

Shabbat 01 18 19 Sermon

I had my props for tonight's sermon in my pocket, lest my child, when coming over towards me, would kind of grab them, not knowing that they were my props, you know. Crunch bar and a lollipop. Learned a lot from where these came tonight. Just came to me on my way to shul tonight. I'm going to get to each of them, but we'll come back.

Because what I'm thinking about first is this phrase. Can you all think if you remember this? Let's see if you remember this phrase or if it's known to you. Life is like a... Wow, so many different... Life is like a box of... You never know when you... What you're going to get. Let's do that one more time, because I think, you know... Life is like a box of... You never know what you're going to... It's kind of part of, right? I mean, life is like cherries, but life is like a box of chocolates.

Part of the song of our nation, in a way, kind of made its way into the very nature, the texture of our lives. Life is like a box of chocolates. It is unknowable. You never know what you're going to get. Could get the one that's really, you know, the one that you always love. Then the one that you hoped that you were going to... Not the cherry, but the one that's chocolate all the way through. Then, if you're like me, if it's a bitter chocolate. Before I met my wife, I hated bitter chocolate. I've learned a lot from my wife. Life is like a box of chocolates.

One of the most remarkable things about that teaching from Forrest Gump and from the popular cultural frame in which it lives is that life, of course, as our friend last week during our yeshiva day, James Jacobson-Maizel said, Relax. Nothing is under your control. We might not agree with that. We might think that many things are under our control. In fact, many things are, or at least seem to be, under our control. But for the most part, life hands us a box of chocolates, and we don't know what we're going to get. Life hands us uncertainty, unknowing, and most powerfully, it gives us suffering. It gives us pain. It gives us challenge. It gives us difficulty. It gives us crucible. It gives us both what we want and what we don't want, and in both directions, we suffer. It's pretty remarkable.

As I was this past Wednesday night up in Westchester for a series called The Buddha and Moses in a Dialogue, and we began with the basic noble truth of the Buddha, Shakyamuni Buddha, the prince who recognized and formulated four noble truths about the world and began with life is suffering. Life is suffering. And life is suffering not only when we experience pain, but life is also suffering, said the Buddha, when we experience pleasure. The grasping mind wants more suffering. More chocolate, suffering. Less chocolate, suffering. Chocolate, suffering.

And remarkably, tomorrow morning in the Weekly Wisdom, we're going to be looking at an amazing moment that might give us insight into this thing called suffering and what we might do with it when life gives us something that we weren't expecting or something that is painful, something that is difficult, something that is bitter. And it appears right after the Song of the Sea. The Song of the Sea, just to keep everybody up to date, the Song of the Sea, the Egyptians are running after the Israelites. They make it to the Dead Sea, the Reed Sea. They make it through and relief on the other side. They are saved. They break out in song,

all of the Israelites begin to sing. Moses starts the whole thing off. And then at the end of Moses' song, his sister decides to jump in too. And her name is? Miriam. Mary. Miriam.

Torah tells us in chapter 15 that then Miriam... Come on, I have some cantors here. Debbie Friedman fans. And the? So if you don't know that little cultural thing there, it's kind of a Debbie Friedman song, quite famous for those who know, for those who don't. Miriam, the prophetess took the sisters, she took the women, they went out and they began to sing a song. And the Torah tells us that as they finished their song, the very next verse. And they came to a place called Marah.

Marah. Can everybody say that? They came to Marah. Not to Marah, but they came to a place called Marah. And all of a sudden the Torah tells us that they couldn't drink water from Marah because they were Marim. This place called Marah is actually named after they come there and realize that the water is Marim, it is bitter, bitter waters. And then the Torah says? This word Marah appears over and over again.

And of course we just heard from Miriam. Marah, Miriam, bitter Miriam. And then no sooner have the Israelites left the land of constriction, the land of suffering, the land of injustice, the land of pain and excruciating, unimaginable... They begin to kvetch. Which is Yiddish for complaining, right? They kvetch. They've just made their way through the waters of liberation and now they're thirsty for waters and the Torah begins a conversation with us about bitter waters. They come to a place that's bitter.

