

Shabbat 05 24 19 Sermon

I think growing up, one of the most amazing things that I would see, week in and week out, one of the most remarkable things that could easily have been missed, but it wasn't, one of the most edifying, inspirational moments happened each and every Shabbat. As Shabbat descended, and people rushed and scurried about, there's never enough time to prepare for Shabbat. Now, I would witness my father, who when I was growing up, now, Pop, I have to say it, it's true, but I hope you don't mind, but, you know, I don't know if you'd, you know, you're not watching anyway, so... The two-pack-a-day smoker of Kents.

And as Shabbat came in, my father, who reached for that pack so quickly and so often during the day, would put that pack of cigarettes away, and it would not be touched again for the entire 25 hours of Shabbat. It was remarkable. Given what we know about addiction, given what we know about what happens to a person when they're reaching, given how profoundly important that habit was in my father's life, when Shabbat came, something else happened.

And it would always make me wonder, like, why can't you do that on Tuesday? Why can't you do that on Thursday? What is going on here? Clearly, you can control it. Clearly, you can say no. But that mystery at the root of what it was that allowed my father to do something that he would otherwise an hour before be unable to do, the mystery of what it is that allows us and gives us the strength, that gives us the capacity to do things that we don't think under other circumstances we might, that is a pretty important question, don't you think? I think at the heart of that story, and by the way, I don't believe that I'm the only one that has a story like that.

I'm sure that if we went around the room, there are a couple of you that would say, oh, you know, I have a similar sort of, this incredible capacity that under certain conditions, whatever those conditions might be, and I'll kind of, I think, look at something in a moment that I think is at the root of this, people can do remarkable things. People can surprise themselves and others in ways. And I think that to some extent, the answer to that question is not only found in tomorrow morning's Wisdom weekly installment called the Parsha, but I also think it was found in something else that I didn't grow up with.

You see, I didn't grow up, many of you might have grown up with this, I didn't grow up going to gas stations where you had to pump your own gas. How many people have grown up and gone to gas stations where you had to pump your own gas? Wow. New Jersey? Anybody? Yeah, yeah. We grew up in Long Island, you know, they pumped our gas for us. And they wiped, you know. I remember pulling up in the gas stations when I was driving and thinking, I'm waiting for the attendant to come in and let me know, and they would point and say, self-serve. And that phrase, self-serve, really hit me hard. Self-serve. Wait a second. That's not a good thing. I would hear people telling me, that's very self-serving, David. Self-serve.

I think at the root of the answer to the question I posed is found in that simple phrase, self-serve. And I think that the Torah portion tomorrow morning, our weekly wisdom, which by the way is one of the most important weekly installments in the entire Torah, get to that in about a minute. I think at the root of the answer to that question, what it was that allowed

my father and others like him and others like you and me to do the thing that we think we cannot do, is something connected to that phrase, self-service.

The parasha that I've been alluding to is called Behar. It basically is chapter 25 of the book of Leviticus, just one very long chapter, and then two little verses that we'll get to in a minute. At the end, the first two verses of chapter 26, all of chapter 25 and a little bit of chapter 26 of the third of the five books of Moshe, Vayikra, Leviticus, and all of the parasha, all of this chapter, is dealing with basically a string of issues or commandments or injunctions that are held together by, I think, this notion that we'll get back to.

The topics range and begin with the most profound, potentially most profound economic institution, probably not very well kept in antiquity, called Shemitah. The year, the seventh year of a seven-year agricultural cycle where all the lands were to be left fallow. They are to be hands-off, not to be worked. They are open, they are hefker, they are for everyone. The Torah then goes on to say that seven of those seven-year cycles will ultimately culminate in a 50th year called the Jubilee year, in which not only will lands have been lying fallow for the 49th year and the 50th year, if you're still following me here, but all the slaves in the land are going to go free. It's a jubilee.

