

Romemu Dvar Torah June 17, 2016

I remember the day vividly. It was a Saturday evening. It was Rosh Chodesh Nisan.

It was the new month of Nisan in 2008. It was the night before, or the night really, that I was going to propose to my wife, my then-girlfriend Ariel. And I had it all planned out.

We were going to be doing it underneath the globe in Columbus Circle. And it was a big surprise. And that night, her sister invited the two of us to go to see Rent.

And I had wanted to see it for a long time. And those words, the words, 525,600 minutes, right? Let me sing with Laura. You know Laura.

525,600 minutes 525,000 moments so dear 525,600 minutes How do you measure, measure a year In daylights, in sunsets, in midnights, in cups of coffee In inches, in miles, in laughter and strife 525,600 minutes How do you measure, measure a life So we're measuring people. Every year, at Pesach, at our seders we say Echad miyodea? One, do you know? Who knows one? Who knows two? Who knows ten? Who knows eleven? Who knows twelve? Who knows? We measure on Pesach with questions. And then we begin a period of measuring.

Measuring each and every day that leads up to Shavuot, counting each day. And this Shabbat, the Shabbat after we've counted up to that moment, up to 50. This Shabbat, the Shabbat after Revelation is always, in our tradition, a Shabbat of numbers.

We are always in the book of numbers. And the Shabbat after we've counted up to Sinai is the Shabbat when we read Parshat Naso, the longest Parsha in the Torah, with the greatest number of verses and the greatest number of letters and words. 8,632 Hebrew letters tomorrow morning.

2,264 words tomorrow morning. 176 verses tomorrow morning. Occupying 311 lines in a Sefer Torah.

Numbers. It's all about numbers. And what we were supposed to be dealing with tomorrow morning and this entire Shabbat is numbers.

And more numbers. Four Shabbatot that led up to this weekend. Each of them with their own journey, their own celebration.

I mentioned a B'ris five weeks ago, four weeks ago, an adult Bat Mitzvah with nine women who courageously took a year to study Torah. Two weeks ago, or three weeks before that, a community gathering. And then the week after that, we gathered together again.

So many celebrations. For months in advance, tomorrow morning was supposed to be about those numbers. And it was supposed to be about our community's celebration of gay pride.

A celebration of love and choice. And the progress our society has made towards a more just and more sane understanding that love is love is love is love. That's what tomorrow was supposed to be about.

What tonight was supposed to be about. This Shabbat and this weekend were supposed to be about so many things other than the Shabbat after the most horrific shooting in American history. A murderous rampage that destroyed the lives of 49 human beings.

49 souls, 49 children of 49 mothers, 49 worlds. 49. 49.

That strange coincidence of the 49 days that we counted up to Sinai and the sacred number 49 in our tradition had me reeling, thinking about the meaning of 49. In our tradition, starting in the Bible, 49 is creation times creation. 7 times 7. It is the fullness of all things that could be.

The perfection of God. 7 times 7. 49 years of the agricultural cycles that lead to the 50th year of returning to the land that you originally owned. 50 is liberation.

It's freedom. And then in the Talmud, the Talmud goes so far as to say that the world was created with 50 gates of understanding. All 50 gates of understanding were given to Moshe, except for one, says the Talmud.

He was given only 49 gates of understanding. Which leads the rabbis to ask, on this sacred number of 49, what was that 50th gate that he was lacking? And says the Talmud in Masachet Baruchot, in Tractate Baruchot, the Talmud says that the 50th gate of understanding was Moshe's question, which Harold Kushner titled his famous book, when bad things happened to good people, Moshe asked, Why is it that we see a world where horrible things befall really amazing people? How do I understand that, he asked God. How do I understand evil in the world? How do I understand the depth of depravity that we see around us? Moshe asked, give me the 50th gate, God.

I want to understand. I want to know. 49 human beings celebrating love.

49 human beings celebrating vitality. 49 human beings feeling the pulse of life moving through them. And Moshe standing there at the doors of Pulse and saying, God, show me, show me.

And the doors closed. We don't always, we don't always get that vision, we don't have it. We are in a state of collective shock.