They just were singing and now they're parched and they want water. And so they cry out to God very much reminiscent of the same crying when they were slaves. And then this moment where the holiday of trees makes its way into the story in a radical way. Vayorehu Adonai etz. Vayashlech el hamayim, vayim teku hamayim and God yorehu to Moses etz. A tree. And Moses takes the tree and throws it into the water and the waters become sweet. What kind of tree sweetens bitter waters? What kind of tree sweetens bitter waters? The rabbis are... The rabbis have a lot of ideas. The rabbis say, oh, what tree was it? It was a willow tree. And some rabbis say, no, it was an olive tree. It was all kinds of... lots of trees. Says one rabbi, this tree irrespective of the kind of tree it was was a miraculous tree.

It was bitter. And says the Midrash, a bitter tree put into bitter waters makes something sweet. And the Midrash goes on to say, you know something? Here's something remarkable. Not like humans at the Midrash where we have to sweeten things something's bitter, we put sweetness into it. God is unlike that. God says, no, I'm going to give you bitter. And the bitter tree is put into the bitter waters and it comes out sweet. And another rabbi comes along and says, no, here's what it is. Even if it is still bitter, it's Torah. How do I know that it's Torah, says the rabbis? Because the word Vayorehu, which means and God showed him, is not God showed him but God taught him from the word Torah. Vayorehu means and God Torahed. He taught Moses the tree.

It's a remarkable rabbinic gloss on a tree, on a night of trees at a turbulent, bitter time both for me personally let's say as a human and for us around this broader national landscape what would it mean to unpack putting Torah, teaching Torah throwing something bitter into something bitter? On one level, it's simple everybody it means that in order for us to sweeten waters, we don't just put sweet onto bitter, we double down on bitter. We double

down on what's difficult. We double down on what hurts. We double down and we enter into like we said on the high holidays, we stay in the room when the waters are being troubled. We don't decide, let me just bring a whole bag of sugar. We actually invite more bitterness in the form of Torah of truth. We bring truth to bear. We bring honesty to bear, we bring softness to bear. We sit with the Mayim Marim the difficult bitter waters. I mean come on everybody in the story, in the Bible, does God have a shortage of ways of bringing water to the Israelites?

Next week God will tell Moses, forget about making the water sweet, just hit the rock. And then a couple of weeks later God's gonna say, you know what, don't hit the rock, just talk to the rock. But this moment, right after the joy and the song of the sea, God says, here, the waters are bitter, the people are complaining, things are not right. There is as the Buddha would say, tuka, dissatisfaction. They were relieved and released and here they encounter difficulty. And then Midrash says God says to Moses, let me teach you the way of throwing Torah that is bitter Torah into bitter waters and making them sweet. What a powerful lesson for me, for you, for all of us on some level if not personally.

Then let's look at candy. I asked my son Tal about this lollipop. He said, Abba it's not my favorite one and I said, why? He said, you know, I always start with the one that I don't like so that I can get to the one that I do at the end. It's okay for it to be bitter in the beginning as long as it gets sweet at the end. In fact, he says, I choose the bitter because I know that the bitter will be the way towards the end.

If we enter into the question of suffering. If we enter into the question of tuka, of dissarim, of pain of mar, of bitter which of course is so much a part of the Passover narrative. The Passover story, the maror the notion of the bitterness, the bitterness of slavery the bitterness of injustice, the bitterness of the imperfect, the bitterness of what I was hoping for and the expectation, the lofty ideal that has now come crashing down in the reality of this is my life. This is messy. I thought that leaving Egypt was going to bring us into this wide expanse, we were going to sing songs, it was going to be a rock concert. First Moses comes down and he's playing, jamming, and then Miriam just stands on the beam and says everybody let's go, and it's great, and then literally the next moment the waters are bitter.

It's hard not to think of course immediately of where we are this weekend, not only in terms of the holiday of trees not only in terms of the amazing Mary Oliver, the Miriam whose songs we sang tonight, not only the Miriam, the prophetess, but of the women's march. I said it can't tell you how many people wrote to me glowingly thanking me for sending out an email saying we will have our very own Rabbi Mir Rivera down with the Jewish women of color representing in DC and that there are other marches happening. Can't tell you how many people wrote to me telling me how disappointed they were that I said that we would stay in the conversation.

Hard to imagine that two years ago amazing amazing as the Midrash says, with women, the righteous women of the generation were the ones who brought us out of Egypt. Women in droves and men, and everyone went down to Washington DC to speak out, to find a voice. And two years later here we are, in the Jewish community pulled apart by the bitter waters of complaining and the bitter waters of enmity and anger and hurt. The bitter waters of

distrust, the bitter waters of accusation, the bitter waters of internal fighting amongst ourselves. The waters are so bitter and I and others said let's throw some Torah into those bitter waters. Let's throw some light. Let's throw some truth let's speak up and say that if you don't repudiate hatred, absolutely, unequivocally that you should step down from leadership.

