

Sermon Shabbat 09 08 17

Transitions aren't easy. Transitions aren't easy. And as the Israelites are going to enter the land, they give us good advice about how to enter many different situations. And the advice that they give is very relevant for me personally because I feel like I struggle with every single day. Kind of in a house with three boys, two of whom are old enough to hate each other. The relationship between giving and taking, the relationship between together, working together, working alone. The relationship between owning your own egoic achievements and giving them away. The relationship between I and we.

Of course, I'm being slightly tongue-in-cheek that it's about children. Children struggle with it more overtly than adults maybe. Maybe not. I feel as though it's a pretty fundamental human question. The relationship between inside and outside, between here I am and there you are. And how does that work? That seems to be the Gordian Knot of our lives, of every life, of every group, every society, every culture, every nation, every polity. Is what is at the core of how an I and a you make a we and how does that work? Or not? It's a fundamental human question. It's an existential given that that needs to be addressed on some level. We need to have some good advice. If I give a good sermon, is it me who gave it or you who listened and gave it to me? We often think about giving things up to God.

Some of us were a little bit suspicious of that moment at the end of every Super Bowl. Maybe you don't know it. Where inevitably an athlete will say, I want to first thank my Lord and Savior. And the suspicion of that religious motivation, that religious expression, giving something away. You were the one that caught the pass and through it were giving it to someone else. This question of reciprocity, of generosity, of I, you, we, it gets addressed right away tomorrow morning.

And every year at this time of the year as we come into the high holy days, into the days of awe. Of awesome potential for transformation. We get some straight up, right into the arm advice from the Torah. When you will come into the land, the Torah tells us. When you will come into the land. Could you have imagined a better Parsha for this week in this country? When you will enter the land. You who enter the land. When you will enter the land that I am giving you, the Torah tells us. You will come into, some of you don't know this.

The oldest liturgical moment in Jewish history, in the Bible, in ancient Israel. The most profound, the only really liturgy, actually word for word what was to be recited in the temple precinct. You are to come into the land and immediately the Torah tells us. Here's what you have to do if you want to stay in the land and you want to be upright citizens. You have to bring first fruits. The mitzvot bikurim. Bikurim means first fruits. So essentially, those of you who have never seen this before. If you are up at Isabella Friedman maybe or some other place where they reenacted. First fruits basically meant that people went out, the farmers went out into the land, into their farms. And they had little rubber bands, a gumi. And they would tie it around the first fruit, say that one, for the temple.

Now lest you think that's an easy thing to do. We'll get to the rest of the ritual. Almost all of the Rishon Lezion, almost all of the early commentators say that this mitzvah, this fundamental moment of what it is to live in the Holy Land, is a great act of spiritual

purification to give away your first fruits. For some it was a fertility rite. But in the mind of the Rambam and Abravanel and Malbim and all of the others, essentially this is a practice of giving away what you would obviously feel directly belong to you. Who else should have the first fruits? You worked the land. You seeded it. You waited on it. And waited on it. And comes along and says, give it away. Unless you think this is only Israelites. Everyone who came to the land had to give away their first fruits.

And so what was the process? So you took your first fruits and then you brought them up. I'm going to bring out a little prop here. You put your fruits into this. And this is kind of an important word because it's an Egyptian word that appears in the Torah. And it's called Teneh. Can everybody say that? Teneh. Anyone? Teneh. Teneh. Can you say it again? Teneh. Teneh. Got it. Teneh. Basket. So you placed all of your fruits in here and you brought them up to the temple. And you follow the bouncing basket here. You gave it to the priest. You're going to be the priest. And the priest will take the basket. And as you give the priest the basket, you will recite the only liturgy that really exists in the Torah, which is found also in the Haggadah, in the Haggadah and Passover. My ancestors were, thank you very much, were Arameans. And they came here to this land. And here I am, the beneficiary of their largesse, of their, of that promise. And you say it in the first person. You say, my ancestors.

A convert, a proselyte once wrote to my monitors and said, I am a proselyte. I am a ger. I'm somebody who is converted or somebody who is Jewish. Can I say my ancestors? And the rabbi says, everyone who came to the temple said, regardless of who they were, they were my ancestors. This too is my country. They came to this country. This belongs to me. These are my fruits, but this is my land. This is your land. This land was made for Jew and me. And so if you follow the balancing basket, there's a moment here that is so powerful that it is, for me, the best advice. We could talk about Dacha, about that crazy moment where 800,000 children who are blameless. We could talk about that. It's perfect for this parasha. It's great. Everyone had a place in the land of Israel. Everybody brought their first fruits. Everybody could say, it is my land. It is your land. It's made for you and me. But I want to talk about this little basket.

