

Romemu Dvar Torah March 25, 2016

I actually have a favorite memory that's happening right now. Romemu used to, before we were here in this church, we were literally across the street in the Grosvenor House. On the second floor, there was a gym there, and there still is, and you can walk by, there were these huge bay windows, huge glass windows, and it was, I think it was the coincidence also of Good Friday, and Purim, second day, it was 2007, maybe, and we had the same thing where we davened together, it was like outside, remember that? Really amazing.

So every year, on this Shabbat, it's the Shabbat of my Bar Mitzvah Parsha. Every single year, I get to do a tikkun. Tikkun is I get to fix something that should have happened then, but didn't. So, you see, I was a rabbi from a very early age. Notwithstanding the dispute in my family as to whether I gave my first sermon when I was three or eight, either way, it was probably too long. But at my coming of age ceremony at my Bar Mitzvah, I should have included a sermon, but I have a twin brother, and it would have been way too long for the two of us to have given sermons. And so we, basically, you're looking at a really long soup-to-nuts service, which we did, but we didn't really, either one of us, give a sermon. We didn't give a dvar. We didn't offer weekly wisdom from our Parshat.

So I've made it up, I think, over the last eight to 10 years here at Romemu, without a doubt. But every week on this Parshat, I get a chance to do some tikkun to fix that mistake that missed the Bar Mitzvah sermon, filling in retrospectively what I might have said or what I may have needed to hear myself, yeah? So I'm thinking a lot this week about the power of passion and how powerful a role passion plays in our lives, in our hearts, in our communities, and in our world. I remember as a kid that I was a super, super intense young man, but then again, so were my parents.

I learned about passion from my dad. My dad taught me about passion. My dad was and is, should live and be well, a very devoted man. If my dad loves you, get ready. My father was passionate about family, and he is extreme about family. I remember being in summer camp one year, in a camp that was about two and a half hours outside of the city, and I was dating someone, and it was her birthday, and I called my father to tell him how things were going, and I said, you know, my girlfriend really loves Smurfs. So my father said, what's that? I said, dad, it's these little blue things, whatever, but I've been looking all around in this neighborhood up here, and I can't find any Smurfs, whatever, and I mentioned it parenthetically, and the next morning, 7.30 in the morning, I get a knock on the door, and I have to come to the headquarters, because my dad is standing there with a Smurf set. No, you know, Amazon drones. Nothing. None of that stuff. There's my dad, with these blue figurines, you know, that said, dad, what are you doing here? He said, you know, I left New York at five in the morning, got here at 7.30, that was my plan, and now I'm leaving, goodbye. He walked out the door, and he made it back for his 10 o'clock phone call. That's passion. It's devotion, it's desire, and it is ultimately love, and maybe a little bit Meshuggah.

Passion is a word that's very alive this week, right? For Jews, having just celebrated yesterday Purim, and then today being Shushan Purim, which is the kind of after party of Purim, or Purim doggy bag, or a Purim extra day. It's a unique quality of a festive, raucous holiday that you get an extra. Kind of this carnival-esque holiday that spills over, its passion

is so intense that the overflow, we drink more than we should, we party more than we should, we have more days than we should.

It's a sanctioned overflow, passion that has run amok. Passion on steroids. Passion that obliterates boundaries and inhibitions. It overturns conventions and controls. It pushes beyond limits and structures to create something new. Kimu vekiblu.

Purim is all about passion. Passion of a king for pleasure. It's a passion for political gain and power. It's passion and poison of hate and envy and jealousy. Passion is everywhere in the Megillah. It is lust, it is greed. It is ardent, it is affection. It is outbursts of rage and anger. It is passion as possession.

And of course today, as we just heard, Good Friday, Holy Friday, a day celebrated or commemorated depending on which group of Christians are celebrating it to remember the crucifixion of Jesus. And of course, the full story of Jesus's trial, death and resurrection is known as the Passion Play. A story of pathos and pain.

Passion there is from the Latin, compassion or pati for pain, suffering. And of course, the eventual triumph over suffering. Now there's nothing good about Good Friday, really.

