

Sermon Shabbat 10 12 18

I don't know where my little son went. If anybody has seen him, tell him that his Abba wants him very quickly. You're on the risk, you know, of working with your kids on your sermon. You know, they take your good material. I'm kidding.

There's a lot in the name, in the Torah. And tonight I want to talk, in the next ten minutes or so, about a name and a character. And I want to bridge him to last week, because last week we began the year, Shabbat B'reishit, with the Holiness Project. We talked about Simon Sinek, and start with why. That not only does an organization have a mission statement, not only does a good project have a mission statement, a vision of where it's going, we, Jewish people, have a mission. Human beings have a mission. We call it the Holiness Project, the Kiddushah Project.

And we talked about the three dimensions, or the three axes of holiness. Holiness in space, in time, and in person. And last week we talked about the holiness of humanity, or living creatures. All created, B'Tselem, created in the image of the Divine. And this week we're talking a little bit about the holiness in space. But again, names matter. And characters in Torah are given names, and often we don't know what the name means, or why the name was given, but the Hebrew language is so rich, and even if you don't know Hebrew, go with me here for a minute, because I promise you that I'll explain it. We're told that Noah, the name for the character of tomorrow's reading, the name Noah is... We're given the reason for it. The Torah says, Zeh Y'nachameynu mi'yitzvon yadeinu.

This one, whose name is Noah, will be a nechama, will be a comfort to us. Of course it's problematic because the name Noah and nechama are not exactly the same letters, nechem, noach, but it's close. Something about the character is nechama is comforting.

Comforting, at least we're told, for the sadness of the curse of the earth, the sadness... Noah has a comforting character. The only problem, of course, with Noah's name and the word nechama, as it appears, is not only is the word nechama, which gives Noah his name, comfort, not only does it mean comfort, but there's only one place in Torah where it doesn't mean that at all, and it's in the Noah story. When God decides, in the Noah story, when the character called God decides to destroy the earth, to bring a deluge, to bring the flood, the word used for regret, for remorse, is vayinachem Adonai, and God had remorse.

God regretted having done what God did. God regretted having created the world. God regretted the world. And so as Rabbi Jonathan Sachs, Chief Rabbi of England, points out, we have here a contronym, a word that means its opposite within itself. Nechama means both rest, comfort, and discomfort, and remorse. Noah, whose name means to rest, to have a resting place, is the one who is dislodged from his place of security. Noah, whose name means to be comforted, is the one who at the end of the story is anything but comforted. He loses his connection. He's drunk by the end of the story.

Those who don't know it, go read the story in the Torah. Noah is an ambivalent character. He represents the thing and its opposite all at once. In fact, it's alluded to, and I talked about this last night, beautifully alluded to in the very flow of the first verse in tomorrow

morning's reading, where the Torah will tell us, these are the generations of Noah. Noah was a righteous man. And in a Torah that has no punctuation, you could read this, these are the generations of Noah, of the two Noahs. The one comforted, and the one discomforted, and maybe all of us. Because really, aren't we that too?

Someone once told me the greatest thing you could ever get in the world is the thing that you most desire. And the greatest disappointment you can ever have in the world is getting the thing you most desire. We are by nature ambivalent. We hold two sides of everything. We have heights and depths. We have the moment we stand in our place, we're moving. When I've arrived, I'm going. When I'm going, I'm arriving.

And Noah represents this ambivalence so deeply. And so Noah, the character of rest and discomfort, of unease, of dukkah. Noah. Noah. Noah, Noah. Noah is uniquely positioned in our Torah to lift up the kedushah, the sanctity, not of person and not of time, but of space. If you follow the Genesis story, we have been now jettisoned from the Garden of Eden, the first holy space. And as God prepares to, quote unquote, destroy the world, God then creates another Garden of Eden. It's called the Ark. And into that Ark, two by two, seven by seven, seven by seven, two by two, Noah is to bring together all of creation into a container, into a sacred, holy space known as a teva, a box, an Ark. Noah becomes the character who gets to sanctify holy space again. And into that Ark, there's a moment where the ambivalence is clearly spelled out, even within the Ark.

And it speaks to me tonight and to many of us here. This sacred space, which is the sustainability, the seed bank of the future world that holds all of those species, all of that possibility, that potency, it saves only a small number of the creatures, only a small number get out. The whole world is up, is being drowned, and this ambivalent character who, according to many of the myths, should have done more. He wasn't so righteous. For 120 years he was building the Ark, and how come only his family was on the Ark? The rabbis find fault with someone who can imagine his entire family will be saved and the rest of the world, who cares? Not so righteous.

Into this sacred space is placed a weird object that we don't know the meaning of. The verse in the Bible will say tomorrow, the Torah will say tomorrow morning, you, when you build an Ark, Mr. Noah, Mr. I'm not sure if I'm coming or going, should I stay or should I go now, Noah? You, place a Tzohar, we don't know what that is, that's the first thing God says, when you make an Ark, make a Tzohar. Along come the rabbis, Rabbi Meir and others say, you know what that Tzohar is? Two opinions. The Tzohar says one rabbi was a window. Halon haya. Halon haya.

And the second opinion is a jewel. A radiant jewel, shining so bright that it illuminated the Ark. What is it, Noah? Is it about where you are? The sacred space as a container for you and your family? Where you rest? Or is it a window? It's great that you want light and you want nechama and comfort, but what about the nechama, the regret, the remorse, the discomfort that is outside in the world? Lest you think it's enough that you have come to your arrival, your destination, there are still other travelers, those who are outside your windows, who need your help, Mr. Comfortable, Mr. I've got all I need, all the light that can shine in my sanctuary, in this ambivalent man God gives an ambivalent object. Is it a window? Is it a jewel? Is it both, depending on where you stand?

