

Shabbat 05 19 17 Sermon

I have to admit, I was a little bit nervous. A little bit nervous because I'd never done it before. A little bit nervous because when I had tried to do it before, it didn't work out. I have to admit that when I was about to do it, I was super nervous because no one had ever done it with me. I wasn't even sure if anybody ever wanted to do it with me. I was confused, I was reticent, I was holding back, I was afraid.

And all of that was when I thought about taking my middle son with me on a trip to the west coast for three days. By himself, without my wife, without anybody else around. I would be working, I'd be on a farm. I was excited, but I was nervous. We had a great time.

Thinking about what it is in us that is afraid sometimes to let go. What is it in us that sometimes, even when we want to surrender, we have a hard time. What is it in us that gets scared, that holds on. And why we do that, I mean, it's kind of obvious.

And when we think about it, and we'll come back to this in a minute, asking ourselves about holding on and letting go is in some way at the heart of a rabbinic question that I come back to almost every year. And so for those of you who have been a part of the Romemu community now for years, or who have studied with me in other contexts, I want to say I'm sorry, but here we go again. Every single year at this moment. Every single year when we come to Leviticus chapter 25, known as Parshat Behar. The chapter and the parsha known as At the Mountain, or On the Mountain. At or On.

The Torah begins the discussion or the introduction of the laws having to do with Shemitah and Yovel, having to do with sabbatical year and jubilee year. Two agricultural laws that were significant for the Israelites. They introduced to the ancient eastern world the notion that one would count six years, and on the seventh year one would let the land lie fallow. No one would work the land, and all of the debts that we incurred would be paid off, or they would be nullified. And in the 50th year, after counting seven such Shemitah cycles, there would be a 50th year known as Jubilee. The land would return to its original owners, and everyone would come back to their original place. All slaves would be released.

This parsha is introduced with a very anomalous phrase in the Torah. And God spoke to Moses at Mount Sinai saying. The Torah often says, and God spoke to Moses, and God spoke to Moses. That's the most commonly used phrase, and God spoke to Moses. But only in this instance does the parsha begin not only with whom is speaking to whom, but where they were talking. Behar Sinai. At Mount Sinai. Which leads the Mechilte and then Rashi, all of the great rabbinic commentaries to say a very well known phrase. Ma'inyan Shemitah etzel har Sinai. Why does Shemitah, the agricultural laws, have to be introduced with a location at Sinai? What does one thing have to do with another? What does Shemitah have to do with Sinai? In modern Hebrew, if you want to say what does one thing have to do with another, you might quote this phrase without even knowing where it's from. You might say in Hebrew, Ma'inyan Shemitah etzel har Sinai. You're talking about apples and oranges. There's Shemitah, agricultural laws, and there's Sinai. We have spoken about this in the shul many times.

This beautiful laconic phrase, Ma'inyan Shemitah, Shemitah etzel har Sinai. What does agricultural sabbatical law have to do with Mount Sinai? We've seen it in a number of different lights over the years. You might remember that I said that to me it also represents a very powerful frame of what does land or concrete reality have to do with lofty principles? That's our question always in the religious life.

How do we walk Sinai in the world? How do we take Sinai and live it? How do we take Revelation and walk it out? How do we take our retreat or our meditation practice and bring it into the cab here in New York City? Yeah? Is the heat getting to all of you? Because I'm going to get a heat thing from you. Does that make sense? Har Sinai is abstraction, it's pyrotechnics, it's lights, and Shemitah is agriculture, the thing of the earth, how we live. That's a spiritual question at every moment of our lives.

How do we live our principles? But tonight I want to ask it differently. I want to ask that ma'inyan. What does one have to do with the other in a different way? I want to ask a simple question. What does Shemitah, which means literally to release, what does release have to do with Sinai, which is responsibility? What does release and freedom and liberation have to do with Sinai?

When I think of Sinai, I think of an obligation. I think of a connection. I think of an empowering voice. I feel tradition speaking to us. And when I feel the word Shemitah, I feel release, letting go. How do we have letting go that is holding on and holding on that is letting go? How do we integrate, how do we synthesize those two places? How do we as human beings live with the reality that at every single moment we are holding life preciously and letting it go simultaneously? How do we live with that tension, that duality? What do we do with that?

The Torah tells us in very stark terms that one of the fundamental principles of living the good life is knowing how to balance agency, agentic reality, what we can do, how we can live in the world, what we can bring, what our talents are, what our work is, how are we being deployed, what we do Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and then Shabbat, how we let it go.

To have what we do in the world without what we let go of in the world, the Torah says is fundamentally a spiritually imbalanced life that ultimately leads to an inability to even work in the world, to act in the world. Without the yin there is no yang, without the wink there is no smile, without Oscar there is no Felix, without inside there is no outside, without these two polarities that work in connection with one another we don't defragment, we can't be functional. When we hold too tightly, our holding becomes an unholding.

