

Shabbat 01 19 18 Sermon

B'yomer Adonai al-Moshe, bo al-paro, and G-d said to Moshe, go, not come to Pharaoh, not, excuse me, not go to Pharaoh, He said, come to Pharaoh, bo al-paro, ki anim to Pharaoh. The heart of Pharaoh and the heart of his servants heavy. L'man shee see, oh so say, eyleh be kirbo, for me to place within them, within them the signs. And so that, u'l'man t'saper b'oznei b'inchah u'ben mincha z'sher yis'alaldi b'mitzrayim, that ye will one day tell the story of this great exodus. B'yomer Moshe, bo al-paro, and Moshe and Aaron came to Pharaoh. And they said to him, ko amar Adonai, thus says G-d, elohei ha'ivrim, the G-d of the Hebrews, the ivrim.

עוד מסעי מענת לענוס מפני שרח עמי ויעבדוני How long will you refuse my direction, send my people, let my people go? The story of Yitzyad Mitzrayim, the leaving of Egypt. The story of leaving the cauldron of suffering and pain. The story that is the cornerstone of liberation, both theological, historical, political.

This great story hinges on this parasha. Tomorrow morning's reading, where Moses will come and deliver the last of the three, the last of the ten plays, the last of those painful retributions slash abuse. Moses and Aaron will come before Pharaoh and demand that Pharaoh relent. We know the story, we've been here before. In fact, we've been here so frequently that it's remarkable, remarkable, remarkable that for rabbis like, you know, every single week we have to stretch to make a parasha fit into the current reality. Rabbis around the world right now have no such problem. I guarantee you at any rabbinic association or convention, no one's sitting around going, well, I don't know what I'm going to do this week. It's not happening. There's no way.

Essentially, we've been here so frequently that we know it, we know this pattern, we know the truth of it. Moses and Aaron are directed to go to Pharaoh and to tell Pharaoh, who is recalcitrant, who is completely inured to hearing this truth, tell Pharaoh that the God of the Hebrews has come. A unique way of casting God at this moment. After all, God has been completely obsessed with everyone getting his name right, her name right, its name right, from the beginning of the Book of Names. The Book of Names begins with no names until someone named Moshe, whose letters of his name actually spell the Hebrew word, the name, Moshe Hashem, until someone named Moshe appears on the scene. Names, names, names. And God has to make sure that they have the right name. And here in this moment, in this parasha, in this week, the God of the Hebrews appears. The Ivrim.

And so, I want to talk for the next couple of minutes about something that our teacher of arts spoke about last night, and something that I struggle with, and maybe you struggle with, and maybe all of us to some degree or another struggle with, what it means to bridge silence and speech, what it is to bridge quiescence and activism, what it is to bridge, what it is to be torn and try to bring things together. There was a great rabbi named Rav Kook, who was the first chief rabbi of Palestine. He said, Mishu hu amar alay she'ani krua yafse amar. The one who said about me that my soul is torn said well, Rav Kook said. I am perpetually split and torn between things. I'm always up and wanting to be down, down and wanting to be up. A radical particularist who also is a universalist, someone who sees things in twos and

wants both of them. And Rav Bart said last night that there is an art of being a bridge, of finding a way to connect things. So the great Rav Nachman of Breslev, Rav Bart, you were the one who brought us into the world of Rav Nachman in such a deep way. Rav Nachman of Breslev, the great grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, is well known for many things. He was on fire, he was potentially mentally unstable, he was a genius, he was mysterious, he was unknowable, he was knowable, he was simple, he was complex, he was everything. He's well known for a Torah, for a teaching on this week's parasha that's maybe his most famous teaching.

My Rebbe, Rav Zalman, Shachar Shalom, Ya'lava Shalom, called it the Torah of the void. The Torah of the void. Bakutei Maran, Samech Dalet, Torah 64 in the great Magram Obas of Nachman of Breslev's writings where he quotes the first verse in this week's parasha, Come to Pharaoh. Why doesn't it say, Lech El Paro, go to Pharaoh. It says Lech El Paro, go to Pharaoh in other places. It also says Bo El Paro in other places too.

