

Shabbat 02 22 19 Sermon

When a movie or anything artistic succeeds wildly, we can assume it's because the film has touched something universal, something archetypal is at play, something profoundly right about what it is to be a human being has been portrayed. A particular story, a particular song, a particular novel, but a universal theme. Something that cuts right through to each and every heart and draws it to the theaters, to the stage. Now, if you're born, let's say, after 1990, maybe even a little bit before, but definitely after, you may not get this reference, but here it goes. Finish this sentence for me, everyone. E.T. phone? Wow! Wow! Wow, there you go.

I was in St. Louis earlier in the week and I said E.T. and everyone was like, what? Right, there we go, right there, there it is, right, let's do that, there we go, okay, let's do that, there we go, I like that, there you go. Hey, there it is. E.T. phone home, E.T. phone home, an iconic line in the annals of motion picture history, an iconic phrase in the cultural memory of the West. Written by Steven Spielberg, E.T., which likely stood for extraterrestrial, was a science fiction movie in 1982 about Elliot, a young boy who befriends an alien being trapped on Earth and trying to find his way home. Elliot and his siblings help the alien return home while trying to keep him hidden from their mother and the government. And E.T. repeats over and over again, E.T. phone home as an expression of his desire to go home.

Spielberg himself wrote later on that E.T. was informed by his own childhood chaos, an alienation in the aftermath of his parents' divorce. And from his personal story, he tapped into the vein of humanity, from Odysseus and throughout the West, the notion of nostalgia, to go home again. E.T. phone home is that story about a longing to go backwards, to go back to write and rewrite a story in the absurdity of a situation in which E.T. or all of us find ourselves How did I get here, he must have been asking. This is not my place.

You may ask yourself, how did I get here? Oh, the days go by. So what should we say? What should we say when we find ourselves far from home? What should we be thinking when we feel like doing that? Where should we go? What word should we use when we feel we're not where we should be, where we're long from home? And where going back is maybe one option. Or we think that going back is the only way to go forward. Or is that too a way to continue being lost? Is going back to go forward also a way to continue being lost? Should E.T. phone home or should E.T. build a new one?

The weekly wisdom this week is one of the most profound and riveting in the Torah. It's known as Ki Tisa, when you literally will lift up, which refers, of course, to a national census. But we find ourselves pulled out of the story of the tabernacle, which was the last two weeks, and forcefully thrust into the saga that is known as the Egil Hazahav, the story of the Egil Hazahav, the golden calf narrative. So just a quick refresher for all of you guys here. Quick refresher.

Golden calf. Here you go. Children of Israel have seen God face to face, a direct transmission, a direct experience of both divine love and divine terror.

They are in the afterglow. Moses has once again left them alone to go hang out with God on the mountain. Then it happens when Moses has been away for a little bit too long, beginning of chapter 32. And the people of Israel saw Ki Boshesh Hulavo, that Moses was tarrying. He was late. He was supposed to be here at 6 and at 7. What's going on? They run to Aaron. They complain bitterly about needing a new god or a new leader to lead them. Aaron complies very, very quickly. No fight, no argument. And within four little verses, the whole thing goes up in smoke. It's done. The whole thing is done. Full on idol and a party is happening at the foot of Mount Sinai. Oh, how the mighty fall so quickly.

When God gets wind of this rebellion in the camp, he sends Moses back to his, meaning your people, Moses, go back. Your people, Moses, get down the mountain. They're not my people. Moses descends the mountain and nears the camp. He sees all that's happened below, all of the raucous, rebellious, repugnant reverie, and in his own fit of rage, Moses smashes the perfect, complete, holy, divinely scribed tablets, hurling to the ground. What is the nature of that act? What is the nature of this moment where Moses sees the people in their worst and takes these tablets and throws them to the ground? Why does he destroy them?

