

Shabbat 11 23 18 Sermon

My favorite yearbook quote from high school, someone I know very well, I was born with him, my twin brother Adam, who probably, if you knew or if you ever listened to these sermons, he sometimes does, you know, Adam, I'm sorry, here you go. His quote was, don't stick with the herd, you might wind up a lamb chop. Don't stick with the herd, you might wind up a lamb chop. Well, herd, lamb chop, I mean, it didn't work. But the idea was that there is a kind of herd mentality, there's a kind of grouping where you lose your individuality, right? You lose that sense of being able to stand outside.

On Thanksgiving, of course, it's a herding holiday. Herds, no matter where they are, different parts of the world, come flocking in, a whistle, a bell, an email, and people gather together. It's a holiday for family, it's a holiday for community, it's a holiday for all of that. And it's also a holiday where those who lack that, or that which they imagined it should be, those who wish community was something else other than the family they have to go back to.

Or like another friend of mine texted me last night, they started in on politics, I'm in the bathroom reading the New York Times. I know that was none of y'all, right? Somebody else. Community and individuality, or community and togetherness and aloneness. Being alone, and what aloneness signifies. Alone on a holiday, alone in our lives, alone without, alone. Would that everyone would be able to look around the room at Thanksgiving as we went around, and like another young friend of mine, as we said what we were thankful for, this person said, for me. I thought that was great, for me. I said, wow, that's nice. How do we deal with this, aloneness? How do we understand it? How do we identify between different kinds of aloneness and what they are? בשבילי נברא עולם, the verse that I, or the phrase from the rabbis that I quoted before, the Baruch Hu, בשבילי נברא עולם, the world was created for me. A radical statement. Expressing the inherent infinite dignity of each and every human being, regardless of their lineage, regardless of their parents, regardless of where or whom they were born to. לפי כן נברא אדם יחידי, we are born יחידים, singular, alone.

Aloneness in the Torah first appears with a very funny valence. When God is about to create human beings in the second creation story, in the second chapter of the book of Genesis, God says out loud, as if to no one but to us, לֹאֲכֶם, לְוַתְּכֶם, הֵיוּתְּכֶם דָּם לְוַדְּכֶם, can you all say that? לְוַתְּכֶם, לְוַתְּכֶם means to be alone. לְוַתְּכֶם by yourself.

לְוַתְּכֶם says the God of Genesis, it isn't good. All of creation is couples, families, but human beings have to be, God says, existentially, not alone. We are to be coupled, familial, intersubjective. We need to be with someone. There's a kind of aloneness that Rav Selaveitchik, the great existential orthodox thinker said, is ontological aloneness. And in that way, ontological or being aloneness actually doesn't matter if you have a wife, a husband, doesn't matter if you have a mama, a papa, doesn't matter if you have a family.

For Rav Selaveitchik, to be alone meant to be human. All human beings are by definition alone. And our aloneness is such, for the Rav, for this particular thinker, that it isn't assuaged when we're in a big room or a small room. To be alone is the human condition. Call that loneliness number one.

Loneliness number two, says the Rav, is historical. It's an aloneness, when he talks about the lonely man of faith, that is, when we live in a society that devalues community and says we have to go at it alone all the time, there's an aloneness that could be assuaged by community, but that because of the conditions, we don't look for it. The second kind of loneliness they'll call loneliness. The first one is alone, and the second one is lonely.

In alone, we recognize that when we are by ourselves, we are full of a certain kind of tornness. We're human beings, and yet we're sublime. We are stuck in bodies, but want to be beyond all of the constraints. In our very aloneness, we come face to face with our deep humanity and can reach another person's aloneness. Hey, you're alone, me too. Loneliness, though, loneliness is a condition that Rav calls an insatiable condition. It's a condition where one is avoiding aloneness. One reaches out over and over again to find community, but because you don't know how to be alone by yourself, and because the society around you is not supporting your being fully alone in the deep sense, you have pseudo groups and pseudo communities.

Tomorrow morning, Jacob will have two kinds of aloneness. The second and third time in the Torah, when the Torah will use the word *livado*. Jacob is about to meet his brother Esau, the one he is literally born with. Their bodies connected by a hand grabbing the keel of his older brother. Jacob has never really been alone. He's been on the run. He's got two wives and two concubines and 12 kids and tons of resources. He's got so much. A credit card. He's got an apartment.

Jacob's brother Esau is coming to get him. And Jacob is scared. And so it tells us that Jacob sends an appeasement offering. He says to him, here, take this. I stole the birthright, I stole the blessing, but here, you can have it all back. He starts sending him all kinds of things. And he'll send him herds of sheep. And he gives a very odd instruction to the one who's bringing the herds to his brother. He's like an entourage of trucks of stuff for Esau.

He says to the one who's driving these herds, he says, now when you take the herds, the *adarim*, he says, He sends with his servants one herd at a time. And he says to them, make sure that you place some distance between one herd and the next herd. Each herd has to stand alone. The word *levado*, the herd has to be by itself. Don't put them together. What might have been the rationale for Jacob sending herds to his brother and having the servants make sure that they don't tailgate? Says the Ramban Maimonides, he says something very beautiful.

