

Rabbi David Ingber's Kabbalat Shabbat Sermon

January 16, 2026

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We sang a new melody this evening to the Haddodi, maybe you guys remember it? The chanty, catchy melody. Well, that was a melody that my wife Arielle composed. The only melody to this date that she has composed.

And I remember coming home and finding her in the kitchen and she said to me, I wrote a chant. And so we've sung it for 16 years. It was around the time that my eldest son was an infant.

And just this Shabbat, the Shabbat of Parshat Ve'eira, it made its debut here at Rom & Mu. And it's deeply connected to what I want to say tonight. But first I want to start with this past week where I found myself listening to one of the podcasts I listen to pretty regularly.

The podcast is called Making Sense with Sam Harris. And this week he had a conversation with John McWhorter, New York Times writer and professor of linguistics at Columbia University. And the subject of antisemitism and the rise of antisemitism took center stage for a couple of minutes.

And I was very struck by something that Sam said. He argued that the answer to antisemitism is not doubling down on Jewish identitarianism. That the world we should be aiming for is not one of louder and more rigid identities, but a broader universal moral commitments, ideas expansive enough to hold all of us.

He cautioned against that doubling down. And Harris often reaches for this metaphor. He imagines a world where, you know, eye color or hair color is clearly visible, but it isn't essentialized or noticed.

We don't have quotas for how many blonde haired people get into universities. We have no quota for how many blue eyed or brown eyed people. And so Harris often will phrase his assertions against identitarianism with a kind of a hyper or hypo dangerous model.

And I find myself agreeing with him. Uh oh. And then almost immediately I paused, not because I don't think that the question is simply whether identity matters.

It's because I think that that question is not the question. The question is, where are we in history and in our story when we invoke it? So the question isn't whether or not identity is a dangerous thing if overly emphasized, but where in our story or any story it is invoked. And I know it sounds abstract, but many of us live in this tension.

On the one hand, we're exhausted by the hardening of identities, by the way speech collapses into slogans and camps, and we long for a language that expands rather than constricts, that returns us to something shared and human. And yet we also know viscerally that when people rush too quickly to universality, something fragile gets lost and erased. There are moments when being told, just be human sounds less like liberation and more like disappearance.

So here's the harder question I think we should be asking. Is it possible for speech at all or stories or narratives or whatever to liberate us? Can speech liberate us and still keep us in edge? Exile at the same time. And this is where the Parsha tomorrow morning has a lot to say.

Vaira is not only about freedom, it's also about stages of freedom. In the heart of the Parsha tomorrow morning, if those of them have been following along, Moshe is like almost every leader that I am familiar with, ready to quit. Moshe has come to these people who are in slavery and have been enslaved for centuries, and he's come to them with a message that he stood before Pharaoh delivering, let my people go.

And no sooner had Moshe brought this message to Pharaoh, and Pharaoh decided to do something radical and strategic and brilliant, straight out of a fascist's playbook, he increased the workload of the Israelite slaves and blamed it on Moses and Aaron, and said to them, to the people, you see what your leaders who want liberation have done? They've made things worse for you. And what, of course, ensues is that the people turn on Moses and Aaron. And by the beginning of tomorrow morning's reading in Parshat Vaira, Moses and Aaron have come back to God, and Moshe now is pleading his case to God, take this burden off of me and give it to someone else.

And God has to come up with some reinforcement, some motivation, some speech, some oration, something that will convince Moshe, it's go back in, go back to Egypt. And within that context, within that context of what God has to say to Moses to get him to go back and take it up again, we find one of the most famous sentences in the entire Exodus narrative. God says, therefore, go to the children of Israel and tell them, I will take you out.

I will save you. And I will take you. Four intense verbs.

And a final one that is often left out in certain ways, and I will bring you to the land that I promised. These four verbs you might recognize because they are the deeper structure of the four cups of wine that we pour in our liberation feast on Passover evening. Each cup of wine connected to one of those verbs, one of those action moments.

And then the fifth, the fifth cup. Redemption, the Torah seems to be telling us, is not one moment. It is choreography, and it unfolds in a series of processes and stages.

The deep structure of the four cups of wine, all of those are set within the context of a stage-like unfolding of redemption with the fifth cup called the kosher eliyahu, Elijah's cup, the symbol of what is not yet completed, not yet tasted, not yet here. And here's what matters. The Torah doesn't begin this process with ideals.

It begins with a simple movement, which is breath. The Torah says, in order for you to get to this first verb, v'hotzeiti, to be taken out, they have to first learn how to breathe. Because right before these verbs can even land, the Torah says something even more devastating.

v'lo yachlu, they couldn't hear Moshe's speech, because kotzeruach avodah kasha, they were short of breath, and they were crushed by hard labor. This shortness of breath wasn't just fatigue. It was a spiritual suffocation.

The soul's asthma. In the Midrash, it's read as an oppression so deep that it strangles not only the body, but the ability to imagine. The Israelites couldn't even imagine.

