

Romemu Shabbat March 31, 2017 Sermon

There was a Rebbe, there was a Hasidic Rebbe named Menachem Mendel Morgenstern, known more as the Kotzker Rebbe, the Rebbe of the town of Kotzk. The Rebbe of Kotzk, the Kotzker said that the words that we just said in the Shema, the words, וְיִי הַדְּבָרִים אֱלֹהֵי לְשׁוֹנֵנוּ, that these words that I give to you today, let them be אֱלֹהֵי לְבָבְךָ on your heart. The Kotzker Rebbe asked, shouldn't the Torah be telling us, may these words that I give you today be בְּלִבְךָ in your heart.

Right, if we could edit the Torah, if we could edit the Torah, it would say, God, I think you made a little mistake here. Instead of it being on your heart, אֱלֹהֵי לְבָבְךָ being on your heart, it should say inside of your heart, and the Rebbe of Kotz said, no, there are words that we hear day in and day out that rest on the heart, that don't enter the heart, but wait for the heart to crack open, to break. And when the heart breaks, those words enter.

The words that are on the heart, that enter the heart, words that are placed above the heart, that sit on the heart, that like drops of water, as it were, that await absorption into the inner place. That's what I want to talk about tonight. For the next two minutes, I want to, share a few experiences of how that happened for me.

How it was that words that I placed on my heart, entered my heart in a deep way. And I want to begin with the reading tomorrow morning. Because the principle that I want to discuss is actually evidenced tomorrow morning in the third book of the Torah.

We transition from Exodus to the third book, Leviticus, Vayikra. And Vayikra, the word Vayikra, which is the first, which is the name for the entire book, is the first word of the third book. Vayikra means, and he called.

Vayikra, and he called. Leviticus, of course, is the name given by the Greeks. The Latin, the Greeks, meaning the book of the Levites or the priests.

It's a manual having to do with legality, and it's gory, and the details of which sacrifices were involved in the cult, in the temple, both in Jerusalem and earlier in the tabernacle. It's a legal manual. It is called by Chazal, Torah Kohanim, the Torah of the priests.

It bears almost no resemblance to the book of Exodus and the book of Rishit. There's not much narrative in it, but it begins not with a legal moment, but with a call. Vayikra Elav.

Unlike other moments in the Torah where God speaks to Moses just willy-nilly, Vayidaber Adonai El Moshe, that God begins with a speech moment, the book of Leviticus begins with a kria, a call. This is so anomalous for the rabbis that the rabbis decide to spend loads of ink trying to explain what connection there might be between the book of Leviticus and what takes place in the book of Leviticus and that first anomalous way of interacting with Moshe, Vayikra. The rabbis say it's not the first time that God calls out to Moshe, a kria, but something unique is happening, the rabbis say, in the beginning of Leviticus, of Vayikra, that required this unique call.

The rabbis further say the call, the word kria means lashon chiba, a loving, devoted way of whispering, of saying something in a tone that would kind of speak to intimacy, friendship.

The book of Leviticus, which is a book wholly devoted to the work that the priests, namely Aaron, the brother of Moses, was engaged in, begins with God's intimate call to Moshe, telling him to come inside the mishkan. The rabbis say, if you look back at the end of last week's parasha, the end of the book of Exodus, the Torah tells us, Vayichal Moshe tamacha, and Moses finished the work of the mishkan.

Vayichas et anan et haol moed, uchvod ha-Adonai malei et ha-mishkan, and then the mishkan became full of the divine presence. And then these words, velo yachol Moshe lavo, and Moshe could not enter into the place that he had created. Moshe had created a tabernacle, Moshe had worked diligently night and day, he had been dutiful, everything that God had told him to do, he had created, and now Moshe finds himself where, everybody? Where? Outside.

The rabbis say, Moshe, his soul was aguma alav, he was embarrassed, he felt forlorn, he felt left out. Moshe, the great prophet, the one who represents the receiving of revelation, creates a miniature Sinai, and as the book closes, Moshe is finishing the last touches on it, and all of a sudden, he can't get a ticket to the show that he created. He can't even scalp.

He can't get in, Moshe builds the mishkan, and then we end the book of Exodus, and Moshe can't get in. So the rabbis say, veichra alav, and God called to him like someone who would call to a friend and say, hey, you're my best friend. I can show you how to get in.

God speaks to Moshe in a tone of intimacy, saying to Moshe, I know that you feel left out. I know that we're beginning a book of law, I know we're beginning a book that will exclude you from the major portion of the legal moments of the book of Leviticus, but you, Moshe, are as Midrash says, your voice is more important. They brought gold and they brought silver, but you, Moshe, you brought Moshe, and I want Moshe in the mishkan.

Veichra alav, and God said to him, hey, what a profound moment. What a profound moment for us and for where we are. The Midrash, if we unpack it deeply, is saying something profound.

At the heart of great men and women, great human beings, there is still a little Moshe saying, I'm being left out. In the heart of the greatest prophet the Jewish people gave to the world, at the heart of Mr. Law, the man who brought legal code, at the heart of political policy and Torah, there is a deep psychological understanding of the way human beings interact that sometimes, or maybe let's say it this way, almost always, psychology trumps policy. Psychology supersedes.

The interpersonal is political. The interpersonal is powerful. And that psyche is often the engine for what motivates us, not principle.

