

Romemu Dvar Torah April 15, 2016

I don't know exactly what happened or what it was that triggered the moment. It was on the third day or so of the trip, and it happened in a schoolyard in Mitte Berlin, in the middle of Berlin. And we had gone that day to visit a school that was doing remarkable things, extraordinary things in that school.

We learned how there had been a synagogue that had been there before the school, and that the school had been built upon the ashes of an Orthodox synagogue in Berlin, and that the principal of the school, who was herself not Jewish, was so troubled by her past that she invited her students into a project where they would research all of the neighborhood locations where Jews had lived, and in memoriam for those Jews who had been exiled and been expelled, they would create another kind of Berlin Wall. Not a wall that separated, but a wall that brought together. Each brick had names written on it with addresses to mirror the bricks that were also laid throughout Berlin, the golden bricks.

And I was standing there in the schoolyard, and then it happened. I really know what happened, but we'll get there. Some of you might not know what I'm talking about, but many of you do.

I told you two weeks ago that I was going to take a trip to Berlin and then to Israel. It was a week-long trip that was a mission with the National Young Leaders Cabinet of the North American Federations, an extraordinary group of young men and women in their 30s and 40s, many of whom were terrified to go to Berlin when the mission was floated to them. Many of them said, no, we're not going to go, we're not going to go.

But they did, and I wanted to be with them. I had already been with them on two previous journeys, one in North Carolina two years ago, and then in Romania, and then in Hungary. And so I liked being their rabbi for a week, like their private rabbi.

That was the primary reason, or maybe the tertiary reason, because the primary reason was to go back and visit my dad's birthplace. My father was born in Berlin in 1933, and he and his family fled four months before Kristallnacht in June of 1938. And I went on a cathartic trip with my entire family, when for the 70th anniversary of that leaving, my father and our entire family were invited to Berlin.

And I went with them, it was 2008, it was extremely powerful, but there was something about going back alone that really excited me. And part of that was because my own dual citizenship. People were asking me if I had a European passport.

I was entitled to one. I said, no, that's not the kind of dual citizenship. I have the past and the future in me.

I have the Churban, the Holocaust, and the rebirth in me, and I want to go back. And also, most significantly, thank God, I am the father of two young boys, both of whom are now around the age, Bear has passed and Tal is coming close to the age that my father had to leave Berlin. And the depth of that, the depth of knowing how much has already transpired in my boy's life, how many steps we've taken around this neighborhood, how much a part of

their own DNA, their own mapping, their own deep process, how much that must have been my father's also.

And I wanted to go back and see where he walked, you know. So I went back. I wanted to see if going back to the scene of a deep familial trauma, it might help me relive part of my father's story and allow me to feel more of my own.

I was wondering if my heart had room to hold more. I was wondering if my heart had the room to hold more. More, more of the pain, more of the unspoken trauma, more of the transition, more of the sights and the smells and the scenes.

I wanted to see how much I could pump up my heart and soul and how much could go in there. I wanted to know if by going down into my roots I could grow up into my branches. That's what I wanted.

And so there I was in the schoolyard. And I turned to Ronen, our Israeli tour guide, who has been living, of course, in Berlin for 11 years because he loves Berlin. And I said, Ronen, my father lived, I think, a little bit close to this school.

And Ronen said, yeah, really? Do you know the address? And I said, yeah, Sternberger Straße 4. Sternberger Straße 4, let me see. And he opened up his phone and he put it into Google. And then he turned to me and he said, you know, your father's apartment is 10 minutes away from here.

And then he said, by foot. And then he said, you said he was Orthodox? This was the only Orthodox synagogue in the neighborhood. I bet your father walked here on Shabbat mornings.

That's when I lost it. That's when the tears came. That's when the heaving started.

That's when the Joseph moment, you know, in the Bible where he says, get everybody out of the house because crying is happening. This was the street that my father walked down to shul. These were the trees, possibly, that he saw along the route.

This was his neighborhood. This was where he had lived for the five years that I know were so full of memories and unspoken fears. Little whispers in the night.

The laws had become, the Nuremberg laws had become part of the landscape. There was terror in the air. I wanted to know how much I could hold.

I wanted to know how big I could be because largesse, or bigness, is to some extent the movement from slavery to freedom. That word, gadol, gedula, to be big. Gedolim are called the great sages.

Gedolim, men and women of great stature, who are able to hold the wisdom of the tradition, are called gedolim. A child who is about to enter into this people is katan gadol yehyeh. This little one, may he become, may she become gadol gedola.