I'll tell you something, when I was 18 years old, a lot of you know this story already about me, you can take it wherever you want to go with it, I was a young man who wanted to very much armor myself and be super strong. I was like a bodybuilder, I was lifting weights, I was an athlete. I remember reading a book by Dan Millman called The Way of the Peaceful Warrior, I think it was, I was 18 or 19, a guy gave it to me.

And in the book, *The Way of the Peaceful Warrior*, the main character is a gymnast. And he meets this gas station attendant who he playfully names Socrates. And Socrates says to him one day, you think that you're strong? You think you're really strong? Let me show you what strength is. And he takes his cat and he says, touch the cat's leg and see what the pliability of the muscle is. And it was firm but yielding. He said, you think you can jump as high as my cat? Muscles that are firm but yielding are strong.

Minds that are firm but yielding are wise. Hearts that are firm but yielding are loving. *The Way of the Peaceful Warrior*. When I was all held like that, I could barely move. I thought I was strong but it wasn't true strength. True strength is being able to let go when the moment requires it.

And this the Torah tells us is Shabbat *ladunai*. It is a letting go, a release for the sake of spirit. It says, the great student of the Baal Shem Tov that told Yosef, it means that even matter, matter that doesn't have spirit, like a body without spirit, matter that doesn't have a lift to it. Reality, material reality doesn't have a purpose to it. It becomes ultimately an end in and of itself. It is meaningless. It runs out. When we live our lives without that sense of purpose, mission, releasing into that which holds us greater than who we are, we run out. Our batteries run out. We exhaust our resources. When we don't replenish, we deplete. When we don't let go, we ultimately can't hold on.

So the Torah tells us tomorrow morning, everybody, *Geirimatem*, you are all converts. You are all sojourners. You are all those who are aliens. Meaning, the land doesn't belong to you. So you have to give it up and remind yourself that it's not yours. Give it up and let it go. Converts get that. Those who come to a tradition that isn't their own have to go through a ceremony that involves dipping in a body of water where they are asked to completely let go of everything that they have. Take off all your clothing and release and let the water hold you because floating takes faith. Floating takes faith. Floating takes faith. So said Rabbi David Volpe to float in the water.

How many of us weren't moved? If you didn't see it, go see it in moonlight where the boy is being held in the water. Letting the earth hold us. Letting God hold us. Letting ourselves surrender what it is that we think we own so that we can be owned by something greater than who we are and become greater in that moment. That is *Ma'inyan Shmita Etzel Harsinai*. What does this have to do with that? What does responsibility have to do with release? It's because if we don't release, we can't hold. If we don't let go, we can't hold on. If we don't let it go and surrender, we don't allow something greater than us to be greater for us.

And so floating takes faith. Floating takes faith. Getting on a plane with your five and a half year old not knowing how things will be took faith. For a family here at Romemu yesterday morning, being able to transition from being on the outside of the Jewish community to being on the inside required faith. It required *Shmita* and letting go. It's so hard.

Rabbi Milton Steinberg was one of the great conservative rabbis in America. He gave one of the most famous and beautiful sermons. And it was titled, *Holding With Arms Wide Open*. *Holding With Arms Open*. He said that he had come through a life-challenging illness and as he came out of the hospital, he felt life's preciousness and how we are consistently trying to

forget that life is fleeting and moving from us at every moment. Life is precious, he said, and so we hold on even as it's leaving. We're holding on. Life is precious, he said, so we hold on. And then he said to all of his congregation, he said, Life is precious, so we let go. Life is precious, so we hold on. Life is precious, so we let go. Letting go is, without a doubt, the most difficult spiritual practice you will encounter. Letting go of that which you think you can do, that only you can do.

If you're not there, it won't happen. If you don't do it, it won't get done. If you don't plan ahead and make sure that every exigency and every possible permutation is gonna happen, ugh! So six years, the Torah says, plant your seeds, water them. Build your business. Make it a big business. And then for one year, anyone who wants to take from your field can take. And you stand there and go, okay. It's the version of the Tibetan sand mandala. It is impermanence writ large. Sinai is forever. Shemitah is to let go. We build it, they will come. We let it go, they'll come back. Because floating takes faith.

So tonight and tomorrow, ask yourself in the inside, where am I holding on in a way that is that's cutting me off from really deep strength? Where am I holding on in a way that isn't serving me or others? Where am I holding on because I'm so afraid of letting go? But maybe somebody can pry my hands off the door. Maybe somebody can invite me to float. Maybe I can close my eyes and be carried. Because floating takes faith.

What does Sinai impermanence have to do with impermanence? Just the vision of a precocious five and a half year old running through an airport towards a candy store. As I fumble with my luggage, I take a deep inhale and let go and discover that it is much bigger than me. It is much bigger than us.

Please rise.