are you, is 36. Ayeka. Hanukkah and all of this time of the year is 36 candles, 36 moments, 36 whatever for us to say, ayeka, where are you? Where are you in that moment, in the reflection, in the resistance to what was and the power to replace old patterns with new ones? So I wanna pray tonight with all of you.

Source of life, God of Jacob, God of the one who finally stopped and reflected, the one who finally was alone long enough to look into a deep pattern and when given the chance to

repeat it, he karma busted, he did true chuvah, true returning. He is our father, the patriarch, and we are part of his family. And although he didn't stay only resistor, he sometimes slid back into Jacobness as all of us will inevitably slip back and forth between victory and enabling and repeating.

Give us the power tonight and every night throughout these winters to reflect long enough, to pause long enough, to react less and to react differently for outcomes that lead towards the betterment of your world and all of those in it as we reflect and resist in order to replace. Please rise. Amen.