

Waking Up - Rabbi David Ingber on Parshat Ki Tavo 5779 (09 20 19)

They say that waking up is hard to do. Waking up is hard. Even if you are a morning person, it's not easy. Waking up, moving from a place of dream-like awareness into the world of the phenomenal, into the world of the things and the tapes that begin immediately. Waking up is hard to do. And waking up is exactly what we are called to do. Which means each and every one of us at this moment, whether we know it or not, but hopefully we do, is involved in a very difficult task. Because waking up is hard to do. And not just because the song tells us to do it, but because we ourselves know, our own experience of being a human being has given us information, we know, that sometimes we'd rather just sleep.

We know we would rather just hit the snooze button, individually, communally, sometimes, nationally, globally, cosmically, there's a big snooze button somewhere. And then the alarm goes off. Something happens, and we hear Maimonides saying, don't turn off your ringer. Wake up, you sleepyheads. The meaning behind the shofar, or the app known as the shofar. And certainly waking up, if it is complicated for us to wake up, imagine the frustration of those who are trying to wake us up. Imagine the frustration of those. Imagine the person walking in for the umpteenth time, only to have seen us fall back to sleep. Maybe the parents saying you have only ten minutes until the bus is here. Or life saying you better get on with it.

It's not going to get easier in ten years or twenty years from now. It's tough to wake up, and maybe even tougher to wake others up. Having the conviction, having the patience, the perseverance, the courage, the fortitude, the day-to-day that it takes, not only to speak those words to ourselves and to wake ourselves up, but also to try our best to convince others of a truth that we see so obviously, so glaringly, so brazenly, screaming at us.

And like Noah in the Floody Floody, running around trying to tell everybody there's going to be a Floody Floody, and no one listens. Or maybe it's a 16-year-old Swedish girl who gathers all of the teenagers and stands in the halls of power and with a very dry way, Greta Thunberg says, I don't want you to listen to me, I want you to listen to the wake-up call of nature and to the scientists that we are in peril. It is no longer a question of whether or not, but when. And it is so obvious. Screaming.

There's a great teacher in our tradition who knows a thing or two about trying to convince people and persuade them to wake up. His name was Moshe, Moses. And before he died, of course, that was like, like you're about to die, so your wisdom, you want to bequeath to your people, to your children, to your nation, Moses at the end of his life, in the book of Deuteronomy, the entire book, the fifth book of Deuteronomy, of the Torah, called Deuteronomy, is basically Moshe with five big speeches telling the people, here, do this, it's for your own good, or else.

Tomorrow morning's Torah portion, Parshat Ki Tavo, begins with Havad Bikurim, with the mitzvah of the first fruits, the commandment that when you come into the land, and you will plant, and you will have first fruits, bring your first fruits to the temple, and thank God for them. And that beautiful hallmark moment of the first fruits, and the beauty of the first

fruits, gives way in the middle of the Parshat tomorrow to all kinds of very beautiful and very ugly things. Here's what's going to happen if you listen, blessings, here's what's going to happen if you don't, scary, scary, scary, curses, curses, curses. And then the Torah portion tomorrow will finish with the grand finale.

Moses will speak to the people and he'll say some words that have perplexed commentators. And here are the words, at the end of chapter 29, verse 1. Moses says to the people of Israel, You all have seen with your own eyes, before there were body cams, you were all seeing it, witnessing it, it was something, a visual, it was veridical, it was true. You saw everything that God did in the land of Egypt. All of the signs and the wonders, you saw it with your own eyes. It's not hearsay. You were there. And then this verse, verse 3, chapter 29. And God has not given you, God has not granted you, God has not gifted you, all of you, with a knowing heart, with eyes to see and ears to listen until this day. What does that mean? The commentators are perplexed because it seems to imply that God is the one who gives us the capacity to understand. Seems to be a direct, a direct argument against free agency, human agents. God didn't give you a heart to understand. You saw all of those things, Moses says, but God didn't give you the capacity to really grok it until today. How many years later? A lot. Is Moses saying to them that being aware of those miracles is up to God? Is he exonerating them? Is he letting them off the hook? Hey, you didn't really get it until now, but now you got it, good. Now we're clean, good.