So classically, there are at least three different ways, or two different ways, I should say, unless you count Mel Brooks in his version in *The History of the World, Part 1*. The first one, the first classic way, the classic way to read this is that the justifiable disgust and disbelief that Moses feels wells up in him and he throws the tablets down in a fit of rage. In the Talmudic reading, Moses tears up the marriage document, the ketubah, divorcing the Israelites from God. The people don't deserve the covenantal agreement. The bride, the groom, the beloved throws the ring on the floor in disgust. Moses, as God's messenger, expresses profound divine disapproval and disappointment with the people. The rapture has turned to rupture. The intimacy has become alienation. Revelation has given way to rebellion.

There is, however, an alternative reading to that one. There is another way to read the breaking of the tablets, the shattering of those divinely scribed stones. It's possible to read Moses' fit not as punishment but as lesson, not as a finger wagging harsh judgment but as a loving guide pointing towards a profound existential truth. Perhaps Moses, seeing the Israelites dancing around in an idol formed in the flames of anxiety and fear, ignited by an unanticipated flight plan, a course correction, Moses isn't here, he's supposed to be here, what's happening? He decides to teach them a lesson, to make a statement to them. Perhaps Moses, seeing before his eyes what allegiance to a script, any script, its perfect plan laid before us and torn to pieces, he sees what happens when we can't move from that perfection. Perhaps Moses, the teacher, seeing that, breaks the most whole, the most perfect object the world has ever known to teach us to make our home in the imperfect present rather than in a mythical and impossible past or future. Perhaps Moses, our guide, seeing the loss of peace, chose to make pieces, chose to smash perfection to teach a path to peace. Perhaps fictionalized pasts and perfect futures are the stuff idols are made of. Perhaps fictionalized pasts and idealized futures, perfect plans, everything is plan A, there's only one plan, it's plan A. Maybe that is the stuff idols are made of.

Our inability to let go of a story of how things should have been can be a deep form of idolatry. When we worship the plan that wasn't, when we refuse to be present to the new

unfolding plan that we have made, then we have made our own idea of how things should be into a Torah, so then Moses says, smash that, tear it to pieces. When we make a perfect plan into an idol, idealized partners that don't meet our standards, it was supposed to be this way, it was going to be perfect, only to find out 15 minutes into your marriage what you refused to see for the 10 years you were dating. The perfect career path, by the age of 25, I would be here in 35 and 45, that's exactly the way it's supposed to unfold, I am supposed to move in this way, and here I am, the perfect community that never manifests, the perfect family, the romantic vision of lighting candles together.

I remember as a kid, when I was 18 years old, I went to Israel for a year, and in my first year of seeing Orthodox Judaism in a way that I hadn't seen it growing up, in Great Neck, Long Island, I was exposed to the beauty of Eshet Chayil, and the beauty of kids getting blessed at the Shabbat table. And I thought, it's all so rosy and perfect, that's the way it's always going to be, all you have to do is become Orthodox, and it comes with the kit, you just get it. You sign up, you say, I'm going to be Orthodox, okay, here's your wife, there you go, check, and here's what you say Friday night when you get home, check, and then you wake up and everybody is cheery-eyed, and they're singing Uncle Moshie, if you don't know what that is, it's okay. It just comes with it, right? The perfect, idyllic family, look how loving they are. No one ever fights on Shabbat. I'm sure all of you have that experience, meaning the experience of never fighting on Shabbat.

Idealized notions, tablets set in stone, written with God's perfect ink, inscrutable, immutable, absolutely the way it should be. And Moses comes down the mountain and he says, hey, idol worshipers, you think that golden calf is an idol? Let me show you an even bigger idol. These two tablets. You think I can't smash these? You think these are beyond? Throw those down too, because it's plan B from now on. And it turns out that plan B is stronger than plan A, that the tablets that are hewn from the broken pieces, the tablets that are made by Moses and by the people in the aftermath of the trauma are stronger than the tablets that God got self-made. The perfection of God is even weaker than the imperfection of human beings who rise up like Phoenix from the ashes of perfect plans that have gone away. From the ingenuity and the perseverance and the power and the presence that comes with seeing a dream go up in smoke.

