

Shabbat 12 07 18 Sermon

I'll tell you something, everybody, you know, nobody here likes to lose. I can guarantee you that each and every one of you would walk around the room and say, nobody here likes to lose. A fundamental assertion of human existence as we understand ourselves is that we don't like losing. Very few of us, though, I imagine, don't like to win. There are a few, if any, who would have the kind of conversation I had with one of my children, I won't name him. As we were walking together, I asked him why it was that he wanted to play competitive soccer, and he said, Abba, I don't want to play because if we lose, it will feel horrible, and if we win, it will feel equally bad. I said, why will it feel bad if you win? And he said, because I'll feel badly for the guys who lost.

Few of us hate winning. In our culture, in everything we do, winners and losers are bandied about, especially in the last two years of the current regime. Losers. We would never imagine a winner as a loser or that a winner feels. Someone who wins, someone who has a winner.

What is it like to be a champion, to be someone who is victorious? Especially at this time of the year, we'll hear many rounds of we are the champions, my friends. No time for losers. But rare is the individual, rare are the people who say, not winning at all costs, because sometimes when you win, you lose, and that there can be something greater than victory, something greater than winning, something greater than being the one who's at the finish line, raising the trophy, the one who is victorious, the one who is getting the interviews and who is going to Disney.

It's antithetical to almost every value that this country and this culture lifts up and elevates. And it's the kind of thing that, in reading the story of Joseph, reading the story that every year accompanies us at this time of the year. There's a moment in the story where victory is had, where victory, as we understand victory, someone who is menatze, somebody who outlasts, someone who stands confirmed and affirmed in their beliefs or in what they said was true.

We have a moment in the story of Joseph tomorrow morning and every year that is a window through a particular reading into this phenomena, into the phenomena of hating to win. And it comes at a very odd moment, because in the story, those of you who might remember this story, Joseph is the man who's got it all going on. Joseph is the one who is the gifted child, the prodigal son, the one who is the beloved, yeled zekunim, he's the beloved of his father, he's his old age kid. He brings him back to his youth, he reminds him of himself, that he gets everything, he has everything. He's spoiled. Not only does he have everything, but he even has dreams. Not everybody gets dreams in the Bible, but Joseph has dreams and aplenty. And he shares his dreams with his brothers, even though he knows, hard to imagine he doesn't, that telling his brothers that he will lord over them, and his dad too. Hard to imagine he didn't think that that would rub the wrong way, but it does, of course.

And so Joseph, the great pampered child, Joseph, the entitled child, Joseph, the privileged child, Joseph, the one who has everything going for him, every single thing, has gone

through a very tumultuous story. He's been thrown into a pit, he's been stripped of his garments, he's been lifted out of the pit again, only to have himself stripped again, and then finally arrives, and Joseph, the dreamer, becomes Joseph, the interpreter of dreams, he goes from having his own dreams to interpreting someone else's dreams, lifted up again to become viceroy of Pharaoh, of all of Egypt, Joseph. No one is greater than Joseph. He is rags to riches, he is colored coat to pharaonic viceroy, he's got the power, and you can imagine him licking his chops. You can imagine him so excited when, true enough, true to form, there's going to be a famine that he predicted, and they have plenty of food. And his brothers come looking for food, and they come and they stand before Joseph. And the Torah, it's dripping with literary beauty, it's dripping with pathos, the brothers stand before the one whom they've thrown into a pit, the one whom they have discarded, the one who has been marginalized and sent out, they stand before Joseph, and they don't recognize him.

The text, of course, winking to us that they never recognized him. How could they not recognize their brother? But Joseph does recognize them, the text tells us that Joseph looks at them and he remembers his dreams. And then the text says something fascinating, a Hebrew word, and Joseph saw the brothers, he recognizes them, and Joseph made himself into another. Joseph made himself as if he was not recognizable. He acted to them as if he were a stranger, which has led many commentators to say, wow, cruel Joseph, this is the moment, Joseph, let yourself out, shine your light, let them know who you are, take off your mask, Joseph, reveal who you are, let them see, don't keep the ruse going, like you do not care, Joseph acts foreign, he acts like a foreigner, like someone other to them.

In the second read, we'll get to the last read in one moment, the second read is, it wasn't cruel, you see. Joseph knew that he needed the brothers to go through their own evolution. Joseph the great teacher knew that if he were to cut this process in the middle, their character wouldn't develop. He had to create a situation where the brothers wouldn't recognize him. And then recreate what had happened, so they could do full repentance. They had to repair it. They had to do the scene differently. And so Joseph's being other, in the second reading is, in order to allow something to happen later on, and here's where we come in for a landing, folks, about winning.

