

Shabbat 07 27 18 Sermon

Well, I know that I don't have to tell you that it's a little bit uncomfortable in here, but just take a look over here, everybody. Wool. Can you all say that? Wool. Go ahead, feel that. That's good right there, feel that. That's wool. Anybody else wearing wool tonight? Flannel? Ah, I love it. It's all about comfort. Or not. Comfort and being comforted play a funny game. The language of comfort. I'd like to be comfortable.

I wouldn't mind if the ozone layer were to disappear, but I want to be comfortable. My ability to maintain or withstand or to ameliorate discomforting and uncomfortable or uncomfortable feelings, one could argue that is the engine of progress and innovation. There would be no shark tank without a desire to make a better product. I mean, we went from this to one day, God willing, we'll have air conditioning. Maybe. Maybe.

But comfort or being uncomfortable participate in an existential conversation about what it is to be a human being, what it means to be a spiritually mature individual. One could argue that the entirety of the spiritual path is learning to be uncomfortable or maybe being able to comfort when one is uncomfortable. I'm thinking about comfort, of course, not only because of the annual experience that I love of sweating my prayers, but also because this Shabbat has a special name.

It is known as Shabbat Nachamu, taken from the words of the prophet Isaiah in chapter 40 of the book of Isaiah. It is read every Shabbat that comes after the ninth of Av, the saddest day of the Jewish calendar, hour 9-11 for posterity. Every Sabbath after we hear about the calamity and the tragedy and the tearing and the breakage and the shattering and the rupture, we are comforted. We are to read publicly, to proclaim. Nachamu, nachamu ami. Yomar Eloheichem. Dabru alei v'yerushalayim v'kiru eleiha. Nachamu. The word nachum, menachem means to comfort. Nachamu, nachamu, like a child, the prophet says, they're there. It's okay. It's gonna be okay. It's gonna be okay. The prophet comes every year to give a message of hope, a message of promise, a message of rising from the ashes of despair, the ashes of hopelessness, and it can never get any better, and it's always gonna be like this. We'll never get beyond number 45. It's never gonna be 46. I mean, we can see it, but we're not getting there. It's too far. Nachamu, nachamu. Be comforted, says Isaiah. Be comforted.

Are we comfort able? Are we comfort able? Do we know what it means to be comfortable? What it involves? What are the inner places? And I wanna kind of look at that for just a moment. What are the features of being comfortable, comfort able? The ability to both give and receive comfort, to both give and receive, and hopefully give and receive to ourselves what we need to hear when we need healing, the kinds of aids that we need to reach for, the kinds of, like, what do I do? It's, so tomorrow morning, not only will we read about the prophet, Isaiah's words of comfort, but every year on the same Saturday morning where Isaiah appears and says, wow, here I am, we read about someone else whose name was Moses. And we read about a moment in Moses' life that is and was the inspiration for Martin Luther King's most famous, perhaps most famous sermon, where he said, I may not get there with you, but we will get to the promised land.

And so Moshe, who inspired that speech, Moshe stands tomorrow morning and every year on the same Sabbath where we will hear about comfort to declare to the whole world that I had my dreams crushed. I had my most cherished, my most desired, my most wanted, the thing that I lost sleep over, perhaps what I think I came to the world to be. Moses stands before the Jewish people, the Israelites then, and says, v'adchanan adonai ba'idahi lemor adonai elohim ata'achilot le'arot et avdecha et gadacha.

Moses says, at that moment, I stood, and he's telling the Israelites, you know, I stood before the great and awesome God and said, God, what do I ask for in the world but just to bring me into the promised land? That's all I want. And God said, no, because sometimes the answer to a prayer is no. And so every single Shabbat that comes after destruction brings us comfort and a reminder that we will be frustrated. There will be things that we don't see, maybe not in our lifetime. There are things that we hope for that we've written down. There are little I-wish-fors that sometimes never materialize, and that that frustration, that wanting, as the Buddha would say, creates dukkha, suffering. We still want, we still yearn, we still long for, but sometimes, often, the two great disappointments in our lives are getting what we want and not getting what we want. And so then we come back to comfort.

So how do we become comfort-able? So three things. Three things amongst a list of 11, 12, 13, 15, 20 things that you can find online about how to grieve, how to comfort, how to console. Often the word comfort and console are used interchangeably. But the first thing we followed last week, for those who were here, for those of you who weren't, we said, we don't move through discomfort until we name it. It is real. We open our eyes. We don't play magic with the world.

This morning, this community, I represented this community at the funeral of a 60-year-old genius who inexplicably and unexpectedly passed away in absolutely good health two weeks ago on his 60th birthday and two weeks later, here we were this morning. And one after one, people stood up and said, I can't be comforted. It's not real. I won't acknowledge it. I won't look at it. I don't want to be with it. It's not true. And so the first step in being able to comfort is to name it, to name the loved one, to name the desire, to name what we wish for, to name what needs to be healed, but just to name it and just sit with it. The second thing that we need is to be good listeners.