On the day of Wednesday when we were planning the vigil with B.J., we were on the phone with Rabbi Shuli Passau, and we were each going, myself, Rabbi Jessica, we were talking about different verses that were speaking to us, and Shuli said, Shuli said that in the book of Esther, in the book of hiddenness, the book of things that are concealed, there's a verse that says, and the city of Shushan was perplexed, it was confused, it was, we're in a state of shock. And our motivation for wanting to know is clear. We want to know.

Why Eddie Justice and his mother Nina had to have their last conversation through text messaging. Where Eddie texted his mother at 2.06 in the morning, last Sunday morning, as many of us were sitting and absorbing Torah, and wrote to his mother, Mommy, I love you. And then wrote to her in club, the shooting.

And then wrote to her trap, in bathroom, pulse, downtown, call police. And his mother wrote back to him, and said, where are you? And he wrote, I'm going to die. Eddie was handsome and athletic.

He had tattoos, if you see the picture of him, they were peeking out of the top of his shirt. Used to wear flashy jewelry. His mother said, he lives in a big sky house like the Jeffersons, and he lives rich, she said.

She called him back, she texted him back, and she wrote, you still in there? And a half hour after his first text, he wrote again, call them, Mommy. I'm going to die. And the last words that he shared with his mother in this life, she wrote to him, I love you.

His family, when speaking about Eddie, said that he loved his mother, and in the end, he was just a mama's boy at heart. 50th Gate, all week long. 50th Gate.

We don't understand the motivations of the murderer. We want to understand what could possibly have gripped his mind, his heart. We know that there was hatred, we know that there was ideology, there are theories about his sexuality, there are all manner of navorah, we don't know.

We know that we need to make common sense changes to our gun legislation in this country. Those things we know, but that doesn't assuage the pain, the rage, and the fear that exists amongst our brothers and sisters in the LGBTQ community. And so here we are in gay pride, and what could we possibly learn from tomorrow morning's numbers? So I want to offer this blessing this evening, and for the Shabbat, and for all of us, for me, for you.

The last number, 15. 15 are the words that appear tomorrow morning in the midst of the parshat, in the midst of the weekly wisdom, the Torah is speaking about an ascetic, a nazir, an ascetic, who sees something and decides that he wants to be, she wants to be a fanatic for God. And the tradition is ambivalent about that commitment.

But at the end, after the sin offering is given by the Nazarite, by the devoted fanatical religious individual, the Torah introduces the priestly blessing. 15 words. 15 words where the Torah says, this is the way you build a world from love.

These 15 words. These 15 words frame how we should look at each and every one of God's children, with what eyes we should see her creations. What are the words that help us into a world without the 50th gate? A world where our brothers and sisters are still in harm's way.

In a world where fear, and anger, and rage destroy the dignity, the inherent holiness of human beings. I'd like to invite Rabbi Jessica to come forward to read with me this translation from our teacher, Nehemiah Polin. May Adonai bless you and keep you safe.

May you always feel watched over, cared for, cherished, hugged by the everlasting arms, covered by the wings of the Shekhinah, the Talit of light. May Adonai shine upon you with a beaming face. May you know that G-d is always smiling at you, taking pleasure in what you do, in who you are, shepping nachas.

May Adonai lift up the divine countenance upon you. May G-d look your way whenever you walk into a room, especially the room of another heart. May you feel acknowledged, saluted, recognized, face to face, reciprocally.

May you see the wink of the divine eye your way, calling you to service, to others, to community, to the cosmos. Finally, v'yasein lecha. Nachas v'yitein lecha, give you, but v'yasein lecha, set you.

May your peace be true, established, and firm. May you be the peace you wish to bring. May you find equipoise, equanimity, balance and alignment that leads to skillful and effective action.

And may you be surrounded by a nimbus of serenity that brings spaciousness and acceptance to all in your radius. Shalom. We measure our life through love.

The pulse in our body is what we feel when the heart is full and the beat comes through. Each of us has 80 beats on average per minute. The last, last number is that we get 42,048,000 times a year to have our pulse.

42,048,000 times a year to check in with our vitality, to feel that aliveness that is flowing through each and every one of us. That pulse is a wake-up call. That pulse is a wake-up call to see the world with the eyes of these 15 words of blessing, setting ourselves in the space of love to build a world from love and for love.

How do we measure our life? Let's measure our life in love. Please rise.