And nothing really funny about Purim, per se. Having your savior die on a cross probably wasn't a good feeling. And narrowly averting a genocide only to be empowered to commit our own in self-defense doesn't really feel good either.

But each in their own way speak to the power and the potency of passion to explore suffering, to explore desire and to explore perennial questions of religious passion and religious power. The dark and the light side of pleasure and pain in a word, passion has it all. It's got the joy and it's got the sorrow.

It's got the elevation and the degradation. It's all there. And of course, given that passion is such an important category in religious thinking, everyone, we know that there's something true that must transcend all of the different flavors in the Baskin Robbins of Jewish life.

Some religious truths—they don't stand the test of time. Some truths are like obnoxious drivers who take up too much space. They die from overreach.

They cross lanes when they shouldn't. They assert assertions that don't hold because they were never really the province of religious truth. The great scientist Stephen Jay Gould once said that each area of knowledge is a magisterium and that science and religion are two distinct magisteriums.

Each had their own worldview and each had their own empirical evidence and each one should remain there. So let's look at some truths that emerged from the passion of Purim and the passion of Good Friday, an eternal truth that can burn through important but secondary surface structures. This weekly wisdom tomorrow, my parsha.

I forgot to say, I'm sorry. Shalom. Thank you for coming to my bar mitzvah.

Tomorrow morning's reading is gonna begin with an arresting image of fire on the altar. Vayidabera Adonai El Moshe Leimor. God speaks to Moses saying, Tzav es arun v'ez banav leimor zoz tora sa ola.

Give a charge to Aaron and his children. This is the teaching, the Torah. This is the right.

This is the law of the ola, of the holy burnt offering, an offering that is fully consumed on the altar. Let fire, let fire consume it completely. Let it be consumed.

Ve'esha mizbeach tukad bo. Let the fire of the mizbeach, of the altar, let it be inflamed, let it be consumed. This korban ola.

It was a unique sacrifice. The entire night, the animal would burn down to ashes on the altar. It would keep the mishkan, the tabernacle aglow continuously, even during the depths of nighttime darkness.

There was always a little devotional light flickering. There was always a little bit of that fire that was taking that animal, consuming it. And there had to be a continual flame.

An eish tamid tukad ale mizbeach lo tichbe. Let there be a full flame like this eternal flame. Let it be there.

Don't let the light go out. Let a fire be in it. Let it consume it.

Completely. The constancy of that burning devotion becomes for the Hasidic teachers an analogy for the human heart. On fire for God.

On fire for spirit. On fire for transformation, say the Hasidic masters, the Bar Shem Tov and then his grandson, the Degel Machanei Ephraim.

Ve'esha mizbeach tukad bo. Ha'inu sh'yivayer b'libo eish yislavo sanal. Let the fire be burning on the altar.

The altar is the heart. And let a fire be burning in your heart that allows you to commit completely to give all of yourself, all of yourself to be lit. Get lit for transformation.

Get lit. Ignite a passion that burns inside and give all of yourself. Don't hold anything back.

If my 13-year-old David were standing here, which he is, he'd say, that sounds a little bit like me in high school. I was the crazy kid. Whatever I did, I threw myself into completely.

I was the one most likely to become from, to flip out. If I went to an NCSY or religious Shabbaton, I would come back and I would be shuffling. Anybody here ever called intense? Anybody ever here called too intense? Wow, those who are too intense, they're too on fire.

They burn, burn, burn like those votives, right? They burn bright. And the world says we're a little bit afraid. You're a little bit too extreme.

In a week in which we saw the ugly, shameful, shadow flames of extremism. In a week in which we saw the ugly, painful, distorted passion for power and politics. In months in which we are full-blown.

It's up in our face. The intensity and the absolute. It's so, it's so pulls you in.

When someone is intense, when somebody is on fire, when somebody is lit up, when somebody really believes in something so wholeheartedly. The whole me'odecha, with all of their heart and soul, with everything they have, the word in Hebrew for adam, human being, is also the same letters as me'od. We are all of us a lot.