Rav Nachman says, why in this unique moment, why that utterance, why that framing? Come to Pharaoh as if God is there in the palace of Pharaoh saying, come inside. Says Rav Nachman of Breslev, you see, in our world, the world is made by God's absence. God's absence allows there to be a separate universe called this world. Known in Kabbalah as the Tzimtzum, as the great constriction. There is, as it were, a place where God can't be so that we might be. Where God's absence is so palpable because in order for there to be other, there must be some pulling back of that great light that is so overwhelming and so all-encompassing. That Tzimtzum has to take place. But, says Rav Nachman, you should know that in that place, which seems to be devoid of God's presence, in the void that is devoid, there is great presence. And the one who knows how to enter into that place, the tzaddik, the righteous one, enters through a doorway called silence.

There are things in the universe, paradoxes, things that are absolutely, that can't be reconciled. There are things in this universe, Mobius strips of the mind and heart, that refuse reconciliation, that can't be bridged, that can never be finished. Questions that are impossible to ever know. And Rav Nachman says, the only way to know them is through silence. The minute you try to figure it out, you are going to get caught in the quicksand of theology and philosophy. Is it possible to understand those 13 children that appeared in the news this week? Is it possible for us to wrap our hands around that level of evil, that level of distortion of the light? Rav Nachman would say, don't go there. Or if you go there, make sure that you only go with silence. Only go with silence. And so Rav Nachman's Torah of the Void, of walking into Pharaoh's palace, as it were, becomes an allegory for walking into the depths of paradox and darkness.

Moses enters into Pharaoh's place because God says, come in. Because you know the secret. You who can't speak, you know the secret of silence. But that isn't a bridge. That isn't bringing together two worlds. That is being able to hold silence without scratching the metaphysical itch.

And the danger of Rav Nachman's silence, is that we look at radical evil and we just meditate before it. The danger of Rav Nachman's silence is the one when things are going terribly, who says, God will fix it. I'll be quiet now. I don't want to ruin my blissful state by getting all worked up about something that I can never understand. And the danger of Rav

Nachman's silence and his teaching is that we might take questions that are absolutely reconcilable and answerable and say, no, those two deserve the silence of presence. In a world of Rav Nachman's Torah, it's very easy to write off things that look one way and say, we don't get it, we don't understand it.

One can imagine that there are people in the world who, let's say, at a certain point in Pharaoh's empire, said to Moses, you know, let's give him a year. And at the end of the year, you know, he seems to be a certain way, but that's only because you don't really know how he's going to govern yet. Just give it a year and it's going to change. Trust me. Hold the space for the emergence of the mystery of what will be. Watch.

You can imagine being in a relationship where someone comes to you and says, you know, these behaviors seem to indicate a particular kind of person, and the first moment is a moment of radical uncertainty about the person's revelation. Maybe you don't have enough information yet to know if they really are who they seem to be.

There is a silence that our culture has completely lost, which is the silence of the void. It is the uncomfortable space between two people where silence is absolutely appropriate. The end of sentences that don't need to be followed by the next sentence, the end of a prayer that doesn't need to be followed by the next chord, or the end of a life cycle or stage, which, okay, I don't know what I'm doing, let me get out my phone. We don't know silence.

And Jews are complicit too. When we started Romemu ten years ago, one of our five freedoms was the freedom to be silent. And I don't mean falling asleep during the rabbi's sermon. Whoever I was looking at knows who I was looking at. It's okay if I weren't standing, trust me. But there's another silence which is, in the language of the great Martin Luther King that we chanted this past Saturday afternoon with our amazing teachers, Rabbi Mir Rivera and Dr. Renee Hill, with the help of Jerry, there is a time when silence is betrayal.

There is a time when silence is betrayal. There is a time when silence is betrayal. In our personal relationships with ourselves, when we act as if we don't know what we know, in our relationships in our community, when we act like we don't know what we know, in our relationships with our extended community, where we act like we don't know what we know. And so to show up in Pharaoh's house, in Rav Nachman's world, and to be silent against the great paradox of life is beautiful. But it doesn't work. It doesn't bridge the world of silence with the world of screaming, with the world of activism, with the world of doing what you can do and naming what you can name.