This, what's it called again? Tenet. This Egyptian word for basket. Because something happened there with Rabbi Jessica, who was the priest, and me, the one offering the first fruits. You see, the Torah goes out of its way to say that when you get to the priest, before you place it by the altar, the priest has to be given the basket. And we hold the basket together. And the Torah goes out of its way to say that. And that caught my mind. It caught my heart. Why does the Torah, which is so laconic and so terse and so economical in its language, have to let me and you know that as I bring my first fruits, whatever they might be, there was no minimum amount. You could bring whatever. You could bring one stalk, one radish, one tomato. Whatever it was, you could bring it. And no maximal amount. That the priest, the representative of the authority of the government, the one who was in charge of the temple precinct, had to carry the basket together with me. We had to hold it.

And the great medieval exegete Rashi says, not only did we hold the basket together, but the hands of the priest had to touch the back of the hands of the one who brought the first fruits. Their hands had to wave the fruits together. What a wasted moment, right? Or not.

I think this is the core of the advice of Torah about I, you, we, all of this. It would be enough for me to bring my first fruits in a relationship that is between me and the Divine One. Thank you for giving us the abundance, the abundance, the plenty. I'll just leave it here by the altar and then I'm gonna go. Thank you, God. Many might think that that's the purpose of the high holidays. We're gonna come to the altar, everybody gets their tickets, and then we're gonna meet with God. We're gonna bring our first fruits, we're gonna bring what it is that we have to offer, and we're gonna place them by the altar, we're gonna say every prayer in the masor, we're gonna pound our chests, and the Torah says that it's not about that, it's not about this, it's about this. It's that small gesture. It's that lifting of the basket together. It's the priest coming to me as I bring him my one banana and saying, oh, your first fruits? Let me lift that with you. Wow. Let me touch your hand with you.

Friend of mine was telling the clergy team earlier that I called a friend of mine who went to high school with us who reached out to me a couple of weeks ago to tell me how he was so upset about what was happening in Houston that he had to get himself together and he had to go to Houston. And because he knew the rabbi of the Orthodox community in Houston and there was a group leaving from where he is in Florida, he decided to go with them. So he called me and left me a message and said, I'm going to Houston. That was a couple weeks ago. And then randomly today, without even remembering that he's in where? I called him today. I said, Emil, how's it going? He said, wow, it's so great that you're calling me. You know it's coming, right? I'm here in my home. I've sent my wife and I sent the kids up to New York and I'm here making sure, I'm batting down the hatches. I'm making sure everything's going to be okay but it's hitting here tomorrow. We're thinking about you. And then he said something so powerful to me.

He said, you know, I went to Houston and I helped and I had never seen so much devastation in my life. And there was Rabbi Avi Weiss who was there and some other great rabbis and we sat down at a kumzitz. We started singing songs together. We were holding hands. And Rabbi Weiss said to me, this gathering, this moment, after helping these people here in Houston is holier than any of the High Holy Days. And my friend Emil said to me, I feel more alive as a Jew and as a human being today than I've ever felt in my life because I made that trip and I helped out. I extended myself. And now here I am, he said, and I'm ready because I trust that there will be people that will also come to help no matter what happens next. And then I heard this story.

About 20 minutes later, Chabad Rabbi called me and said, for no reason, I want to tell you a story from the Lubavitcher Rebbe. He said that it is well known in Jewish mysticism that the right hand or the right side is associated with love in Kabbalah and the left side is associated with the opposite, a little bit of strength or removal, kind of the tension between love and constriction. And someone once came to the Lubavitcher Rebbe and said to him, if love is always represented by the right side of the body in the Torah and other places, why would the heart, the seat of love be on the left side? And the great Rebbe of Lubavitch without even batting an eye said to him, because when you stand before another human being, your heart aligns with their right side. That the only way for your heart to be what it is is to stand in relation to one who comes to hold the basket with you. And in that reciprocity, we are the most human that we will ever be. In that moment, when we get beyond ourselves, when we give our first fruits, and not only give our first fruits, but we give them together with someone else who holds our hand, someone who is a leader, someone who is a Kohen,

someone who represents and says what you are bringing, what you do matters, and I want to lift it with you. We are stronger than, and we are most human. And by extension, we are less human when we don't lift the basket with them, when we don't extend ourselves with them, when we deny them citizenship, when we deny them their rights, when we treat them as other, not you, holy human being with a gift to bring to the altar. But as a stranger, as a pariah, as a danger, God forbid.

I love that little teneh. I love that basket. And I say to myself, what would the world look like? What would this community look like? What would my relationships look like if when I was willing to offer from a generous heart the things that I could offer, and I ask the one with me, can you meet me there and lift it with me? Sure, I can wave it myself, but that teneh, that little basket where we meet, that's our heart, that's our relationship, that's our culture, that's our shul, that's everywhere we go, lift the basket. We have to be basket cases, all of us.

So we prepare for the high holidays. We're getting ready. It's a little, we got about, what is it, 10 days now? What person tonight, tomorrow, next week will come to you with a gift and ask you to lift it with them? What person, what phone call will you be the priest lifting the basket for someone else? It's all about teneh. Everyone. I bless you, I bless me, I bless all of us, no matter where we are, to be able to lift together with the other, to be fully human.

Please rise.