This week I was so fortunate to finally have Kol Nidre. I was at Kol Nidre, many of you were there, I had a sermon to give, but this week was the week that I got my sermon, the sermon that I needed to hear, and it was from someone I quoted on Kol Nidre night, a remarkable human being named Brian Stevenson, who wrote a book called Just Mercy, who is a law professor at NYU and who works on behalf of the poor, the destitute, the marginalized, people of color, people who are immigrants, people who are children, people who have no one to speak for them. Brian argues cases before the Supreme Court to end mass incarceration. He told us his stories and inspired us, and I felt this is Kol Nidre.

And the thing he said that touched me the most, he said there were four things that we need to change the world that we live in, and the first thing he said was we have to get close to those things that we naturally remove ourselves from. Get close, he said. Get proximate.

The second thing he said was, he said you can't get close. The third thing I can't, one second, where's the second one? Anybody remember? Narrative. We've got to change the narratives. Change our narratives, he said. We have narratives in our country, in our world, in our communities, in our cultures that we don't confront narratives that run amok like viruses, narratives of white supremacy, narratives, you name the narrative, it is not challenged. So that's the biggest thing that we can do is challenge narratives that are limiting, that are racially charged, that are ambiguous, that are bigoted, that are prejudiced.

And the third thing he said was don't ever give up hope, because if you give up hope, you're lost. You either have hope or you're hopeless. And the last one, he said get uncomfortable. To be willing to be uncomfortable. So which one is it, Noah? Are you comfort man or discomfort man? Is it a window, is it a jewel? The purpose of sacred space, like the purpose of sacred human is to say that there is a place that is safe, a place that is not an insulation, but an opportunity. A place that gives us a window into the world outside and an avenue towards it in order to make it a better place, like the Garden of Eden, but not to shut us in, not to pull back, not to become those who retreat from the world in order to save it, but those who are engaged in the world in order to lift it. Noah didn't get that. The rabbis didn't like that. Sacred space.

So whether it's Israel or the Upper West Side, whether it's, you name it, where there is sacred space, you ask yourself, I ask myself a question, is this space a window and a jewel? Is it illuminate? Is it an opportunity? Is it inclusive? Are people safe? Are people seen? That is the definition of sacred. That is the Garden of Eden. And you can be living in the garden and you're holed up in your little community and the rest of the world is drowning and you're comfortable. Sacred space demands that we live a life comfortable and discomfort. Living with the window, living with the jewel. It's apropos, of course, in my world, I think this way.

That it wasn't long ago in this past summer where I stood here from the Bima on Shabbat Nachamu. On a Shabbat of comforting and I said and told this amazing, beautiful, remarkable community. Many of you are here for the first time tonight, but for those who have been here for a year, two, five, nine, ten, twelve years. You know that we have been far from comfortable in our search for our own sacred space. Our own journey towards having sacred space that we could say is a window into the world where we are on the

inside feeding one another in order to go out and feed more and invite more in. We have been on that journey together.

We have been noach and noach. Hand in hand, ten years ago, we moved from across the street from the southeast corner of 150 feet to the northeast corner. We moved on up at the invitation of our amazing friend and community Alistair Drummond from West End Presbyterian Church. We have been not only guests in your home, but we have been partners. We have been together walking step in step every step of the way. And we've always wondered, you know, where might we find a sacred space of our own and so on Shabbat Nachamu and the Shabbat of Comforting, I told this community that we had in fact located an amazing space.

A space that remarkably is not very far from that front door. In fact, it's the very same space that we left ten years ago, 30 feet south from that corner on the south corner. I reached out to the community and I said, we have a long way to go. It's a very big lift. There's a lot of money between us and the finish line, but someone had generously stepped forward and given us a chance to for the first time in Romemu's history have our own space. And so tonight, God bless you as we speak of windows and we speak of doors and spaces.

I hold in my hand the keys to the first space, the first ark, the first container. And I know that I'm not alone in saying that that space across the street, which will be called the Romemu Center, will be a place where there are a lot of windows. A lot of windows. A lot of beauty. A lot of light. A space that will have music and spirituality and community activity. This entire community will be welcome and we are a part of it. We are woven into the warp and woof of this area. I am so looking forward to the next stage and to the next level of partnership with you, Alistair, and to the entire West End Presbyterian community.

I know that you celebrate with us tonight this remarkable achievement, this milestone in our community and in our relationship with you. My wife, Ariel, I think was thinking, David, don't cry, so I'm trying my best. My wife, Ariel, went out to get us our first mezuzah for it. That door post. And like I said last year when the horrific immigration ban was decreed, we are not a people of the book. We are a people of the door. Our liberation happened through the womb of a doorway. And forever on those door posts, we, the Jewish people, remind ourselves that birth is tough. And like my friend Valerie Kaur says, from tomb to womb, we are not in the darkness of death, but in the darkness of the womb, we are being born as a community, as a people, as a nation.

And so she got this, this birth symbol, this affixing of freedom to the door post to say, all are safe in that sanctuary, all are safe in this sanctuary. We will be a light, and we will be a window. So sacred space.

May the source of life bless all of those who seek to create sacred space, space for the Holy One and her presence. May the Holy One bless this community that as we move into this next stage of having our own space with our own keys, that we don't lock the door on all that is surrounding us, calling us, beckoning us, that all that needs to be served and all that we are called to serve. May the Holy One a blessing. Amen. Amen. And this entire community, and let us say, Amen.