We have a yearning for intensity. And in the intensity of someone who wants to sell you something, you want to buy it. People who don't have intensity are not... What's the word? When you're sick, right? When you're sick and somebody gets... It's contagious. It's contagious. When someone believes in something so deeply, we want what they have. It's attractive.

There was a Rebbe named the Imre Emes. He was the son of the Sfasa Emes. It was the Gerach Hasidic tradition. And when he came to this verse, at the age of five years old, he was in Cheder. He was in school. And he was reading my Bar Mitzvah Parsha.

I'm honored. And he got to the verse that said, And let the fire of the altar burn inside Bo. It should mean, right? Bo in Hebrew means inside of him. But the verse was saying, let the fire of the altar burn in it, in the animal or on the altar. So this little kid says to his teacher, he says, what does it mean when it says, is that referring to a person? And the Rebbe, the teacher doesn't know, he's the son of the grand Rebbe, he doesn't want to answer him. He says, I don't know.

Why don't you go ask your father? So little Avram altar, Avramula altar, goes over to his father Sfasa Emes, Yehuda Leva altar, and he says, Abba Tati says, it says in the verse, in this week's portion, let the fire of the altar burn in Bo, in him. Who is that referring to? So his father says, Avramula, what do you think? See what Avramula said? He said, I think it means the priest. The one who is igniting the altar.

A priest, a spiritual practitioner must feel like someone who actually means the stuff that they are peddling. A book that just came out this week that was reviewed by my friend Mark Oppenheimer, in Tablet, was posthumously published by Edgar Bronfman, the great philanthropist, the heir to the Seagram's fortune, who grew up in a secular home, a complete atheist, and he wrote a book called, Why Be Jewish? And Mark Oppenheimer, in his review of the book said, that title shares a title with two other books that have also been written with exactly the same title, Why Be Jewish? One was written, I mean both of them were by rabbis, and very different rabbis. One of them was Rabbi David Volpe, who is a very well-known conservative rabbi in Los Angeles.

And the other one was Meir Kahana. Meir Kahana, the rabid anti-Arab racist critique, a critic of American Judaism. And Edgar Bronfman, in his book, is trying to engage people and say, why be Jewish? And he gives all kinds of great reasons.

And I want to write a book and say, not why be Jewish, but if you're gonna be Jewish, be on fire. If you're gonna be a spiritual practitioner, if you're gonna live a holy life, get lit. Be excited. Have a fire that is tukad bo, that is inside of each and every one of us, that's your fire. I was on the phone with my brother-in-law, about 10 minutes before Shabbat started,

and I said, I said, Spencer, where's my sister, and where's my... And then he said, oh, he's in Utah. They're in Utah. They went to ski. He said, you won't believe this. They're out skiing yesterday, it's Purim, and it's one o'clock in the afternoon, and up on the ski slopes, there's a Chabad rabbi with a big megillah. Chabad rabbi with a big megillah on the ski slopes in Park City, Utah. Unbelievable. Religious passion is, in a liberal idiom, is passion for transformation.

Passion to evolve as a loving human being, and passionate Jewish engagement means that we expect Judaism, along with all of the other religious traditions, to be vehicles for the evolution of our species. That each and every religious tradition is a vehicle for the evolution of our species. We are khalashing in our culture.

We are yearning, we are desirous of passionate spiritual engagement. But you ask me, wait a second, we just celebrated Purim, and Purim is a holiday of cynicism and skepticism to a degree. We poke fun at religious traditions. It doesn't take itself too seriously. Is there room within a passionate living for doubt, for cool down, where things are not going smoothly? And so here's where the Parsha says something brilliant. You know that burned, holy burnt offering that had to be scorched by that fire, that passion? There are ashes, says the Torah.

And the priest, the one who was on fire, is to take those ashes and cleave them off of the altar, and place them on the side of the altar. My friend, Dr. Aaron Leib-Smokler writes, This pious act of *trumat hadeshen*, of lifting and shoveling the detritus of fiery consumption, reminds us that light does not, and need not, make darkness disappear. *Mishet sarich le'esh mechapes b'afar*.

