

Shabbat 08 09 19 Sermon

The hour is late and Shabbat beckons. Too much has happened this week. Too much bloodshed and violence and divisiveness. Too much destruction this week. The week that leads into the ninth day of Av and the communal mourning. For us not to stop and pause for a moment and ask the Torah if she has anything, any guidance that we might use in order to enter into this great riddle of human suffering and misery.

And before we turn to the wisdom of the Torah I just want to say that part of what I want to share with you and that I think the Torah shared with me today when thinking about what I might share with you is connected with a lifelong terror that I've had of heights. For those of you who have been part of the Romemu community for years you know that there is no fewer than three major sermons that I've given that have to do with my particular terror of looking down from high places. And this past week when I was in Colorado and happened to be on a gondola going on the way to a very, very, very, very tall mountain I remembered that wise adage of not looking down. As I looked down and remembered not to look down I kept my eyes focused high, high, wanting myself to remember that as long as I kept my eye on the ascent and on where we were going that I might be okay and sure enough I was.

I think Moshe is going to point that out in a moment but before we get to that moment in tomorrow morning's good advice just to recognize that this Shabbat when we read the beginning of the fifth of the five books of Moshe known as Deuteronomy in English but Devarim or words in Hebrew that fifth book is always read on the Shabbat that precedes the saddest day of our year. There's something about Devarim and the beginning of the fifth book of the Torah that intimately weaves itself into the theme and energy of the saddest day of the year. We read it every year right before. And so I'll offer something but before I offer what I want you to walk away with is just a little bit of context for how monumental tomorrow morning's Torah reading is. Because it begins with a statement that only appears here in the beginning of the book of Devarim of Deuteronomy the fifth book and the name of the book itself is taken from this phrase from the sentence which itself offers us a remarkable moment.

The book is named Devarim because Devarim words are the very thing that Moses is about to speak. These are the words that Moses will speak. And anyone with a cursory reading of the Torah knows that that word Devarim words and Moses were not always favorably linked one with the other. When Moses was called upon by the divine voice to go and take the Israelites out of the land to lift them up, to elevate them, to bring them to rise up. Moses complained about himself, I'm not a man of Devarim. Who me? Words? That's not me. Moses his own oral issue. His own issue with how words dissemble and come from his mouth. His own lack of confidence. His own wounded place. His own essential and core inadequacy. His vulnerability. Comes back in full force though with the triumphal Elahad Varim and now these are the words that who spoke? Moses spoke. As if the Torah is saying you see, that's Moshe. He's the one that couldn't speak. Remember him, the one who didn't go down because he needed his brother to speak? Elahad Varim, a whole book of Moshe's poems and poetry. His oratory. A simple word that clues us in that Moses knows a thing or two about what it is to lift oneself up out of a place of weakness, a place of deep vulnerability and insufficiency, a sense of inadequacy and who am I? Moshe begins the fifth

and the final book of Torah with a now hear me, let me teach you. And then Moshe says to the people, let me remind you that history repeats itself and that you will have cycles. You will have cycles over and over again of the very same moment. It will be Groundhog's Day every day.

The book of Devarim which is really the first book of Midrash, the first commentary on the Torah is Moses' own subjective, very different reading and interpretation of the events of Israelite history. And he'll give his own twist, but the first of all of the historical moments that he would like us to look at and the Israelites in the Torah to look at is the story of the spies, the miraglim, as if to say to the Israelites, the Ur sin, the most fundamental sin, the sin of hearing words and not knowing how to interpret them, of becoming privy and not being able to defend oneself against words. Moses used to be saying, you know, I know that one everybody. See, I hit the rock instead of speaking to it, but I've learned better. I know that words have meaning and they are powerful. Not only the ones we say, but the ones we listen to. And so listen to my words about how you should not have listened to the words of those spies. And then Moses goes on to tell them the story and here's where heights come in. As Moses is telling them the story of how they listened to gossip and believed gossip, leaders who spoke falsehoods about things that these believing citizens, these believing Israelites, they swallowed it hook, line and sinker and followed them.

In the midst of Moses recounting and repainting the picture, Moses decides to add this little line and here's where I want to come in for a landing and just send you off with this charge. As Moses tells them about the story, he adds in verse 26 of chapter 1 of the book that he spoke. Moses adds an element of motivation, something that is not in the original text, something that he surmises of his own accord, a great coach and motivational teacher that he is. He says, really what was at stake on that fateful day when you didn't go into the land or you didn't or you should not have listened to the spies was lo'avitim la'alot, you did not want to go up. You did not want at its core to really leave your familiar place. You did not want ultimately to stop making the same old mistake over and over again and really trying something new. You didn't really want to learn. There was something in you that benefited from the repetition of walking around in the desert complaining about how things used to be. There was something in you that didn't want heights. Literally Moses says to them, lo'avitim la'alot, you didn't want la'alot to make aliyah, you didn't want to go up. You were afraid of heights.

In our language we might say that in all of the discourse about the kind of society that we don't want to have, might we think about the society we do want to have? In the two centuries in some of this young country's existence, in our conversations about rights, the lotah says, if you will, the things that we are not to do, the shalt nots. We shalt not, in those few lines, infringe upon the right of citizens to bear arms, knowing full well that a militia, blah, blah, blah, the shalt nots of our world. But what about the ases, a world of positive visioning? The heights, as it were, not the depths, not the lowest common denominator that gives each and every one of us freedom to do as we choose in our own little foreamos, our own little forefeet, our own little private Idaho's. But what about the grander vision of a world where children can grow up and go to a store, or a synagogue, or a church, or walk around their homes and be safe? Protections, not just liberties, but responsibilities to safe living and insurance.

We are terrified of heights in this country. Unless you think it's only a national issue, go home tonight and think to yourself if you've articulated a vision for your own life. Not just who you don't want to be, but who you do want to be. Not just what kind of relationship you don't want to have, but what kind of relationship you do want to have. How often we focus on what we don't want instead of visioning together about what we might lift ourselves towards. Are we all Icarus, flying so low to avoid the beauty that we might see, or are we to lift one another up to a much higher altitude? V'lo avitem la'alot. Moshe cuts through all the garbage and says, hey, let's just be honest, you didn't really want to go up, did you? Did you really want to go up? What an interrogation.

I feel Moshe speaking to me saying, Ingber, how about you? Do you want to go up? And where might we imagine ourselves? Where are we to answer and say, we're afraid of what it might look like from that high up, that vaunted, beautiful vista, where we might see a world that we must actively bring about. How amazing were we to acknowledge that vulnerability, that fear, and say, af al pichem, even so.

A friend of mine sat with me in that gondola and kept pointing my head up, kept saying, you know, if you keep looking down, you'll stay scared, but focus on where you're going. In every generation, the Talmud teaches, where the temple is not rebuilt, it's as if it were destroyed in our generation. Every generation in which we don't eradicate racism, and homophobia, and misogyny, and domestic violence, and othering, and treating immigrants like animals, and separating children from their parents, and those screams reverberate through history, and they are present right now in this room. State-sponsored violence that we ourselves feel so paralyzed to combat. So we have to each grab a hand, lift our eyes, and remind ourselves of where we're going, what we need to do to get there. Lo'alitem, you didn't go up because lo'avitem, you didn't want. Do we want? I know you do.

Tomorrow night, I hope each and every one of you, to some extent, if you can, will be somewhere to cry out and say, Eicha, how could it be? And to add the voices of this week, how could it be, how could it be? And then lift ourselves up on Sunday, marching, protesting our fear of heights. This is an illusion.

It's time to rise.