And so Rav Nachman here says that the reason why we are called Ivrim, those who trans, the ones who go over, the passers, the ones who pass by, or the transient ones, is because being able to step over that gap between trying to fix a paradox and being able to rest inside of it, that's what makes us Ivrim. We're the ones who know the secret of crossing the bridge from what can't be known into the place where it is known through the vehicle of silence. And maybe tonight, in the wake of those who know Kabbalah of 86 rabbis being arrested yesterday, 86, the number of the Shem Elohim, from 18 organizations, you know that number, who walked into the palace of Pharaoh with Bend the Arc and sat down in the capital and said, let my people stay.

Let my people stay. Not the silence of acquiescence and the silence of paradox that we must cultivate, but the scream of let my people stay.

We, a year ago, spoke about that we are not the people of the book, but we are the people of the door. In this week's Parsha, one year ago, I stood here before all of you, and I said to you that we are a people of the door, we are a people of that. Perfect, perfect. People... in a second... some answer in... answer in... that gives us... to taking care that no one else is oppressed, right? We transition from the ones who receive to the ones who now give over what we have learned.

That if we don't take care of those who stand at the door, then we failed. How's that for being a Jew? How's that for a definitional stance that might be politically incorrect or problematic or not? To be Jewish is to stand by the door and to make sure that those who need to leave to freedom can leave, and those who need to stay, stay. People of the door.

And maybe a third reading of Ibrahim, and then... maybe... being a bridge, as Reb Art introduced us to last night, a bridge to intimacy, is being willing to lay ourselves down over troubled waters so that others will walk to freedom through us. Maybe to be Ama Ibrahim, to be a nation of Ibrahim, to lay ourselves down over troubled waters so that others will walk to freedom through us. Maybe to be Ama Ibrahim, to be a nation of Ibrahim, is to know when to be quiet and when to speak, know which mysteries will only open when we present ourselves empty to them and before them, and when we must make a stand and be willing to put ourselves on the line, to say, like a bridge over troubled water, I will lay myself down for you.

My friend Stash Cutler from Bend the Arc wrote in an email to her community, Bend the Arc, an incredibly important social action organization, she wrote to her community that after they were arrested on behalf of the dreamers, some of the dreamers came over to the rabbis and other Jewish leaders and said, why would you do this for us? Why would you do this for us? There is a time when silence is betrayal. There is a time when silence is betrayal. The man she see also say, Eile Bikir Bam, says the great Maor Einayim, the great Rabbi of Chernobyl that Rabbi Art also brought into our consciousness.

Boal Paro, come to Pharaoh so that I might place the letters Eile inside of him. L'man shee tee o to tay Eile, in order that I might place Eile, Aleph, Lamed, Hey, Bikir Bo. A Pharaoh who could say, Mi Adonai, who is God that I must serve him, her, it? The one that doesn't recognize that his power is limited because he doesn't have Eile, that it comes from you, from Eile, from these.

The Pharaoh who imagines that all he has to do is drown us in paradox and parable and deaden us from knowing what's true and what's right. The metaphysics of liberation are not complicated. For us today. It involves being Ivrin, being bridges over troubled waters and being willing to speak out to trouble the waters, to be willing to lay ourselves down. That's, I think, the call. And so for those women who will be marching strong tomorrow, who are lifting up the great Midrash that says, Bizchut Nashim Tidkanayot Nigalu Yisrael, it was in the sake and for the sake of the women that we were redeemed from Egypt.

Amazing. But we can do more. We can do more.

So let me bless each and every one of you here before we stand up for building a world of love together. May God bless each and every one of us with the strength to recognize the silence that is betrayal and the silence that is resting in paradox. May God give us the appropriate measure of being a bridge towards and a bridge for and standing for liberation. And may God give us the strength to lay ourselves down. To lay ourselves down for the sake of our brothers and sisters who stand at the door today, tomorrow.

Let's rise.