He says, you know what was going on here? Rashi quotes the Maimonides. He wanted Esau to think that he had a lot more stuff than he actually had. And then here would one group of animals come and Esau would be like, wow, that's a lot. And then he'd wait a minute, another minute. And then another entourage would go, oh, wow, does it ever end? He's got so much. Jacob uses the aloneness in this context as a kind of loneliness. It's a deception. He doesn't want to actually meet his brother Esau, but he wants to deceive him into thinking he's something other than what he is. He uses aloneness in this case with the herd in order to say, hey, look, I'm much bigger than you thought.

It's me showing up at Thanksgiving looking my finest even though I'm living off of beans at my house. I want you to see the best self that I could put forward. I want you to think even bigger things about me, lest you actually meet me.

Maybe Jacob himself doesn't know how to meet himself in this moment. But a couple of verses later, after Jacob has taken all of the herds, all of his family, all of his children, every imaginable screen that he could possibly distract himself with, his iPhone, his iPad, his Kindle, his watch, and Jacob is finally, mercifully, scarily, alone with himself. Alone or lonely? Jacob, as lonely, is trying everything he can do to avoid himself, but Jacob, as alone, and finally, finally, finally, when everything is said and done, when Jacob is alone, it is only when he is alone that he finally triumphs.

The rabbis say, you know, all great things that ever happened that God ever did for humanity, humanity did in some way in the Bible. Here's an example, say the rabbis. God brought forth life, so did Eliyahu the prophet in the book of Kings. Just as God also blessed the small amount, there was another biblical figure. They go through a list of things. Just as God made the bitter sweet, so did Elijah the prophet. It goes through a whole list of things that God did and then human beings. And then listen to the last one, everybody. Just as God will one day and was always Livado alone, so too there's a parallel in Jacob. Vaivater Yaakov Livado. And Jacob too was alone.

To be alone, to be thankful at Thanksgiving for me. Not me because I have no problems, not me because I have no suffering, not me because I'm not torn, not me because I have it all together, not me because I have a resume and a CV, but me because when I'm alone, I am not turning towards something to pull me away from myself. I don't know about you, but I'm finding more and more that I don't believe that we ever will be alone. Again, in some deep way, in some deep way where boredom shows up.

I used to sit long retreats when I was in my 20s. I had time. And people used to say to me, people who had never sat for even an hour in meditation or 10 minutes or 5 minutes, they'd say, don't you go nuts when you're not speaking and just watching your mind? I'd say, no. It is so interesting. It's boring. It's exciting. It's crazy. Finding 5 minutes to be alone. In some way to be able to ensure that our aloneness becomes sacred solitude and not depressing loneliness.

That we aren't distracting ourselves and avoiding ourselves by being with people or by being with something, but to be able to know what to do with ourselves when we have nothing else but us. Oh sure, Jacob knows how to deceive people. He knows how to send flocks. He even uses aloneness with his flocks as if to say, look how great I've done. But Jacob doesn't become, Israel doesn't become the one whom we are named for until he can be alone the way that Midrash says, like God is alone. Home alone with God. Home alone with God for the holiday. Home alone for 5 minutes at night before being distracted.

What amazing opportunities we have as self-reflective beings to be able to think into what the difference between aloneness and loneliness might look like. If we as a culture highlight the atomistic self, the individual, the lone ranger, the lonely ranger might be the more appropriate. To be alone, to be able to say, I was created in this way that I know how to meet myself is a hallmark of spiritual maturity. It's a discipline that when not practiced

atrophies. It's a muscle that we need to build. What would the world look like if we were to have a self-understanding and healthy concept of aloneness that wasn't lonely? What would it look like if we didn't medicate ourselves with friends and with movies and with websites and with emails and to-do lists and all of the wonderful ways that we medicate ourselves in the name of productivity, success, ambition. Being home alone with God.

I know that one of my favorite prayers is Adon Olam. When I think about aloneness, I think about one line that we say and I've said since I'm a little boy, a thousand, a million, how many times have I said Adon Olam, Asher Malach. The master of hiddenness, before your rule was recognized, before your awareness of your presence was seen. Before anything created, any phenomenal thing, anythingness manifested. And then we called you king master. We had a relationship with something beyond ourselves. And then it says, And everything is gone. When this entire manifest world is no longer here, just a dream, God will, as God will, be self-sufficiently aware of God's self, God's own beautiful, profound self. That very self that we have been imbued with, that we were born individuals in order to attain and to experience and to lift up, to elevate.

We too, when everything is taken away, all the dishes are taken away and all the studies and all the jobs and all the acronyms behind our name, in front of our name, when all of that will be taken away, we will be asked, Did you cultivate your sacred solitude? The levado, the levado, the aloneness that is true. There are lonely people in the world, that's for sure. And sometimes a hand or a gesture, a hug, can assuage that.

And there are a lot of us who claim loneliness, but it isn't loneliness, it's uncultivated sacred solitude. A lot of us who have not yet been shown the way in. And even if we have, we fall off the wagon. So tonight and tomorrow, asking you to take five minutes to be with yourself without any distractions. Five minutes. Five minutes. And if you'd like to report back next week, that'd be cool. Did the five minutes feel like an eternity? Was it hard? Was it easy? For those of you who are really great at being alone, maybe you become the connoisseurs, maybe you'll be like the alone rangers. You'll be the ones who show us a way in, how to be, so that we might show others, too, the way out.

May the one who is alone, may that one show us how to be alone in a way that might serve this family, this community, the broader space. And next year, Thanksgiving time, maybe we can come around and say, what are you thankful for? And you might say, me.

Please rise.