The Maggid of Mezrut says that if you need fire, you find fire even in the dust, even in the ashes. There are embers that just need to be burned on. So okay, you were on fire and now you're not. Great. You place that little canister of ashes right next to the altar. And there's fire in those ashes.

Mishet sarich le'esh mechapes b'afar. If the fire is not burning in me, if I'm going through a tough period, if I'm feeling that my life is slightly less than passionate, look in the place where stuff that we've thrown out, stuff that's burned up, stuff that's no longer there, but stay with it. That's Good Friday.

Good Friday is the universal spiritual truth expressed through Christianity, that on Good Friday Jesus was crucified, and on Esther, I mean Easter Sunday, from the embers and from the ashes of that destruction something arose, something life-giving and transforming in their wisdom. Passion extinguished. Reignite.

So spiritual truth number two, not only be on fire, not only be lit, but when passion has its obstacles, wait for it to reignite. From the ashes of destruction grow the roses of success. From the ashes of destruction grow the roses of success in Chitty Chitty Bang Bang.

So I'll close with one last story. In the spring of 1938, 78 years ago, my five-year-old father and his two-year-old brother, Joe, along with my grandmother Irene and my grandfather Ali, left Berlin on a journey that would bring them here to New York to the safety of this land of immigrants. Here my grandparents would thrive and here my parents would meet, and here on March 28, 1969, I was born with my brother Adam. And 34 years ago, I had my Bar

Mitzvah in Jerusalem. And he and I chanted that weekly wisdom and we reminded ourselves and all of us that were there to live passionately and to look for fire, even the embers that have been discarded. Rebirth can happen and petals can bloom.

And it was 10 years ago on this evening that together we had our first service at Romemu. Romemu, which means to elevate, to live elevated, was a direct desire from my own heart, as I used to say, to build a fire and let everyone who wanted to put their log on it, let's just build a fire for God. From the word Leharim, to raise up ashes, Haramat Hadeshen Romemu, 10 years ago.

And so I want you to know that less than a year after we started Romemu, my father was invited by the Berlin government with his family to go back to Berlin. And my father who had promised that he would never, ever, ever go back to Berlin ever again, he broke that promise and took all of us, 15 Ingbers and others, made our way to Berlin. And on our second day there, we walked into the Neue Synagogue, into the new synagogue, which is on Oranienburger Straße, the largest synagogue in pre-war Berlin.

It has majestic Eastern Moorish style and it was one of the few synagogues to survive Kristallnacht, but it was badly damaged prior to World War II and then it was eventually demolished, most of it. And then it was reconstructed. It's magnificent.

And so we walked in, all 15 Ingbers walked in, and everybody walked through, and I got stuck in the antechamber, in the entry hall. Because there was a charred Torah there, a Torah that had been saved. And the Torah was open. And I looked in. It was open to my Bar Mitzvah. And of course it made sense because the Ola, the holy burnt offering, is known in Latin as the Holocaust.

I leave for Berlin on Sunday, April 3rd, at a time where even last night, here in the Schule, I heard people saying things like there isn't a God. I heard people in Romemu saying there's no truth but this truth. I heard people speaking and I couldn't believe my ears. Because the response to religious fire that is extreme is liberal spiritual fire that is extreme, that is devoted to the transformation of humanity through love, the strongest fire that exists. A great Christian mystic named Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who was also a paleontologist. He was a scientist. He was a mystic. He wrote, The day will come when after harnessing space, after harnessing the winds and the tides and gravitation, we shall harness for God the energies of love. And on that day, for the second time in the history of the world, we shall have discovered fire. We shall have discovered fire on a week full of the fire of hatred and hostility.

Let's remember those words. On a week that is the solemn remembrance of death and resurrection. On a week where everything in us is so sick of the vitriol and so sick of the misogyny and so sick of the racism and so sick of the pettiness and the smallness. On a week like that, fire burning here, in Bo in here. Bo knows.

The fire for transformation. The fire for living lit. Let's keep that fire growing so that when people look at us, they say, wow, what are you on? And you'll say, I'm on love.

I want to build a world from love. Let's be passionate people. Let's rise.