

Shabbat 03 09 18 Sermon

This is what mine looks like. I'll show you mine, you show me yours, okay? This is what mine looks like. What is that, everybody? What is that? What am I doing? That's my mirror face. What do you mean? Everybody's got a mirror face. Come on, who doesn't have a mirror face? You know what I'm talking about, a mirror face? You know the one that, well, when you get married or you have a partner or whatever it is, you guys look at the mirror, you're like, all of a sudden something shifts just as you look in the mirror. It's like... You know, it's kind of a little thing you do. It's like, you know, pull the cheeks in slightly, you kind of, your body, you might have a mirror body. Something happens under the gaze of a mirror. I want to talk about mirrors tonight a little bit, just for the next couple of minutes.

Talking about mirrors and another thing that's kind of amazing, at least in my house, I had this conversation with Bear this morning where he said, you know, Amba, because we were talking about taking showers and baths, that kind of thing that we, when you're an adult, you like to do. And he said, did you know, Amba, the human body, it cleans itself. I mean, that was news to me. I mean, I know that the human body, of course, has many systems of detox and cleanse, self-cleansing. That was really a remarkable selling point. I want to talk about a strange connection between washing and mirrors that I've spoken about many times before in the shul. And I want to talk about it again tonight.

But I want to begin at least by acknowledging that, you know, somehow, by some strange happenstance, I don't know if anybody worked on this, but the Academy Awards always wind up on the Shabbat before or on it or after of the golden calf in the story. No joke. So, of course, last Shabbat was the golden calf and Sunday night was the Oscars. And when I think of mirrors, when I think of images, when I think of posturing, when I think of imitating and I think of acting and authenticity and all of those constellation of ideas, what does it mean to be real? What does it mean to be authentic? What does it mean to be projected as an image or to be seen as an image? What does it mean to stand in as an archetype or a representation of something larger than yourself? I

It's remarkable how attuned we were this year to the absence of equity or the presence of it, the absence or the presence of some kind of equality or the importance of images for the formation of our society. It's not just optics. It's not just about getting someone on a stage to make sure there's some kind of gender balance, but it's about the images that are projected writ large on the screen of our society, of our culture, of our country, the mimetic resonance of what we see and don't see and how that impacts us. That's all up for me. And it's up for me as a human being because it's always up for us as humans, right? From the moment we are children, we are actors, right? To be in some way, shape or form a student, a disciple, it is to be able to mirror and imitate.

I get to watch it happening with my little guy, the guy that you saw reaching for the Torah. He's reaching for that Torah because he sees it. It's kind of what gets modeled to him. And so he fakes it until he makes it. He wears it in the language of what Rabbi Jessica spoke about two weeks ago so beautifully, the garments that we wear. In Kabbalah, we say that you wear something. You try it on. Think about mirrors and trying things on. We try stuff on

all the time. We just take a look and say, oh, no, that's not it. There you go. Okay, there you go. And you put the face on.

Jacques Lacan, of course, is not lost on us. Jacques Lacan, the great psychoanalyst, wrote that from the moment that mirrors were created in our society, we see, interestingly enough, I mean, we've always had mirrors, but the mirror as we understand the mirror, not a shiny object, but the mirror as we understand a mirror today coincided with the birth of individualism to some degree, the importance of the word *je*. In French, we have a *Paris*, right? *Je*, I. Say, I am. Somewhat co-arising with Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*, I think, therefore, I am, the mirror said, I am visible to myself. I have a self, which, of course, was a technology that existed before and it became prominent, but it was only reflecting a deeper psycho-dynamic truth, which is that we are not monads.

We are not born, and our self is not *sui generis*. We find ourselves in the mirroring gaze of a loving other. The first mirrors that we ever look into are the mirrors of the loving eyes of a caregiver. The first time we saw ourselves was when someone saw ourself, and we said, oh, I am seen, therefore I am. I am seen, therefore I am. The relationship between mirrors and the work of being a human being, and the relationship between images and the work of being a human being, find a strange place in tomorrow morning's Torah reading, the Torah reading that will finish the book of Exodus.

We will read tomorrow morning something that appeared earlier in the Torah, when the Torah was describing the parts of the tabernacle, the portable sanctuary in the desert. We come to a strange moment tomorrow morning where we are going to be implementing the tabernacle. The tabernacle had already been, instructions had been given, there were lists and checklists, and then there was interruption with a golden statue, and then two weeks, two more portions tomorrow morning.

And in the two more portions we are actually going to implement the tabernacle, we are going to build the tabernacle. Tomorrow morning we are going to build the *Mishkan*. And the Torah is going to tell us that all kinds of metals and other objects are going to be brought to the tabernacle, and it is going to say something remarkable about something called a washing basin, or a laver, a laver, which as I was growing up as a kid in an Orthodox world, we washed our hands a lot. We actually had a Yiddish term for the thing you washed in the morning. Anybody know what it was? In the morning you washed? *Nagelwasser*. You washed your hands early in the morning, you had a little cup of water inside a basin, before you walked a couple of cubits you would wash your hands to get the evening off your hands.