And imagine Moshe showing up and saying to them, here's where you're going, and it's going to be four steps. And they say, before we even get to the first step, we can't even imagine the first one. And so the teaching of the Torah is that before liberation, before it becomes covenant, before liberation meant Sinai and all the things to come, before it became a vision, it had to first become an inner space for them.

The first miracle that God does in Egypt is not the splitting of the sea or the blood or the frogs. It is the quiet restoration of the space inside to be human again. There's a kind of divine patience that says, you don't have to be able to speak.

You don't yet have to be able to form sentences. You don't have to worry about all of these four unfoldings that are going to come. But first, let me give you your breath back and your ability to even imagine liberation.

In the language of the Zohar, this stage is called the redemption of speech. The redemption of speech, says the Zohar, is that in the mind of the slaves, they couldn't even hear the yearnings. They couldn't even imagine the possibilities.

Galut with Dibur, Dibur with Galut, that speech was in exile meant that they had no inner place in which to even know their own story. Imagine showing up in Egypt and telling the Israelites, transcend your story. It's too parochial.

Imagine showing up with the Israelites and telling them, be careful about how much you focus on your own narrative because it might reify and become identitarian. Imagine showing up in Egypt to the Israelites and saying to them, you know, you slaves who have not yet tasted the taste of freedom for almost 400 years, be very careful on how tribal you are because your tribe might become tribalism. Clearly, that would have been a mistake.

And so Moshe comes along and says to them, first narrative, first find your words, find your unique contours of your breath and your soul. Imagine and dream your dreams, make space for it. And when your dreams are sufficiently rooted in who you are, you will one day have a dream that is bigger than just your dream.

MLK got that. Dr. Martin Luther King and the weekend named for him reminds us of a prophetic leader, a Moses in our times who came into a world in which the embers of hatred were flames and he brought a dream, a dream that is often misheard. When we quote, I have a dream, we think of it often as a kind of naive optimism as if it were a call to erase differences but that's not what MLK dreamed of.

He didn't imagine a world without race, without history, without particularity. He was dreaming of a world where those differences no longer determined ultimate value and worth. He didn't say, I have a dream one day that race will disappear.

He didn't say, I have a dream one day when all of our particularities will be subsumed under a great universal truth, universal story. Difference for Dr. King remained visible. But it was no longer ultimate.

That isn't denial, it's refinement. It's the move from the first verbs of liberation, getting out, being saved, being redeemed toward the later work, becoming people capable of blessing and justice and covenant. And so perhaps through the prism of Dr. King, we Jews, when we ask this question, it shouldn't be, should we Jews speak as Jews or should we speak as universal human beings, but rather, which verb are we in right now? Which stage of redemption are we living through? There are moments when reclaiming Jewish voice is essential, when silence would be a betrayal of breath.

And there are moments when speech must broaden and widen, less voice itself become another narrow place. Parshat Vayera teaches us that liberation is not just about finding speech and language and breath. It's about finding those things, but then continuing to refine them.

So that speech once redeemed does not itself become exile. That the speech that we find that teaches us who we are does not continue without refinement so that we don't see others as less than us, of less worthy, of less valuable, of less important. We must find a way to use language both to solidify and strengthen our identities while using it as well to broaden those.

Learning when we assert Jewish pride and when we soften it, when we translate it and when we let it reach beyond itself. And that's the fifth cup. On my Seder table, and I hope on all of yours, there is always a fifth cup that is called kosher el yahu, the fifth one.

And it is a reminder that not every promise is ready to be consumed. It's a reminder that some truths must be held with humility. It's a reminder that the universal dream is real, but it cannot be rushed.

Rav Koch, the first chief rabbi of Palestine wrote that the old shall be renewed and the new shall be made holy. The Jewish story does not become universal by abandoning itself. It becomes universal by being refined until it turns into a blessing.

And so I'll end with a dream of my own because I have a dream. I have a dream that is faithful to Torah and also to Dr. King. I dream of a world where identities are neither erased nor idolized.

I dream of a world where we know who we are and therefore don't need to shout it constantly. I dream of a world where Jewish speech is grounded enough to be generous and universal enough to be trustworthy. I dream of a world where every breath has returned, where every voice has matured and difference no longer frightens us.

That's not a utopia. That's the fifth cup of blessing. It's a long view of redemption.

And forever reminds us that God does not free us all at once, but God brings us out and then saves us and redeems us and takes us into covenant and then slowly and patiently teaches us how to lift that fifth cup up still untasted toward a future in which our particular stories no longer imprison us but become pathways towards a shared moral dream. It was auspicious tonight to sing a song that was 16 years in the closet. It was auspicious tonight.

R, I hope you're watching. I don't know where, if you are. Not everything happens in the timeline that we expect it to, but our hope and our prayer, and this is also to you, my not friend, but my friend, Sam Harris.

There is no danger in Jewish pride. There is no danger in Jewish identity if it points in the direction of a wider embrace without losing who we are. And maybe, just maybe, every time we speak with that kind of courage, that kind of restraint, that kind of unapologetic courage, unapologetic love for who we are, and unapologetic vision for who we all could be, that we each bring a dream a little bit closer together.

God bless us to do that and let us say amen. Please rise, everybody.

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