

Shabbat 11 09 18 Sermon

The Talmud has a phrase, Rabbinic lore, the Talmud has a phrase that's instructive, that resonates very deeply for me, and I want to begin here, which is Ein simcha k'hatarat hasfekot There's no joy like the joy of having doubts clarified. When the uncertain becomes certain, when we have ground to stand on. Right, we all know that feeling of not knowing, of being in doubt, where things are unclear. Worst of all is, maybe not worst of all, but it's bad enough, let's say, when you don't know what an answer is, or what the solution to a problem might be, or what the cause of something might be. It's maybe much worse when you have the wrong answer, we'll get to that, but not knowing is hard, not knowing is human, not knowing is painful, not knowing is a source of tremendous anxiety. Makes us anxious.

And I'm not even talking about big things, I'm talking about not knowing where you left your keys. The Talmud says, suffering, how small is suffering? The smallest amount is looking in your pocket for a quarter and getting a nickel. The frustration, I thought it was one thing and it was another.

Feeling like you don't know, it's unclear. Even something like, you know, maybe some of you have this experience, you know, my son, he jumped off a chair last Friday night or Thursday night, whatever it was, and woke up and he was screaming, his foot was in pain, we took him to get an x-ray, but it didn't show anything, but it still bothered him for days, right? So you start thinking, what's wrong? What's at the root here? Did I miss something? Something is causing suffering, but I don't know what it is. Suffering is happening, pain is present, something is not right, something is not aligned, and I can't quite grasp what it is. It's a very deep parasha, it's a very deep Torah, what that looks like. And what it does to us, what happens when we don't know what suffering is caused by?

So we have a story in tomorrow morning's weekly wisdom, as the Torah turns, we'll bring us to a story that is deeply resonant with that theme, and also with where we might be right now in our lives, collectively, individually. The story goes like this, there's the second patriarch named Isaac, Yitzchak, marries an amazing woman named Rebecca, Rivka.

We spoke about her last week, the power of God, her letters, Rebecca, are the letters Haboker, the morning she rose on the darkened skies of Abraham and Isaac's life, she rose like the certainty of the morning sun, she appeared on the landscape, she replaces her mother-in-law, Sarah, and Isaac falls in love with her. The Torah begins tomorrow morning with that marriage, and then says that she was barren, like her mother-in-law, before her she was barren, couldn't have a child, Isaac prays for her, as I said earlier in this evening's service, and she becomes pregnant, and then this, and the boys were wrestling, it's a very strange word, they were scrambled up inside of her, inside her, and she said out loud, as if to no one, or just to us as readers, if this is, why am I? Now that phrase, for those of you who have the Hebrew, you'll hear this, if you don't, it's so full, I'm not going to use the pun that I could have used there, it's so full of possibilities, it's a fragment, it doesn't even have an end, if this is so, then why am I? The words hyper-literally mean, if this is, why am I? Which could, on a very simple level mean, if I have this pain, why do I exist? I don't want to exist, I wish it would end.

Rashi, the great medieval exegete, the great medieval commentator says, what it means is, why did I pray so much for this birth, if it's so painful? Had I known? But then, Rebecca does something remarkable, and it's like, thank you, Rebecca, thank you. Vatelech lidrosh et Adonai. Four words. She went, which seems to be Rebecca's modus operandi in the world, is she's always vatelech. She says, eylech, when asked whether she would go with the stranger to meet her beloved, she says, sure, I'll go. And now she's in pain, so she does what Rebecca does, she goes. Anybody know people like that? They have a problem, like, I'm going to fix it, I'm going to find out what's going on. She's in the active verb, she's like, oh, there's pain, I'm going to go find out what's going on. Lidrosh, the word lidrosh in Hebrew means to seek it out. Lidrosh means she went after it. She went after it. She went to find something. Her suffering led her on a search. Her suffering led her on a search. Her suffering moved her, her suffering pulled her out of her life and said, let me go find out what this is that's happening inside of me. Vatelech lidrosh et Adonai, she went looking for Adonai, looking for God.

Maybe she went to an oracle to get an answer. Rashi seems to say that she went looking for an answer. Tell me what will be. Throw the tarot cards. Tell me the astrological prognostication. Tell me in your, tell me. Give me that joy that comes from having my doubts clarified. Maimonides, who lived a couple of years after Rashi, disagreed with him strongly, said, no, we don't find the word lidrosh to go looking for something in the sense of, let me go find an answer in that way. She went to pray, says Maimonides.

Like the Buddha, maybe, who upon recognizing that there was suffering and there was illness and death, sat down under a bodhi tree and wouldn't leave until he uncovered the mystery of why we must suffer. Rebecca wants to know. She doesn't want the answer necessarily. She goes looking for an answer. But if you're Rashi, she goes to get the answer. And if you're the Ramban, she goes to pray. To open herself to what might happen. And here's the answer she gets. Do people know the answer? She gets a wild answer.

You want to know why you're suffering, Rebecca? God spoke to her, verse 23 of chapter 25. And God spoke to her and said, You have two nations in your belly. How would you like to hear that? Not indigestion. You have two nations in your belly, in your womb. Two nations, two peoples will come forth from you. The older one, she'll serve the younger one. Depending on how you read this, it's very ambiguous. Younger will serve the older.