So there is a laver in the *Mishkan*, in the tabernacle, and the Torah will tell us that although all of the articles in the tabernacle are going to be brought by the collective, the copper that will be for this laver, we have a kind of baptismal font over here, but it is not exactly it, but the laver itself will not be brought from the collective funds, from the collective community, but rather will be brought by a very unique, specific group of people, and the copper that they will bring is not just ordinary copper, it is not going to use the word for copper in Hebrew. Listen to this verse, chapter 38, verse 8. *Vayas et ha-kiyor nechoshet*. And he made the laver of brass, *ve'et kano nechoshet*, and the foot of the laver was also made of brass.

Where did this brass come from, you ask? Did you all ask that? Where did the brass come from, say it, where did the brass come from? Oh, they're going to tell you. Be mar'ot ha-tzov'ot, asher tzav'u. Every year I read this and I'm like, what? The Targum, I don't even know what to say, what this means. With the mar'ot, of the tzov'ot, the traditional, I mean I guess the English here, the new English version of this is, these were made, the brass came from the looking glasses, the looking glasses, what's that? A mirror, thank you, a mirror of the women assembling. Now the word women doesn't appear here, it doesn't say the women, it says ha-tzov'ot, the assembling ones, but the feminine here points to some, to women, I guess women are assembling, asher tzav'u, it's a very strange, it is the looking glasses, the mirrors of the women who assembled, assembling at the opening of the gate of meeting. The Targum here, the Jerusalem Aramaic translation says here, be'chezyat nishayat tz'ni'ata, te'hav'an tz'ni'a, it is through the looking glasses of modest women, who were tza'nur, were essentially modest.

What is this? So if you read this in the Torah, you kind of like gloss over it, if you're a kid growing up in school, you think, oh, okay, I don't know what that means. It's just these looking glasses that women brought, I guess they had mirrors in the desert, and why would the labor be connected to the women's, why must the labor, which is the washing basin that the priests would use, they'd wash their hands and their feet before they would walk in to do their holy service, why must they wash their hands and feet through a particular vessel that was created by mirrors? Is everybody with me on that? So I'm going to give you what I think. Maybe over the weekend you'll think of your own interpretation.

I threw it at a couple of people today, and it's always yummy. So one of the most classic interpretations brought by Rashi, by the great medieval exegete, is, you know who these women were? Let me tell you a story about these amazing women. These women, wow, amazing women. These women, during a time when their husbands had given up on redemption, during a time when their husbands had despaired of hope, these women, with their marot, with their mirrors, engaged in an erotic arousal of their husbands' yearning for redemption through their own hope, through their own hope. They used the mirrors in which they would play, I'm not going to get into the particulars of this midrashic, this rabbinic story, but they somehow used the mirrors to get into a vanity game with their husbands to arouse them, to get them excited so that they would have sex and they would make a child, and that those children, right, they made, they are responsible for the word svaot, they are assembling, but they are responsible for the multitudes, the word svaot is multitudes of Jews who left Egypt. It's all because of those women who used the mirrors as a tool of redemption.

That's what Rashi says, which by the way, just think about this for a moment, how remarkable it is that in the tabernacle, which is like the synagogue, there is a symbol of eros. You wash your hands at the basin of eros, of redemption. Think about that for a moment. Another reading would be this. This is a classic reading. The mirrors are an expression of the piety of the women who put away their vanity for the sake of the greater good. They sacrificed their mirrors, Ebenezer and others, for the sake of this beautiful tabernacle. Also lovely. I want to offer a different interpretation tonight.

It speaks to the question that we began with about images and about what would it be like to be a priest and to walk over to a laver in which as you wash your hands and feet you see

your own face. What would it be like as a human being who started life intersubjectively with the mother, like in a relationship, to look at the moment, the liminal space, as Ebenezer Orenberg writes, the art installation at the liminal space between the holy and the outside. There is a washing basin, a device meant to strip away a layer and to get to what's underneath, to cleanse us and to give us a new beginning.

What would it be like if into that mirror, into those frames, as a Kohen, a priest, you would see the image of these women? You would look at it and you would remember, let's say in Rashi's read, that these women were responsible for redeeming the entirety of the Jewish people. That as you look at their copper, as you look into it and saw your own face as a representative of the Jewish people, you were inspired by these incredible heroes and heroines that lifted you up. Their projected image and the residue of their memory embedded in that copper would lift you to places that you didn't imagine you could go or hold you to that place that you imagined you can't go.

The power of an image of someone who does something before you to lift you up. Or as Rav Nachman of Breslev says, in every dance that we dance of joy, there is a sad person who stands on the outside of the circle and the joyous individual says, come join the circle. Come be lifted up. Come be lifted up by the image of someone who came before. That's why we cover the mirrors in the house of a mourner. Not because of vanity, but because the image in the mirror is the image of the loved one you've lost.