The third reading, the one I hope you leave with tonight, is a reading from the Berditchev Rebbe, the great Hasidic Rebbe from the 18th century, known as Lev Yitzhak Berditchev, the great Rebbe of Berditchev. The Berditchev writes, and here's where Joseph won over his brothers. In the existence of the dreams he had, in which his brothers fell in love with him, and they really didn't want Joseph to win over them, and they had to fall in love with him. They were so big and now look at you, in this moment, says the Berditchev, the Rebbe says, the brothers were right where Joseph wanted them, their hearts exposed, their necks exposed. And Joseph knows that they can't feel good if he says, I won, and so the Berditchev says this, and this was the righteousness of the righteous Joseph, that in the hour when they fell in love with him, he was found. And he won over them, even though they knew that the one who fell in love with him was Joseph. He was their God, in that moment that Joseph said, hey, the one to whom you just bowed, guess who it is, I'm back. It would have hurt them so deeply. It would have crushed them. It would have destroyed them. And Joseph makes his light smaller, he dims his light. He keeps his mask on, not because he wants to be

cruel, not because he wants to create some crazy story. That at the end, but because Joseph finally learns to feel what someone else feels, Joseph, the privileged, entitled kid, finally says, you know what, if I win now, and they lose so deeply, their loss so absolutely shattering to them, if my victory comes at the expense of my brothers who are still my brothers, then what victory is that?

A victory without empathy, a power without compassion, powerful people can turn it on and off. Powerful people don't need to be powerful. Powerful people can empower others. Powerful people can put others before themselves. Powerful people, evolved people, don't lord it over when victory is present. Unless you think that none of you ever do this, it's about dreams, and it's about politicians.

Has anybody here ever had a fight with their lover, their spouse, and said, you see, I was right? You see, there it is, there it is, I'm right. Told you, told you so. That's a great one, right? Told you so, told you so. The true test of power, everyone, is not when we are powerless, but when we are powerful. The true test of our control, of our power is have we arrived, because now I have power. Now I can do to you just as you wanted to do to me. Now I have you right where you are. Joseph says, wow, what am I going to do to these guys. Let's see, maybe I'll hold back. Maybe I'll do what's called in Kabbalah. Maybe I will self-regulate myself in order to find a moment to reveal myself that might not be this one, because you matter.

Unless we think it's only about Joseph, we might as well at this moment think about any people that have less power than us. That we at this moment find it difficult to imagine how they might feel. Imagine a powerless people or a marginalized people at this moment who say, you know what, I have my power, but I'm going to reduce my power I'm going to limit my power for you and your sake.

Joseph becomes a paragon in the Berditchevers reading here of what it is to care about the other. It means he made himself firm. It can also mean he took the position of the foreigner, he became the one who stood before him and said, I wonder how he feels, she feels, they feel. Around the Jewish world tonight, on the 6th night of Hanukkah, we lift up the plight of the Rohingya people, who as Jews, we can readily imagine very quickly what it's like to be persecuted because of our religion, we can readily imagine what it is to be afraid to be publicly Jewish or Muslim in Burma.

What is it that's being asked of us from this story? And what might the world look like if we were to live this truth out, if we were to say to ourselves what was it in Joseph that allowed him in that moment to make the transformation from self-centered and privileged and it's all about me, to you know what, those brothers, even though they hurt me, are also my brothers. And even though those Rohingya people are all the way on the other side of the world, they are also my brothers and sisters. That question is at the heart of our spiritual and religious evolution. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Work unto others as you would have them work unto you. Win unto others as you would have them win unto you. Abba, I don't want to win because it'll ugh. N

Now I can hear you guys as we come in for landing and saying well wait a second, David. What about Marianne Williamson ,and I can't be small for the rest of the world because the rest of the world is? What about Nelson Mandela? What about hey I'm going to let my light shine even you know, I'm not going to let somebody else tell me not to be big, yes.

Hanukkah is a holiday of all of our 18 holidays, the only one that begins when the moon is dark. Meaning at the end of the moon where the light of the moon has yet to be renewed will be five days in the dark and each day will light one candle as if Hanukkah herself itself is saying not all of my light needs to be present in the first day or the second day or the third day. As if Hanukkah itself, the holiday where we find light says not all of the light has to be present, not all of me has to win in every moment, there is room for me to win and for me to care about you. The prediction of it would have it no other way and neither would my son.

So tonight when you go home here's the question. Where is there in the world, in my life, in other places, in this community an opportunity for me to hold back some of my light and give it to another? Where are there the opportunities for me to say I won't win unless you win, I won't win unless they win? Where are those places? And how do you know? Share it with a friend, share it with a lover, share it tonight and don't say told you so.

Please rise.