I was on a scooter on Wednesday. I know, from the golden calf to the scooter. I'm driving up on Amsterdam Avenue with Bear, my nine-and-a-half-year-old son, and we got cut off. We were in the bike lane, and we got sharply cut off by a truck that didn't see us and was trying to make a left on 103rd and Amsterdam. In order to avoid hitting him, I threw myself to the ground, and we rolled for a bit. Before I knew it, there were ambulances. Before I knew it, there were cops. Before I knew it, I was in the emergency room at St. Luke's. God bless all those people. Bobby and Angel, love those EMS guys. And as we were there, and my dear friend Jeff was there, and Ariel was there, it's just so obvious that I had not planned that into my day. It just wasn't in the tochnit. It wasn't on my loose. Okay, you know, breakfast, meeting, meet Nigel, and then on the way, we'll spend five hours in the yard until they figure out that it's okay. And while we were there, it was just the most remarkable thing because we were there, and we were fully there. We were with each other, and we were making hay of the whole thing. We said, you know what, this is where we're meant to be.

The beauty of the nurse that came in, and the tenderness, and watching and praying for all the people in the hospital around us, and just being there, not in plan A and how the day was supposed to unfold, but just there. Not in regret and remorse, and if I would have, you know, of course, I thought that a couple of times.

And so what's remarkable is how the story of the golden calf ends. In the aftermath of the golden calf, something beautiful happens. In the very next chapter, chapter 33 of the book of Exodus, after this trauma, after everything, the rupture and the reconciliation, God and Israel are married again, and Moses finds himself asking God for an even more significant experience of intimacy. Moses requests God to give Moses divine knowledge. Show me God your glory, says Moses. This is understood by our ancient sages as a request to know God's inscrutable way.

The Talmud says that Moses asked God, tzadik viralo, why do the righteous suffer? In other words, why are the scripts imperfect, God? I know what you told the children of Israel. You told them, let go of your imperfect scripts. There's a crack in everything, and that's how the light gets in. That's all great. But tell me why, Moses says. Tell me why. And God responds. v'yomer lo tucha lir'ot et panay, ki lo yir'ani adam v'chai. God responds and says, you can't see my face. No human can fully understand my divine face. Or in the language of our rabbis, no one can fully understand the unfolding of human lives and the stories that have twists and turns. We can't get it head on. We struggle to understand and make sense of how we find ourselves so far from what we'd imagine our lives might one day look like. We find ourselves like E.T., aliens in a strange land. And even when we try to let go of plan A, sometimes we want to just understand this wasn't the way it was supposed to feel, to be a mother, to feel like a father, to feel like an adult or a kid.

Moses basically comes back to God and says, you know, I smashed the tablets. I showed them not to take the plan so seriously. But that's them. I'm Moses. Can I see why? Can I find out why? God says no. But that's not the final answer. God then says, in my opinion, let me tell you how you work with it in this world. Let me tell you how you work with the places you will be, the hospitals, in the wilderness of life. Ine makom iti, v'nitzavta al-hatzur. The very next words out of God's mouth in the Torah, you can't see me and live, but I have a room here for you. I have a place here. Hinei makom, I have a place. And then God says the words, iti, which in Hebrew means with me. Iti, phone home, or iti means with me. Iti means with me. I will be with you. You will not be alone. If you will make room in your heart, if you will make room for faith, you will stand on the very rocks that you broke. V'nitzavta al-hatzur, you will stand on rock. If you will be with me, iti. Had iti known that, maybe he would not have longed so much for a world far away. He might have said, right here with me is iti.

Right here where I find myself today, tomorrow, next week, in a month, I might find myself in a place and say, how did I get here? And I might say, you know, God is in this place because there's no spot where God is not. Here, iti, with me. So whatever you call her, she longs for a place to live in this place in the heart.

Every day, for the last six years of my life, as I walked, my son, Bear, the one who was with me on the scooter, and I hope one day that Bear will watch this, when he would go into his school, I would say, where do I live? He'd say, what, Abba? I'd say, where do I live? And I'd

say, right here. I'd point to my heart. Y'all do that? Iti means with me. Iti means with me. Wherever you go, whatever the plan was, there's a new plan. And home is not far away. Home is right here.

And God bless all of us on all of our journeys, wherever we go, to remember, iti means with me.

Please rise.