We have the custom of taking pictures of loved ones and going to the homes of Shiva and say, don't cover the mirrors, put the picture of the person you are remembering on the mirror and when you look in the mirror, you will see them. You will see that woman, that man, that person, that friend, that brother, that sister, that daughter, that son and you will be lifted up.

What a far cry from role models that find the lowest common denominator in which to project their image into the world and how amazing it is to find heroines and heroes who stand up and say, let me inspire you. Let me lift you up as you wash your hands to enter your holy space, to begin your day, to go to sleep at night. When Shabbat ended last week, I received, on the weekend of a movie extravaganza, I received a small edited movie from Romemu's services. Some of you might have been here last Shabbat morning, but a surprise was happening and unbeknownst to myself, a little bit to Rabbi Jessica, but it was kind of a little bit of a surprise.

There was in our midst an amazing leader in our community. Some of you might know her, Allegra Kochman. And that morning, Shabbat morning, Allegra, unbeknownst to me, but had been practicing because she wanted to lift Torah She wanted to lift Torah. Something that isn't usually done by women because of the weight of the Torah. But Allegra said, no, it's actually, you can figure it out and I'll get some coaching. She had a Chagvah coach. We have those here. We have Chagvah coaches. You can get a Chagvah private, you know. It's like hundreds, but with a, you can do it like this. It's all in the wrists. And amazing. Allegra came up and, and she did it. And I got a beautifully edited video by our board chair. Scott sent it to us and sent it around.

Romemu was going to post it up. And we were watching it with my wife and my wife started to cry. And I looked over and I said, what's going on? I don't think you even know this. She said, until Allegra lifted it, I didn't think that I would ever want to lift the Torah. Until we see the image of the Mar'ot Tzovot, the assemblage of the women who are there to wash the hands of the servants to say, don't forget. Your role here is to redeem the people. Your role here is to be an image projected onto them of what they could become. We covered the mirrors because you are to remember the one, not yourself, your own projected image. But we look into these copper images and we see the women and the heroines who stepped over and became a model to be in the world.

How about washing your hands with that kind of water? What does that look like in the world? For a young man, a young woman, for a young rabbi, what does it look like to see those kinds of this is the way you do it, this is the way we figure it out, this is it, this is the projected image. And you know what else you see when you see a movie? Or a projected image? You also get to see things about yourself that you didn't know. You get to see how much bigger you are than you usually feel. You get to remember, as you look into that laver, hey, don't forget you're a Kohen. You're a priest. You're a big man. You can stand in the darkest hour. You have it in you, Mr. Kohen, Mrs. Kohen. You're going to step in.

That's the story of mirrors and images to me this year. In a world that has gone crazy with images and the proliferation of images, some of them broken, some of them shattered, some of them fragmented, confusing role models, people on the left, people on the right, lifting people up, not lifting up others, not bringing people down who should be brought down. What a powerful image this Shabbat. An image of cleansing our hands and our feet at the laver, at the basin, at the sink that is the mirror of the assemblage. It's like an army of mirrors. I want to imagine a world where those kinds of moments happen more and more frequently, where people are inspired by the image of someone who steps inside of something that hasn't been done before and shows the way and says, hey, come on this way.

I want to be inspired by the image of parents who have gone before and though we mourn them, we lift them up for who they were and how they lived. I want to be inspired by the images of leaders who show us that we are much greater than we imagine ourselves to be, much bigger than the smallness that we sometimes carry. That if we could see ourselves often as God would see us or those women who saved thousands of souls in Egypt, we would find ourselves inspired to become heroes ourselves. We would ourselves become heroes. We shoot way too low most of the time.

So there I was on the camera and watching myself here and getting all like, oh my goodness, wow, that's quite an image. I didn't know that I look like that from that angle and that I sound like that. That's embarrassing and I didn't even get a chance to go. I just, you know, God, Adonai, svetay tiftach, ufi yagit toratecha.

If I could remember once this week, once this Shabbat, that at any given moment in my heart, my life and in your hearts, in your life, we are standing before your kiur, your kano, that sense of being able to wash ourselves clean of any surface that is covering a depth. Because mirrors can often, they don't disclose depth, they just give us surfaces but there is some way to look into a mirror and see the depth of the ancestors who came before us and

it's not just our image but it's an image that has images and images embedded within it and to be able to bring that forward and to invite that, to invite that, to live up to that, to be mirrors for each other that inspire, that don't judge and cut down but lift up and refine. That's the kind of mar'ot sva'ot, that's an army of mirrors, of reflections, of who we could be together in our highest place.

I want to bless each and everyone to do the Shabbat as we close the book of Exodus, of leaving. We leave Exodus every day in the morning and in the night. Zech l'yitziv, it's fine, we leave it in the morning and in the night and we need to take those women with us. We need to take their message and their faces and their inspiration and their challenge and their demand of us to live up to that higher image, that higher tselem that each of us has. We can do it. God, give us the strength to remember that as often as possible and to leave that place of narrowness to a place of expansion. Tachat ha'tapuach o'raticha Arouse us from our slumber to remember the power of an image and a reflection to bring out what is best in all of us for your name and let us say amen.

Please rise.