

# Romemu Dvar Torah August 12, 2016

Life is our greatest teacher. All of us enrolled in life university. It's very hard to find someone who's graduated, you know.

And so the Torah that we live, the Torah that we live and the Torah that we read, the Torah that we live and the Torah that we read, in a sense, those are the grains of sand, as it were, that create pearls. Wisdom is the accrued experience of doing it wrong over and over and over again. And we as a people, we know what that's like, to do something over and over and over again.

Some might see it as a shadow, kind of repetition, compulsion, an OCD, we want to get it right. But others might see it as a mystery of what it is alchemically, when magic rises. Repeating something over and over again can either look like the deranged efforts of a really delusional, insane individual, or a magician, or an athlete, or a musician, or anyone that knows that practice doesn't make perfect, but practice makes better.

And so we practice. And like all traditions, one of the most foundational ways that we practice is by telling stories over and over again. Those are the stories, those are the way in, those are the way that we look at life and then have a story that somehow might give us an insight, might help us do something better the next time, if only we heed this advice or heed this story.

There's no greater myth than the myth of control. There's no greater myth in the sense of illusion than the illusion that we can do a lot, or that we have it within our hands, we can, if we just. Man, you don't need big, esoteric, Talmudic, or Biblical stories to tell you that. You can watch the Olympics.

You can watch Ali Reisman's parents. For those of you who don't know her, she's an amazing gymnast who, four years ago, came onto the national scene by winning the gold medal, and then, just yesterday, won the silver in the all-around, and she happens to be, of course, Jewish. Which gets us so excited, wow, we have a gymnast who's Jewish, and she even did Hava Nagila, or something like that, or Mashu.

But more than Ali, right, and how much attention she got, her parents, and watching her parents, who, you would imagine, at this point, talk about repetition, they must have seen this routine, routinely. You must have seen her do this run, this pass, 50,000 times, and each and every time, like a movie. They know the end of the movie, but, of course, it's contingent.

They don't know if she'll stick the landing this time. My wife will like that I know, stick the landing, gymnast that she was. Each and every time, to watch her parents writhing in their seat, is to recognize that whether it's somebody else's life, or even, and often hard to imagine, our own.

We live between will and grace. Between efforts, that lay the groundwork, that repeat a pattern, often enough, until hopefully we let go, to have those fruits. To effort, and then to let go.

To effort, and then to let go. That is the rhythm of our life, that is the rhythm of our spiritual life, it is the rhythm of our heartbeat, it is the rhythm of our relationship with our loved ones, it is the rhythm of the Jewish relationship with time. We make an effort, and then we say, I can't.

To be in our fullness, and in our emptiness, to be in our greatness, and our vulnerability, simultaneously, that is the story of Jewish wisdom. No greater example of that than Moses, the greatest of all prophets, who was known as the greatest of all prophets. Even the Torah says about him, Moses, who purportedly wrote the Bible himself, must have penned that line, there was no greater prophet than me. And also wrote, there was no greater humble, more humble individual than me.

That man, who alone, who alone took the entire Jewish people out of Egypt, alone. A man, who lived his life, didn't have a mother, a biological mother, had a stepmother, who didn't know what it was to have family, he was adopted, didn't know what it was like to have his own family.

That man, who left, that exile came back to redeem the exile, that man, who said about himself, I can't speak. When God, at the burning bush, said to him, I have a mission for you, and he said, Who, me? You mean this guy? Even though I know I'm great, I'm a prince of Egypt, I can't speak. How amazing is it that tomorrow morning, when we begin the fifth and final of the books named for that one who couldn't speak, we will begin with Moses speaking, and speaking for a full three long speeches.

The man, who has no speech, speaks. Lo ish dvarim anochi, I am not a man of words, eileh ha-dvarim, these are the words, says the Torah. These are the words of someone who was both incredibly strong and vulnerable.

And no sooner does Moses begin his first speech, which is rebuke for the Israelites, does Moses bring up, Moshe Rabbeinu brings up an episode that my dear friend Rabbi Jill Hammer spoke about three years ago in her beautiful, beautiful sermon called Our Forgotten Teachers. Moses repeats the words that his father-in-law Jethro had advised him so long ago, 38 years to be exact. As Moses stands before the Israelites, none of whom were there at Sinai, he begins to tell them the story of what it was like 38 years ago and he begins with this tale, but he leaves out his father-in-law's advice and says it as if it were his own words.

Do you remember, he says, when we were standing at Sinai, and I had all of you, and you were many, and I couldn't carry you. I couldn't hold you, says Moshe. And because I couldn't hold you, I decided that I would, I would bring elders on and I would bring governance and there would be others who would hold you.

It wouldn't just be me alone, but Moshe uses the word that is tonight and tomorrow night's most important word. When Moses recounts his vulnerability, his inability to hold all of the people of Israel, he says, How can I hold all of you by myself? That word, Eicha, which you all know. Eicha, a lament.

Moses says, I can't do it alone. Moses, the great orator, who worked his whole life to be able to speak in public. Moses, the great leader, who took them alone out of Egypt, finally arrives at the Book of Devarim with his greatness and he lets go.

Eicha, I can't do it. I can't do it alone. We can't do it alone.

Our history and the history of all human beings who want to make a change is to recognize that we can change. We can change the world. That's the Jewish motif. Ask Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. He says it over and over and over again. We Jews gave history to the world. We are the ones who weren't circumscribed by pagan circular consciousness. We broke free. We created a new world, says Jonathan Sacks. But that isn't completely true. There were things that we couldn't control. There were things that were too heavy for us.

Maybe the burden of being in our own commonwealth was too much. Maybe the burden of living together in a non-exilic moment when we weren't in the trials and tribulations of the desert. Maybe arriving in Israel and trying to create a just and ethical commonwealth was too much and the temples were destroyed and Echa Yeshva B'dad says Moshe Echa I couldn't do it.

The lament of someone despairing of their own power to fully finish the job. And each and every one of you here tonight I guarantee you, you don't have to look far whether it's you can't turn off your phone which is so banal whether you can't lift yourself out of X, Y or Z it's hard to transform it's hard to do it by ourselves we can't do it alone the first Echa in the Torah is Moses admitting that even though he is so strong he can't do it if he doesn't ask for help it's so classic, right? The strong male figure that can't ask for directions but without those tropes each and every human being finds a place where they come up against the Echa, I can't do it by myself, I can't lift it and the Torah says that the radical answer to that is that we have to get it together. Together we can't do it alone. We rebuild the temple every time. We rebuild the temple every time. We remember that effort only readies us for grace, says Mark Nepo effort only readies us for grace as grace can never be planned or willed only entered we can't plan grace but we we can make an effort until we can't anymore and then he says this, remember this line or maybe listen to it again. Effort is keeping the break in your heart open while grace is the light of everything not broken that washes the break clean. Effort is keeping the break in our heart open. We keep making an effort keep trying to do it on our own and then we say we can't do it by ourselves Echa Esa Levadi. Moses learns the hard way Moses knows what it is to be vulnerable and he knows what it is to be strong and as we enter into Tisha B'Av tonight and tomorrow and then tomorrow night when we actually read the book of Lamentation, we remember that we live in a world where over and over and over again the bonds of connection are broken and that the only way that we can build a new world is through connection through bonds of love bonds of trust Echa Esa Levadi how can I carry you by myself says Moshe and the answer of course is you can't Moshe, not even you but we'll help as best we can.