Call liberty and proclaim it throughout the land, written forever, etched into our liberty bell in Philadelphia. Those two institutions, radical, radical institutions at their time, the Torah then goes on to talk about other radical things, like the responsibilities that we have one towards the other, if someone becomes destitute, how we are to support them, social glue, social connection and cohesion. The Torah will go on to talk about slavery that is okay, the kind where you have to sell yourself into slavery because you've run on difficult times.

The Torah will read all of these things through chapter 25, and by the time chapter 25 ends, here's where we wind up. This most important of all chapters of the Torah, here's the last three verses. Do not have slaves, the Torah tells us, redeem them, set them free. Why? Says verse 55 of chapter 25. God says, for me, the Israelites are my slaves, my servants, those who serve me. They are my servants, they serve me. I took them out of Egypt in order for them to serve me. I am Adonai. And then these two verses that act as a coda, a capping moment, we have the land must lie fallow, we have the 50th year, we have raised those who are destitute, be fair, and we have God's proclamation that we are servants not of a human, but of God, God's self. And then these two verses. God says, idolatry, no good. Don't make idols, don't set up carved or graven images or pillars, don't place a figure of stone in your land, don't worship idols. And then verse two. But keep my sabbaths and revere my sanctuaries. I am Adonai, I am the Lord, I am Yodei Vavi, I am God. Agricultural laws, economic rules, poverty, social responsibilities, the cohesion of what makes a social unit. And then let me finish everything I just said by telling you, you are really my servants, and make sure that you don't worship idols, and a refresher course, you keep all of the sabbaths.

I'm not the first one to say, what does these things have to do with each other? What's the connection between idolatry? Why all of a sudden we have to go back to idolatry? We were just hearing about agricultural laws and institutions of the kind, all of these other beautiful things.

So I would think that, for me personally, what binds all of these things together, and what you and I need to remember, what the Torah is telling us in terms of our weekly wisdom, what we are to do, why does it matter, why does it matter, is simply this. The foundation of an ethical and moral life, the foundation of a life that is based in community between me and Nadav, me and you, me and all of you who are tired because it's a long night, and gosh, it's still light outside, the foundation is self-transcendence. The foundation of living a holy life, the foundation of living and being able to fulfill the mandate to love the other as we would love ourselves, to love God as we are to love as it were love, to serve that.

The foundation is to remember that self-serve is serving the self. That self-serve serves the self, but when we are able to transcend something that is greater than us, we stand at the precipice of self-sacrifice, of self-limitation, of a no to the self for the sake of a yes for the we. And at the heart of every one of the commandments, every one of the institutions and practices that you will find in chapter 25 of the book of Leviticus is a fundamental statement.

At the end of the sixth year, even if you want to plant the field, you can't. Even if you'll make money, you can't. At the heart of the institution of Jubilee is that freedom is not up to you. To be free is who you are. You are to set others free because you are free, and even if it is in your economic advantage to keep slaves for 200 years, that's not what the Torah demands. Even if you will lose money if you help your fellow man, woman, child, self-transcend.

And we get a chance to do it every single week. Every single week, Shabbat reminds us, or should remind us, that it's not up to us. It's not up to us as consumers to buy happiness. It is not up to us, it is not up to us to decide when Shabbat comes in or when it doesn't come in. It is not in our freedom to choose. Shabbat chooses for us because it is bigger than us.

And that every single Friday night when my father came home and said, I want another tin cigarette, he knew that there was something bigger than him that he must allow to pull him along. It was bigger than him. He was small next to it. And it lifted him. It strengthened him. It ennobled him. It dignified him. It reminded him of his strength. And when he put away those tin cigarettes, he wasn't just invoking his own will as petty and as small as it might have been on a Wednesday, but on that Friday night, every single one of his ancestors who had said no to all manner of things stood with my father to say no.

How counter-cultural is that? How profoundly counter-cultural is that? That the I, the atomistic, individualistic, my side of the aisle, my perspective, my iPad, my iPhone, my I, I, I, is an I doll. How profoundly destabilizing that the United States is called united and begins with a we, the people. Not individuals, but something bigger than us, something stronger than us, something that we have often lost and are struggling in an ugly way to recapture. Some narrative that can ennoble us and remind us and strengthen us. Help us to say no to those immature, selfish desires.

