

Shabbat 06 14 19 Sermon

So we just sang the Priestly Blessing because, as you'll see in a minute or a couple of moments, we're going to be talking about the Priestly Blessing, which appears in tomorrow morning's Torah reading. But before we talk about the Priestly Blessing, we've got to talk about Coco. Love that word, Coco. Coco. It's a funny word, Coco. In fact, it's the repetition of two letters that seemingly have no meaning in and of themselves. And you put them together, and you have Coco, or Co-Co-Not, or Co-Co.

Doesn't seem like a good place to begin a sermon or a wisdom teaching. It's talking about the two letters C-O that are Co-Co. But something significant in Co, not only in English, but also in the Priestly Blessing, as you'll see in a moment, but so many Co's. Let's think of some Co's together. Co-pilot. Co-elaboration. Co-operative. Co-teaching. Co-exist. Co-operate. Co-ed. Keep them co-ming. Come here. Keep some more going. Co. Co-co. Collusion. Yeah, nice. Nice. Collusion. Co. Co.

There's one Co that, although it sounds like a positive, actually, in the 80s and then still to this day to some degree gets a bad rap, and it's Co-dependency. Co-dependency was all the rage in all the literature in the 80s as the world of psychobabble began, you know, to become normative and central. Co-dependency, which at first glance would sound like a really wonderful thing. We are co-dependent. We are dependent on one another. Co. We cooperate and we co-depend. That sounds lovely. But of course, for those of you who are following this and who know what co-dependency came to mean, co-dependency was to some degree labeled as almost a pathology. To be co-dependent in the literature of the 12-step program and other programs was to have blurred the boundaries between the self and the other. We are not standing on our own. We are co-dependent. We have an unhealthy relationship between our own agency and the agency of the other.

To be co-dependent is to confuse the I and the we. It is in some way synonymous with a kind of enabling, a kind of learned helplessness or shared non-agentic relating. I will pull back from who I am so that you will pull back from who you are so that we will meet in our collective pulled back place in the middle. Co-dependent on one another for ways and in ways, for things and for ways that we really have confused. Co-dependency and leaving co-dependency. Maturing beyond co-dependency. Having a relationship that was not co-dependent. That was it. I don't want to be in a co-dependent relationship. No way. I want to be in an interdependent relationship. I want to be in an independent but dependent relationship. But no, not me. Co-dependent no more, as Melody Beattie told us. Co-dependent no more.

And so this letter, which would seem to involve two, which would seem to invite relationship and shared holding, shared something. I want to redeem co-dependency tonight. I want to lift it out of the waste bucket of poorly named and framed psychological phenomena. And I want to do it with maybe the oldest prayer and the oldest set of verses in all of the Western canon. We have in tomorrow morning's Torah reading the words that we just chanted, the priestly blessing. Chapter 6 of the book of Numbers.

6.22 And God spoke to Moses saying, Speak to Aaron and Aaron's children, saying, Thus, exactly like this shall you bless the children of Israel and say to them, And then the iconic three verses, each building in intensity, beautifully crescendoing three words that lead to five words that lead to seven words. The musicality building, the prophetic incantational quality of those words seeming to invoke a magical formula. Ko tevarchu is not sort of bless them, but bless them exactly like this with these three words followed by five, followed by seven. Magic. And then the capping verse of the entire piece. Verse 27 after, right? Ve'asim lecha shalom. Pause. God says to Moses, After you've told the Aaron clan, your brother and his children, this is the way I want you to bless the children of Israel. Then God says to finish, And you shall place my name on the children of Israel.

Feels like God is still speaking to Aaron here. Ve'ani and I will bless them. Now I'm sure even without having read all the commentaries that have been written for the past two millennia, if you're just tracking with me at this moment, you might be asking a question that was asked about a thousand years ago or even two thousand years ago. Wait a second. Who's blessing who? Who is blessing whom? In the beginning, Go speak to Aaron and tell him that you, Aaron, and your children are to bless the children of Israel. Ko tevarchu. Thus shall you bless. That's you, Aaron. Priests. And then the end of the priestly blessing is, And you shall place the name, my name, on them. And God says, in God's first person says, And then I will bless them. Who's blessing the children of Israel? Is it the priests? Or is it God? And why does that matter? What's at stake?

I remember a dear colleague of mine, I think one of the most magnificent and amazing spiritual leaders in the Jewish world, a remarkable rabbi, cantor, speaker, leader, Rabbi Angela Buchdahl once came to Romemu on the holidays and saw what is known in Yiddish as Dukhanin. Dukhanin is the priestly blessing. And there in the front of the room were the ko hanim of our community, the priests of our community with their spock-like hands extended. And she, having grown up in the reformed world, and her daughter, her young daughter, who has also only been in reformed temples her whole life, her daughter turned to her and said to her, Mom, what the nk is happening here? And Angela wrote to me and said that she spoke about it at her temple at Central Synagogue the next week and said to them, you know, I was sitting with my daughter and all of a sudden a group of priests got up and they did the whole spock thing and they blessed them with the 357 and it begged the question, do we believe that priests are the medium through which the blessing of God, as you understand, God must be mediated for us to receive that blessing? And the ambiguity of who is blessing begs that conversation.