Gadol gedula is a word that represents bigness, largesse. I want to be grown up one day. I want to be a gadol.

I want to be grown up. To be gadol is to be someone or some heart that can hold multiple realities in one place. And tomorrow morning, this entire Shabbat is called Shabbat Hagadol.

This is the great Shabbat that our tradition teaches us. It's the Shabbat that preceded Passover. Three reasons at least are given.

Shabbat Hagadol, the great Shabbat is called gadol, because it was on this day that they were given, the Jews in Egypt were given a monumental task. Bring a lamb into your home. Bring that which you are terrified of.

Bring it close to you and watch it for four days. And then slaughter it. That will be your ticket out.

Gadol, that's big. It's also gadol, we're told, because of the vision of Malachi in the Haftarah, the prophetic reading that will be read in traditional synagogues tomorrow morning. Malachi imagines Yom HaShem gadol v'norah.

There is a great day, gadol, a great day, a messianic day, which is characterized as gedula. It's a grown up time. A time of gadlut.

And the third reason given is quite cynical. It's that usually rabbis go on and on and on and on in a drashah, and thence it is called gadol. What a long sermon.

But there's another reason. There's another reason. The gedula that I'm speaking of, that I experienced in that schoolyard, is the gedula that can hold complexity and the moments of pain that are transformed.

Gedula means transformation. From one level of reality which is katan or mikuta, which is disparate and cut in Hebrew, to gedula, something that is woven together, that is a larger tapestry, a larger arc. To be gadol means to be able to go back to a story that was not yet finished and to finish it.

To be gadol means to be able to hold more and more as we grow older and older, hopefully evolving. Gedula becomes a catchword for human evolution writ large. Shabbat HaGadol is the Shabbat of human evolution.

The promise that the arc will bend towards justice, that the human beings will grow towards love, and that compassion is around the corner. That is gadol. When I stood in front of the young men and women who would come to Berlin, I said, I want to give you a frame from the Torah for what I think this experience is all about, moving from Berlin to Israel.

There is a midrash that says that after Joseph's father Jacob dies, that the brothers are afraid of Joseph. They saw and they were afraid. And the midrash, the rabbinic story says, what did the brothers of Joseph have to fear? Joseph had already promised them that he would take care of them.

What had transpired? Why was there now suspicion in place of trust? Why now was there despair in place of hope? And the midrash says, here is what happened. You see, when Jacob died, they had a big family trip back to Canaan. And along the way, in the caravan,

Joseph said, do you mind if we stop here? There is a pit over there that I would like to go visit.

And so Joseph goes over to the pit. And the brothers, can you imagine the brothers? What is going to happen? Joseph is going over to the pit. He is going back to the pain.

He is going back to the suffering. He is going back to the remembrance of scar tissue. Long forgotten, perhaps, under his dual citizenship as Egyptian and as Hebrew.

He stands by the pit. And says the midrash, And Joseph made a blessing. Joseph, in the pit, he had the pendulum swinging.

He swung from smallness to bigness. He swung from katnut, from a mind that is cutting into little pieces, disparate, to a bigger place. I sat with those same fellows that very evening.

And a woman who was 94 years old, named Margot Friedlander. Margot Friedlander, who when she was only 21 years old, had to hide in Berlin. And the last time that she saw her mother, her mother gave her a note with her last words.

And when she opened it, Margot found these were her mother's last words. Try to make a life. Try to make a life.

Margot hid in Berlin. She was hid by non-Jews, by Germans, who were compassionate, loving. At risk of life, they kept her throughout the war, until finally, towards the end of the war, she was shipped to Theresienstadt, where she met her husband, whom she called Mr. Friedlander.

And Mr. Friedlander and Margot moved here to the United States, to New York. And they lived in New York for 64 years. And at the end of those 64 years, after Mr. Friedlander passed away, Margot, in a class at the 92nd Street Y, in a memoir writing class, against her wishes, was invited to begin to write her story.

And she wrote her story, she had it published, and we read the book. Try to make a life. That's her book.

And Margot did the most remarkable thing. Margot, all of 89 years old, moved back to Berlin. Margot moved back to Berlin, because she wanted to tell her story.

She wanted to tell the story of returning to the pit, of going back to that place where stories had been cut off, where they were just disparate pieces, and she wanted to weave it into Gedula. She wanted to be Gedula. She wanted to be big.

She wanted to be grown up. She wanted to have a mind that could hold pain, without becoming spiteful. She wanted to have a heart that could hold injustice, without becoming callous.

She wanted to show the path of the elevated life. She wanted to have it all. She didn't want to be small.