Most of the commentators are struggling with what this could possibly mean. They offer all kinds of rationales. Really, Moses is using a figure of speech, but I think the most accurate interpretation is from Nehemiah with the great scholar of the Torah who writes, this is what was happening. Nehemiah Leibovitz writes that it would appear to me that we should read these verses with bitter irony, from a place of pain and deep pain with Moses, the leader. He said, She says that Moses at this moment is looking back at the panorama of their journey through the desert and he didn't succeed in changing them. Here they are, it's 40 years later, he looks back and says to them, you all were there, you saw the miracles, you saw the beauty, you saw the nature, you saw it, it was not a mystery, it was not a fairy tale, you were there. But you still don't have eyes and ears and a heart that gets it. And here in this very beautiful, striking, unsettling moment, Hamel Leibovitz reads the verse, listen, until this very day, she reads it as, did you also want that too, to be given to you? God gave you everything. Everything. You wanted manna, you got manna. You wanted birds, we gave you some birds. You want a little well that's going to come out of who knows where, or a rock that brings forth water, you name it, you had it, it was all on your Amazon wish list, it was all there, or not Amazon, or whatever your wish list was, it was all there, it was great, you were in the desert, you had everything you could have possibly wanted, but then you didn't see, and you didn't hear, and you didn't get it, and here I am, I have five minutes left until I'm leaving the scene. And did you also want God to give you the capacity to stop and appreciate it? Is that what you also wanted? Was that also your level of infantilization? Did you also need that to wake up? You were free, but you weren't awake. You were liberated, but you were still enslaved. You were walking in the desert, but you were still back in Egypt, and Moses says, God's not going to give that to you.

And maybe I thought, after reading this, I thought maybe I understood the parasha now more deeply. Tomorrow morning's reading will begin with the first fruits. And then it will devolve into kind of power, let's call it power theology. A God who has much more power

than us, who can make us do what we want by scaring us, as if that's a real motivation. The real motivation is in the beginning of the parasha, where we come into the land and we recognize that even the first fruits that we toiled for, even the first fruits that we ourselves can say, oh, this isn't a gift, I worked for this, this is my hands made these grapes, my hands made these peaches, my hands built this business, my hands built this, whatever. The parasha begins by saying, no, no, give that away. That was a gift. He's like, no, that's not a gift. No, no, I worked for that. That's my carrot. Wait a second. No, no, give that away. As if that is the protocol for living humanly. That is the project. Recognize it's all a gift. Appreciate it while you have it. Name it. Don't stop naming it. Don't stop naming it. Don't stop seeing it. Don't stop listening for it. Wake up. Or you wind up like Moses, saying you had it all. We had it all.

The only thing we lacked was the ability to appreciate it. To stop and feel its given-ness and its temerity, its vulnerability, its tenderness. It's here now. It's in the falling sleep person next to you. Or the wake-up person next to you. It's in the lights and the eyes that see and the ears that hear. It's in the standing and the sitting. It's in here. It was in the oceans and it was in the skies. In our mother, the earth, in her veins and in her blood. It was all given to us. We thought that God would give us the awareness not to ruin the gift of the earth. Was that also what should be given in addition to all of its fruits, all of her bounty, all of her beauty? We should also ask for the gift of, God, please help me stop my absolute headlong rush into progress that imagines that there are no consequences in progress without price. No. We have an opportunity.

It's Friday night, September 20th. And maybe like me, you're trying to be awake every day of your life. But waking up is hard to do. So along comes the Jewish tradition and it says, right before Rosh Hashanah, every single year, right before we get together tomorrow night and begin the week before Rosh Hashanah with an awareness of our vulnerability and our often misoriented, our disorientation towards the world. Start now. Start waking up now. Don't ask God to wake you up. Wake yourself up. Set your alarm. Count your blessings. Appreciate the givenness of this precious incarnation.

My best advice on how to do that, of course, I'm giving it to myself. So why don't I just say it blatantly. So David, here's my best advice. When we're around people who themselves want to wake up, we get on with that. When we surround ourselves with like-minded individuals who themselves are practicing staying awake, it helps us. When we have a roommate or a wife that's a morning person, it helps us get out of bed in the morning. These next precious days of Elul and Tishrei are an opportunity for all of you to wake yourselves up and smell the coffee.

Tomorrow night at 10 o'clock, we'll be gathering in the Romemu Center for our first Everest Lichot at the Romemu Center, which was bought last October 12th. And tomorrow night, 10 o'clock, we will gather to learn together, to sing together, to write letters together, to practice appreciating and to practice having a knowing heart and eyes that see and hears and ears that listen. I'm throwing down the gauntlet for myself and all of you with Moshe as our great teacher.

Did you want God to gift you? It's up to us. Aleinu.

Please rise.