She gets a prophecy. And functionally, what does it mean for me and you? For Daikin, for me, for Sharon? What does it mean that she received this prophecy? She came in saying, Why am I suffering? And the answer of the oracle, or in her prayers, what she heard was, It's bigger than you. What's happening in you is not for you. What's happening in you is not for you. It's for something bigger than you. And it's also you. You're also suffering.

They're both true. Rebecca lands in this moment in a classic problem which is, when two things are given, how do we choose both instead of only one? There will be two children. They will be in a relationship with each other. There are two truths. You are suffering, but your suffering is not about you. It's bigger than you. It's both and, not either or. And although the tradition will make it either or, Esau bad, Jacob good, it's not so clear. The answer to her question, Why do you suffer, is, Well, it depends which perspective you want to hold. Is it the perspective of you individually who are suffering? Okay. But there might be a bigger story that's unfolding, not for you, but through you.

There was a great Hasidic Rebbe named the Berditchever. Yitzchak Berditchev reads this story and says that Rebecca says to God, I think that only righteous people have a childbirth without pain. And if I'm in pain, it must be that I'm not righteous. It must be my fault. The pain must be my fault. And the answer of the oracle is, it's not your fault. It's bigger than you. Something transpersonal is happening for you personally.

When we think about where we are individually in our lives at any given moment, and we ask ourselves, I am in pain. I am suffering. We can make it very personal. I'm the only one to whom this happens. I'm the only group to whom this happens. I'm the only religion to whom this happens. We're the only... There's a moment where our suffering can inure us to the human quality, to the transpersonal phenomena happening before us. We are in pain, and it becomes all about us. And we even have all kinds of wonderful victim narratives about it that give us power. It must be something that I did, and therefore I can undo it. Sometimes that's true.

Sometimes our personal story is exactly that, personal and absolutely accurate. There are times, as my friend Yehuda Kertzer writes about anti-Semitism, where anti-Semitism is context-dependent. And those who argue for its context can find numerous contexts everywhere. Every story is different. The reason why there are anti-Semites in France is different than why there are in England. And the anti-Semites that show up on the left who refuse to distance themselves from Louis Farrakhan and his venom, that's very different than the anti-Semitism on the right.

Context is everything. And often when we're fighting about context, we say, My suffering is my suffering. It's different than yours. This context is unique. That's not a context in which... That's not anti-Semitism. That's called... But all the contexts are somewhat true. And there's a larger story about anti-Semitism, too. What Yehuda Kertzer calls a collectivist narrative. Where the anti-Semitism here today is no different in some very deep, profound way than the anti-Semitism in 1938 in Germany. The circumstances have changed. Things are very different. As we said last Friday night, together we rise.

Then, 80 years ago tonight in Kristallnacht, 80 years ago tonight in Kristallnacht, the windows were shattered, but the police were the ones who were supporting it, not the ones who were preventing it. Things have changed, but in a collectivist understanding of suffering and a personal narrative, there's a bigger narrative. We all suffer is the human level, and Judaism and the unique hatred of Jews is bigger than the context. It's big. It follows us everywhere. It has its own unique strands.

It isn't reducible to a story. So they're both true, Rebecca. Something happening within you is about you, but there's also something happening in you that's about being something bigger than that. National, huge, transpersonal. And what about our country now at this moment? On Friday night, only two weeks after 11 Jews were murdered, 12 human beings murdered in a bar. Each and every context is unique.

Each and every story is unique, but there's a larger story of American violence, American racism, American xenophobia, American shadow. We are living in both narratives, Rebecca. They are both true.

And the question for us tonight and every day is, will we, in response to suffering, go seek out Adonai, love, compassion, the broadest imaginable context in which to place each of these competing narratives? To not knee-jerk react and say it's one thing and not another. Remember that our theme this year is Emet. Emet.

And for those of you who are here on Kol Nidre, we talked about those letters, Emet, Aleph, Mem, Taf, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the middle letter, and the last letter, all 22 letters of the Aleph base. All 22 letters of the Aleph base from A to Z. That if you read them from A, Aleph, to Mem, it spells mother. And if you read them from Mem to Taf, it spells mate, death. From womb to tomb, from tomb to womb, how do you hold these two truths? It's personal and it's not about me. It's unique and not so special.

Tonight we remember our brothers and sisters like my father who four months before Kristallnacht left his beautiful, beautiful Berlin home. I want to imagine what my five-year-old dad was thinking when his father, my grandfather Ali, came and said to him, you have to leave. My one-year-old uncle, Joe, what was it like for them? How could they integrate the narrative of their own personal suffering with the bigger trans-Jewish narrative? How would they find a way out? Two weeks ago was not Kristallnacht, that's for sure. But we must, in every moment, hold these two places.

The place of the particular, the place of the universal and not pit them against each other. The place of our own personal narrative with a larger narrative. The place of American narratives with a broader national narrative and our own individual stories.

All of that, we have to be mature, hold the aleph and the taf and everything in between. We lift up the aleph base, the letters that were stolen and the letters that we vow to lift continuously.