She wanted to have it all. She wanted to have the story of destruction, and the story of reconstruction. She wanted to have the story of birth and rebirth.

She wanted it all. That's Gedula, not Katnut. So we stand tonight, on Shabbat HaGadol, the great Sabbath.

The great Sabbath that is the pre- the antecedent, the pre-moment to liberation, to ask ourselves, where is there Katnut in our world that we need to make Gadol? Where is there the smallness that needs to become large? And I don't mean the movement from not eating kitniyot to kitniyot, even though it's the same words, Katan, kityniyot. The radical decision of the conservative movement to allow us to eat legumes that should never have been prohibited to begin with. And one place where Gadlut is possible.

One place where expansion to be more inclusive is clearly needed. It's both in this country, in its conversations about the way forward. Certain states in our union that want to go back to Mitzrayim, back to Egypt.

That's one place if we look outside of ourselves. But if we look internally at me and you, it is in the Jewish community and in this community and others, where we think small instead of thinking big, where we imagine community in its lowercase c and not in its big dream, its big Gadlut. I want to be in a community that wants it all.

I want to be in a community that has Gadlut, bigness as its goal. What does that look like? It could be that I want everything because that's the way I was born. It could be that that's conditioning.

But I want a both and community. A community that honors the dignity and the design of each unique individual's power and presence and a community that recognizes that we come in different sizes, in different colors and shapes, sexual orientations and psychological, a community that doesn't just say that truth but professes it without pulling back. We walk that talk.

I want to be in a community that finds a deeper commonality with all of God's children and isn't afraid that that will in any way, shape or form, challenge us or reduce our Jewishness. That's the community I want to live in. I want to live in a community that walks its talk.

I want to live in a community that can touch pain and also celebrates. I want to live in a community that knows that by its definition communities exclude. And so we stand ever present on the line of exclusion to say have we rendered someone outside the camp? Let's find a way to bring them in.

I want to live in a community that can go back to the pit and see that there were good Germans there. I want to live in a community that doesn't just promote the Holocaust as a reason to be Jewish and doesn't just promote Israel as a reason to be Jewish. There's more than just those two poles in Jewish life.

I want to live in a community that evangelizes the power of Jewish spirituality to the entire world. That says, you know what, I lived in New York, I'm going back to Berlin. I'm going to tell you about Judaism.

I'm going to tell you about my truth and I'm going to live here with you and you're welcome to partake and let's have a party. We have to think big. We have to act big.

We have to breathe big. We have to feel big. Nothing else is really going to liberate us.

So there I was in the schoolyard. Heaving. Losing a lung.

And thinking to myself, you know, I'm definitely not needing to go find my dad's house anymore. This must have been it. But after hearing Margot speak about the power of returning to the pit and finding the holy, of making a blessing even in painful places, I woke up the next morning still hemming and hawing.

And with an hour left before our bus left for the airport, I jumped into a cab and told him to go to Sternberger Straße 4. And there I stood with my iPhone, taking a picture of my dad's katnut, of my father's small place, hoping to bring some gadlut, some bigness there. And out of the door, a woman walked and she said, she said, what are you doing here? It's early in the morning. And I said, this is the house that my father lived in.

And she looked at me very strangely, and I thought, oh, I must have really freaked her out, you know. And she left with her husband and they walked over. And I was holding my grandparents' picture in my hand, my grandma Irene and my grandfather Alex.

And I thought, okay, I'll never know what happened here, you know. I'm so happy that I at least came to touch it. And then a really fast car came speeding around the corner.

And Andrea Harlass rolled down her window and she said, She said, you speak German? I said, no. And then she said, okay, okay, there's someone in the home who wrote a book, a Haggadah, a book about all of those who lived in this building, and you need to write him your story. He doesn't have your grandparents in his story.

And she gave me her card and her husband's card, and she said, write the story. And I walked away and I said, wow. Thank you, Gadol, thank you God.

Ki gadol Adonai. There is Geulah, there is great mystery in this world. And I thank God for bringing me back to a place where I could make a Racha, where I could make a blessing and write the story of my ancestors.

So I bless you on this Shabbat of Geulah, where there is pain, bring awareness. Where there is constriction, bring hope. Where there is an outside, enlarge yourself a little bit and bring them in.

Let's imagine a world that can hold all of those pieces together, without having to choose either, without having to deny either. That's the world of Geulah. Geulah.

Befnei yom, hinei anochi sholech lachem et elayoh ha-navi. Befnei bo yom Adonai ha gadol vi hanora. May it be true soon and let us say amen.

Please rise.