Maybe this is why the Torah tomorrow morning will end with idolatry and a warning against bowing down to graven images. Maybe the greatest graven image is the self itself. The lonely, isolated I that thinks it is greater when it stands alone. Man, pump and gas, self-serve. We need each other. We need community. We need to lift each other up. We are greater when we remember that we can't do it alone.

And so it was, 11 years ago, in April of 2008, when we gathered together as a small Romemu community at the time, not 600 strong families as we are today, but only a handful of people, maybe 70, 80 individuals. And in that first membership drive in that year, 11 years ago, we said something profound. We said there are five freedoms that the great Virginia Satir, the systems theorists, the psychologists said that every human needs in order to feel free. And one of those freedoms we said was the freedom to commit.

How countercultural was that? That we pay a price when we don't pay the price. That when we receive gifts, when we live in a birthright Israel culture where everything is handed to us, when we don't have to walk and talk and work, when we don't realize that just to walk in tonight to this synagogue, it costs each member of Romemu \$5,000 just to keep the lights on, just to be able to have the music and the services that each and every Friday night and Saturday morning is Yom Kippur. But that we keep it open at the largesse and the desire to serve and to connect, but that each and every year around Passover, between now and the receiving of Torah on Shavuot, we invite members of our community who are not yet members to step in, to be lifted up by the strength and the power of the we that is greater than the I, to say not what do I get for membership, but what should I give for membership. Because in a world of Shabbat, it's not about me. Even though me is in the middle of Romemu, it also has a you on the end. It's Romem-u.

About five minutes before Shabbat, I got a video from my brother who sent it along. It was a video of a dear friend of ours that we went to high school with. His name is Alan Brown. Alan Brown was here a couple of years ago, a dear friend of mine from growing up. How do I know Alan? Alan is part of the Ramaz family that I grew up with. And Alan was with his other brothers, Stephen and Daniel. Alan was one of the best hockey players and general athletes that I'd ever met. Handsome, striking, beautiful young man. Part of our Hevra.

In 1988, when I was 19 years old, I came back from Israel after spending the second year in Yeshiva, and we heard the news that Alan had been in the Caribbean with his family, had been in a freakish accident. He had just been wading in the water, and the undertow had taken him and flipped him over, and he landed on his neck. And he had shattered his C5, C4, C5 vertebra. I went to visit him in the hospital then, and I didn't think he was going to make it, but he's more than made it. Married, with children. Alan spends his life trying to raise awareness about the cure for paralysis and healing spinal cord injuries.

So what was the video? The video was a WhatsApp that my brother sent along of Alan, who's in Israel right now, and he's there raising money and raising awareness as part of a convention around disabilities and other abilities in Israel. And the video is a four-minute video after the lifts on all of the buses had broken for all of those who had been in wheelchairs, seeing Alan on the bus with the lift broken and a group of seven, eight, ten people. As the video kept going, more and more people started coming. And I could hear them, in Hebrew, they were going, יאללה, תתקח אותם.

תתקחו אותם, לא, לא. They were trying to fold the wheelchair and get Alan safely off the bus. It's one of the most moving things I've ever seen, how what started off as one or two people looking at Alan, then more and more people came, and they were holding him gently, strongly, firmly. All of them gathered together to do something that was scary and maybe

impossible to imagine they could pull it off, and they did. And I couldn't not think about self-serve. Serve the self.

And that for us to fully inhabit our humanity, we must serve selflessly. When we self-transcend, when we Shabbat, when we say something stronger, bigger than me, can tell me no, can lift me up, can constrain me and also elevate me all at once, that is the meaning of Et Shabbatotai Tishmoro, U'mikdashi Tira'u, Ani Adonai Eloheichem. Observe my Shabbats. Let them lift you. Let them lift us.

Please rise.