And that we use principle often to cover over a feeling of vulnerability, a feeling of being hurt, of being wounded, of feeling left out. This principle that exists, that shows itself here in the reading of Vayikra, became really clear to me when I took a trip, as many of you know, I was in Israel last week. One week ago today I was in Tel Aviv and the entire week until that moment was spent in the West Bank.

Unless those of you are worried that I'm gonna launch now into a political conversation, I can relax you now and say that I'm not here tonight to tell you anything you don't already know. I'm not here to weigh in on things that have not been figured out for 1,000, 2,000 years, but I'm here to share how this principle, the principle that principle often replaces deep psychology, that at our core we are like that mosha sometimes, as great as we are, that the simplest moment is that the heart feels wounded. We were sitting, a group of us, after having listened to Palestinian leaders in Ramallah and in East Jerusalem and in Bethlehem, and we sat with someone who has been involved in the conflict for years, someone high-ranking who has been involved in negotiations, and this person sat down with us and said something that I will never forget.

This person said, I have degrees in law, I have degrees in political science, I have degrees in philosophy, I'm an intellectual, I've been at the negotiation tables, I know all of the arguments on both sides, upwards and down, inside and out. And if I could do it all over again, he said, I would go back to school and I wouldn't get a degree in political science or in law, I wouldn't get a degree in philosophy, I wouldn't get a degree in economics or international relations, I would get a degree in psychology. Because at the end of the day, he said, almost every one of the negotiations break down along one simple line.

The Palestinians feel themselves to be the victims and Israel to be the villains, and Israel believes themselves to be the victims and the Palestinians to be the villains, and neither side can see the other side. And he said, they're both right and they're both wrong. Now, I hope that I haven't said something that you don't already know.

But sitting and listening to the pain of people whose pain had been only on the top of my heart, not inside my heart, I knew the stories, I had read it. I read Jerusalem Post, Haaretz, I read all kinds across the spectrum on both sides and upward and downward, but to sit with people and to hear their experience, I thought to myself, you know, I already know it all. I'm a liberal rabbi from the Upper West Side, been there, done it. But to sit inside of someone else's suffering, to hear their story, to hear their moment to moment, their day to day, to hear what it's like for human beings to suffer and to feel impotent to help them, but to feel as though at the heart of something so complicated is something so radically simple. I'm in pain, can we figure out a way for me not to be in pain? I'm unseen, I feel unsafe.

Abraham Maslow, for many of you know, the father, one of the fathers of humanistic psychology had a hierarchy of needs. And this week, I was sitting with a group of high school students and we're discussing Maslow's hierarchy and of course, on the bottom, the bottom level is physiological needs, the second level is security needs. When we don't feel safe, transcendence is a very abstract conversation. When people don't feel safe wherever they are, politics becomes a coding for that deep structure. We know it interpersonally.

We can sit with someone and they can tell us, you know, you really hurt my feelings. I don't feel intimate with you. I feel like you didn't see me and we can retreat into our narrative. You know something? She's, you know, she always does that. I am not giving in this time, no way. I am right and she is wrong, he is wrong, I am right. There's a way that our vulnerability are deep cracks, the cracks in the heart that would allow light to come in. It's covered over by principle, non-budging, not gonna compromise.

There's a way, as Mark Nepo, my favorite author, likes to say, there is a way that we protect ourselves and conspire in our own diminishment. We conspire in our own diminishment because in protecting ourselves, in putting up walls in all various forms, we'd some, in some profound way, we say, if I protect myself in this way, then I'm really safe. The reality is that often we feel like Moshe Rabbeinu. We feel like Moses.

We're standing on the outside. We understand the rules, but it doesn't help. And we require someone like the divine in this story to say, *layikra elav Adonai*. To call out from a place of courage, a place of power to say, I see that you're hurting. The knee-jerk reaction that we often see when our security is threatened or our opinions are threatened or our identities are threatened in relationships, in synagogues, in communities, in larger social structures, institutions that will never get us where we need to go. And the hardest thing, the hardest thing that we can do as human beings is take a moment before we erect our walls, before we hide behind our principles, before we reconstruct our systems and say, you know what, I bet I know what's motivating this. You're in pain. Can I sit with your pain? Can I hear your pain?

After these four days on the West Bank, and of course, how do you integrate all of that? I'm a very staunch and strong Zionist. I grew up that way. I have a very particular narrative about how things work over there. But what I saw was very, very painful and real. And I'm sitting with it, sitting with what it feels like. I don't know, I don't have answers. I don't know what the answers could be. But I know that I could not forget seeing what I saw and the pain that I experienced.

One day afterwards, I sat with people back in Israel. And a friend of mine heard that I was there and didn't even ask me what I saw. He immediately said, whatever it was, it must have been a lie. Whatever it was, it must have been propaganda. You are... And I thought to myself, this is not about politics right now. It's about being human. It's about being able to hear someone else's experience and not be triggered in that place of deep security that my world will end, that I will be destroyed, to stay a little bit higher up. So the bracha tonight, the bracha from the reading of Vayikra, is that God sees Moshe standing outside. He sees Moshe's broken heart.

He sees Moshe's feeling of rejection and he is willing to reach out and say, Moshe, come on in. Can we do that? Can we do that with lovers? Can we do that with each other? That's the question. And you'll let me know how it goes.

Please rise.