Is it the priests who are blessing as they stand here conduiting and transmitting? Or is it the divine, unmediated, pure, no need for a veil? And one of the answers that is given that I love, one of the answers that tries to make it all work out, to try to streamline what these verses are saying, who is the blesser, why does it change from God saying, you will be the blessers and then God saying, no, I will be the blessers. Here is the Sifri. Here is an early Midrash on what is happening. It says, I'm sorry, this is not the Sifri, this is from the Al-Shih, much later on, but he's quoting an early Midrash. He says, When God says to Aaron, I'm sorry, to Moses to tell Aaron, this is the way to bless them. He's saying to them, you are to prepare the Israelites through this blessing that they might be ready to receive my blessing.

You are to prepare the Israelites to receive blessing that they might be ready to receive my blessing. And in seeking to understand this, Nechama Leibowitz in her commentary, great commentator on Torah says, if you are someone who says, wait, I don't feel like I need preparation, I don't want the priest up there doing the Spock thing, I just want a direct channel. Here is the Gemara, the Talmud in Masechet Shabbat.

Listen to this and then we're going to bring it all together. Pesha she'ala Moshe le'marom, mitza'o le'Kodesh Baruch Hu, she'aya kosher ketarin le'otiyot. At the hour that Moses ascended on Mount Sinai, he found the Holy One, a Blessing God, sitting and tying little crowns and beautiful things on the top of the letters. Amar le'Kodesh Baruch Hu, this story, this myth says, God says to Moses, Moshe, ein shalom be'irecha? Don't you, Moses, feel like it's polite to say hello to me? Don't they, where you're from, where y'all from, in Austin, or wherever you're from, Moses, don't you, when you see God, say, hey, God, shalom. That's what the rabbis imagine God saying to Moses, like Moses is just sitting there watching God do this artwork, and then God says to Moses, wait a second, shouldn't you say hello to me? It's not polite. So what is, what is in this imagined dialogue between God and Moses? Moses says to God, Amar le'fanav, ribbono shel olam, Moses says to God, Master of the world, klum yesh evid noteyn shalom le'rabo? Moses says, is there a place in the world where someone with so little power preemptively says hello to the all-powerful one? Is there a servant that preemptively says to the king or to the master, hi? I was just waiting for you.

And now listen to what God says as the rabbis imagine God saying this, because it brings us insight into codependency that is holy. Amar le'fanav says God to Moses in the rabbis' imagination, haya le'cha le'ozre'ni? True, Moses, God says, but you should have helped me. haya le'cha le'ozre'ni? You're right. I have much more power than you. I'm the blesser. But I need your help for me to be able to bless you. We're in this together. As much as I want to give to you, if you're not ready to receive it, if you are not helping me give you, if you don't realize, if we don't realize that so many of the things that we want in our lives are things that are already here, but because we haven't prepared ourselves to receive them, they sit around waiting for us. It's as if we say, you know, we go up to heaven and we say, God, can you give me a blessing? God says, I already gave it to you, but you missed it.

I was waiting for you to help me bless you. Remember that gratitude on Wednesday morning? You were so unprepared to see it, it just went... We are codependent on the world around us to be able to receive what is given. We are codependent. We are kotevarchu. We are kohane. We are beings who require preparation to arrive. We don't have to prove that we deserve blessing, but we have to be ready when it comes our way. We don't have to prove that God is needing a mediator, but we sure could use all manner of haya lecha leozreini. I was waiting for you to help me help you. I was waiting for you to help me help you.

We pause at this moment as my son and Sinai are... Thank you both so much. And you should know that this little Kohane over here, his dad's a Kohane, parents are Kohane. One day this little guy is going to be given the old. What it means to live in this world is to recognize that we are mutually dependent on one another, and that to be codependent is not to live confused by the boundaries, but submitting that even if there's more power, we still need each other. That relationships are about sharing the load.

Relationships are I could do it by myself, but why would I want to? God says, I could easily give you all the blessing you want, but I'm going to bring the Kohane, because you're going to co-do this with me. You're not only going to receive my blessing, but you're going to be a co-creator, a collaborator in the blessing that you receive. Co-Tivarchu, bless them with co.

Bless them with a recognition that it is not asymmetrical, it is not one-dimensional, it is not unidirectional, it is a collaborative effort, and that every blessed moment in our lives had to do with both preparation and stepping in to own our part in the co-dependent, co-operative, Kohane, co, co, co, co.

Of course, you might be wondering at this moment, isn't it Romemu's annual membership drive, and is the rabbi going to connect that to the membership at Romemu? Well, I'll leave it to you to make those connections, but it's super clear that the members in every one of your lives, those who came tonight and said they love this temple, and those who come every Friday night and Saturday morning and come on holidays and come to classes with Rabbi Gilhammer, or come to classes with any manner of our amazing staff, teachers, you know that Romemu is blessing you in your lives, but Co-Tivarchu, wouldn't it be great if this is your home, that you would not wait for us to say hello, but that you might step in, to help us lift this together.

In your homework tonight, wherever you go along this weekend, I hope that you ask yourselves whether or not you are preparing to receive blessing, what you might do to be partnering with how blessing occurs in your life, whatever that might look like, and in what ways you are not partnering, where you are imagining the all-powerful one, whomever that is, will be the one that does it, and you don't have to step in at all. God confuses us tomorrow morning and says, you bless them and bless them to receive blessing, cooperating with the Kohanim, and then God says, I'll do my part.

Please rise.