The movement is bigger than who you are that we give them a chance to do tshuva. We give people a chance to tell us their story that we don't go on social media and dehumanize those whom we think are dehumanizing. We take a step back and we take a deep breath. There are implications at play.

There's a, there was a great Hasidic Rebbe, his name was the Meir Shiloh, the Ishbitzer. The Ishbitzer Rebbe. The Ishbitzer Rebbe writes on this teaching of what it means to throw Torah. Listen to these words. He quotes the Aramaic commentator, the Oklos, who says he says that God through a tree is translated in Aramaic as God taught a lesson gave advice. And the Ishbitzer in the 19th century goes on to say, says that even if you think that you're so holy, there are people who are distant. There are people who are far away. People who have fallen, people who have made mistakes, people who don't deserve to be called holy who are off. The way he says to them we have to go and teach them the ways of love and compassion. We have to go and teach them the ways of love and compassion that God throws love and compassion into bitterness in order for there to be compassion and love. And how has that ever happened without listening, mutual understanding, dialogue, the courage to speak. And so when people say Rabbi Mira Rivera went down to DC, we say she went down to walk with at the protest against let that be clear there are bitter waters and sometimes we have to turn up the heat on its bitterness in order for it to become sweet.

You know this lesson is something that we walk with, each and every one of us because in the end of the day and after conversations are had we will be asked to step into the bitterness that we own. We will be asked to step into the pain and suffering that we alone have been allotted. We will be judged. Our lives will be judged by our capacity to turn things that were painful into things that were sweet. That alchemical walk is our spiritual work.

So I find it playfully fun that in the conversation about Moses and the Buddha I began talking about the Buddha's enlightenment and many of you know the story of the Buddha that when the Buddha sat under the Bodhi tree he meditated and contemplated and worked with all of the difficulties that the mind will procure. But the last and most difficult moment of the Buddha's journey was when he was sitting under the Bodhi tree and Mara, Mara the demon of death, Mara the demon of suffering, Mara came to Siddhartha and Siddhartha sat still and untouched by Mara claimed the seat of enlightenment. He said enlightenment belongs to me I am here with you. Mara the monstrous soldier who cries out and Mara's energies they cried out to him and said what business do you have becoming sweet? And Siddhartha said I bear witness and pointed to the ground and said the witness will be the ground. The ground will witness my deserving to break through Mara the bitterness, the demon of death.

What a world it would be if we gave each other the benefit of the doubt and asked one another to step in to listen before we come to conclusions we must have the courage to

soften and to sweeten the bitter waters. The earth will witness that the tree of life will witness that Mary Oliver said in her last book thirst thirst thirst.

I knew a loved one once who gave me a box full of darkness. It took me years to understand that this too was a gift. Life is like a box of darkness. It takes our courage. It takes our fortitude. It takes our commitment, our dedication, our unwillingness to give in to the voices of hatred, to the voices of closing off our hearts from the one who stands before us. Calling them on what needs to be called. Asking them to rise to the occasion so that every human being is seen as holy and as beloved. That is turning a box of darkness into a gift.

So I want to thank my son Tal because he taught me a lesson 15 minutes before I arrived in Shul today that I had learned. And some of you have heard me say that once there was a great Hasidic Rebbe before whom two little boys were brought out for a blessing and the Rebbe the seer of Lublin he took a little scotch a little schnapps and he kind of gave it to the first kid which by the way he shouldn't have done but anyway he did and the little boy drank it and then spit it out and he said oh it's bitter. And then he gave a little schnapps to the second kid, and he petted his head, and the kid drank it. And he went and he looked at the second kid and he looked at his dad and he said this one this one will be great. He knows that it's bitter in the beginning, it's bitter in the middle, and sometimes we make it more bitter, more truthful, more honest, more turbulent, more real. But if we wait long enough and we abide in that place we get to the sweet sweet sweet gift.

We're told that as you celebrate the holiday of the trees you're in your heart thinking about the moror on Pesach. I bless all of you here tonight. The road is long the work is overwhelming. There are so many shortcuts to deep truth and understanding. There are so many places for us to go or ride. There are so many assumptions. We can make it so much hatred that we can foment from fear. But if we wait and if we listen; and if we speak and if we wait holding on to that tree of life we who believe in freedom shall not rest until it comes.

Please rise.