Tomorrow morning, no fewer than 15 times, the word Moses uses is now listen, listen, listen. To be comfort-able, we need to be great listeners to ourselves and to the other. And lastly, I'm thinking about this a lot in my life. It's so vital that we invite people in our lives who need comfort, parts of us that need comfort to share sacred community. To not be alone. I'm thinking to myself all day that that's the reason we say, ha'makom yinachem etchem betoch.

May the one comfort you, the word comforting, when we come to a house of a morning, we say, may you be comforted, but not may you be comforted, but may you be comforted amongst all of those. We find a greater solidarity with others. We come out of a place of solidarity, out of a place of being alone. We say, me too. Let's hold hands together. And when we are comfort-able, we give that to others. We provide that, we acknowledge we need it. We open up, we say, I need help, I need support. I can't do it alone.

When dreams die, when yearnings go unrequited, when we feel like we felt last week, we arrive on the shores of Isaiah's nachamu, comfort, comfort with Moses showing the way. I lost the dream and we share it together. We sing it together. We will read it together tomorrow. We are then comfort-able. This is, of course, the day of love, Yom Avah.

And so in the spirit of love, in the spirit of transparency, I'd like to myself ask for comfort tonight. I need you to comfort me. I need your ability to hear. I need your ability to name and your ability to hold. I'm not asking because, thank God, I've lost anyone, God forbid, thank God, but I have a dream too. It was a dream that started over a decade ago that we commemorated this year at Romemu.

A decade ago, a former waiter at an Upper West Side restaurant who had been an ultra-Orthodox Jew who had dropped out of too many rabbinical schools to name had a vision of a community that placed as much emphasis on the heart as it did on text, a community that placed as much emphasis on love as it did on dues, a community that placed as much emphasis on welcoming others as it did on deepening those who were already a part of the family, a community that elevated Jewish life, that danced and sang and cried and laughed, that was embodied, that was postmodern but mystical, that was feminist and egalitarian, that loved Israel but criticized it. I had a vision, it was a dream, and I have, along with my wife and with many of you, over the last decade, sweated that dream. I have bled that dream, I have slept much less than I might have had I not had that dream, and that dream has been what has kept me so profoundly grounded and humbled in my ministry and my calling.

And just this past year, right outside those doors, when all of you will walk out in about nine minutes, cross the street as you open the second set of doors, you will see the place that Romemu began. This community of over 600 families began with one guy and a drum on the second floor of the Grovner House, right across 30 feet. We found out, Romemu did, in March, that that building became available for purchase at a very low price by New York standards.

But we're stalling. We're stalling because we didn't have a lot of time, we're stalling because, frankly, you don't raise that kind of money in five minutes, no matter how much love you have in the community, no matter how many people are bought into the vision, no matter how many people think that what you're doing deserves its own home with air conditioning and with all the accoutrement of what a home, a shul, a synagogue might look like. Even in the best scenario, we knew that it was a very narrow window.

Even in the best case scenario, we thought this is gonna be a miracle, it's gonna be a Hail Mary, it's gonna be Ted Williams' last at bat, it's gonna be overtime, it's gonna be craziness, it's gonna be Moses standing before God and saying, God, I've already prayed 1,500 or thousands of prayers to you, can you give me one last chance to see my vision accomplished? Can you give me one more try to enter the promised land? And like Moses, who gotta know, in my own heart, I'm having a hard time accepting that and I need your comfort because I can't let that dream go yet. That dream was to become a 20,000 square foot synagogue built with every imaginable spiritual technology, a sound bath, and yes, air conditioning. To make uncomfortable and comfortable.

So I still have a dream and I'll receive comfort but we have about a month left. We have about a month left to buy that building. We have a month left to see if this community is ready to have a home, to see if this community as a community that began with five people sitting around, if we have the inner resources and other resources to finally say there will be a place, I'm gonna say that I comfort myself knowing that even if it doesn't work out, it will happen one day. I might not see it. I might not live to see this amazing, remarkable, unique, vibrant, dynamic, alive, once in a lifetime community have its own center with yoga and gyrotonic and Pilates and even rabbinical training and a yeshiva all over. I might not see it but it will happen.

It will happen, of that I am absolutely clear. So if you are inclined to comfort me by telling me you're going to buy the building, this is not a pitch, just let me know in the next 20 days. Spiritual practice means that when it's no, it's no. Spiritual practice means that even if the answer is no and we are uncomfortable, we need to say no. We find comfort by naming what's real, by listening and by holding each other's hands. I, like you, imagine a world that is built upon those principles, a world that is a comfort-able world. I dream for it, I yearn for it, I want to work for it and I know you do too. So let's build a world with that in mind. Let's begin tonight.

At your dinner tonight, tomorrow, whatever it is, try to imagine those three principles with the person you're sitting with. How can I be of comfort to you? How might we make each other comfortable? Let's be the air conditioning that we want to see in the world.

Let's rise, please.