

Jonathan Roos, Kol Nidre Sermon 5781

The Torah of Perseverance

What a way to start the new year. Justice Ginsburg's death, literally on the cusp of 5781, cast a pall not only over services that night but augured poorly for the new year. Coming so close on the heels of John Lewis' passing in July, you would be forgiven for thinking perhaps that God was trying to send a message before opening up the books for this Yom HaDin, this Day of Judgement. But trying to read current events for signs of God's will are notoriously fraught – it's not our theology and it's a dangerous hubris. That's not to say we can't learn from events. There is, in fact, a powerful and important High Holy Day message to absorb from the lives of both figures. Ruth Bader Ginsburg and John Lewis had perseverance in common. Both showed a profound ability to withstand and overcome great hardships for the long run not just to survive but to succeed and even more, to change the world.

Perseverance is, perhaps, the character trait we need to cultivate more than anything else for 5781. Like many of you, I have experienced some of the worst moments of my life this past year. While life under the pandemic has been full of surprises, perhaps its greatest twist is its constant ability to take you to the place where things cannot get any worse... and to make them worse. And this is not going away soon, so we'll need more than quarantines, Netflix, and outdoor heat lamps to get through this. We are going to need some more perseverance.

Perseverance is one of the core themes of the entire Torah. It is portrayed in the arc of the life of Moses. In Moses we see a gradual transformation from a person who will not even enter the struggle let alone persevere it - to one who, at the end of his life – even though he's still wandering in the desert with a million plus complainers - begs God for more. In Exodus 3, he stands before the burning bush and tells God, "Who Am I that I should go? Send anyone else just don't send me." Forty years later, in Deuteronomy chapter 4, Moses exudes confidence in God's deliverance and sees only a bright and long future for the Hebrews. I'm going to share three things that are critical

to the transformation of Moses and his perseverance. Each of which applies to us, here, today.

First, it's about how he sees himself. Biblical scholar Avivah Zornberg (in an episode of the podcast ON BEING¹) focuses on the claim Moses makes at the burning bush about his inability to speak well. He tells God he can't take the job because he stutters. Actually what he says is that he has "kaved peh" which literally seems to mean "heavy mouth." This word, "Kaved," is the same word the Torah uses to describe why Pharaoh does not heed the suffering or hear the cries of the enslaved Israelites. His heart, becomes "kaved." Dr. Zornberg teaches that "heavy" is not a good translation here. Kaved, in the case of Pharaoh means "resistant, impervious, closed off." It's no coincidence that Moses uses the same word to describe himself. Moses does not, it turns out, have a stutter or speaking challenge. His problem – at first – is that he sees himself as kaved – "impervious." In Dr. Zornberg's reading, Exodus is not just a story of oppression by a cruel Pharaoh. It is about Moses and by extension the entire people who need to drop their kaved-ness, their own closed off-ness, it is about the need of a people to arouse within themselves the capacity to be redeemed." Moses, at the burning bush, represents unwillingness to open oneself up to an alternative reality.

When John Lewis recalled Selma 1965, he said he was never afraid. He never saw himself as anything less than able to withstand the opposition and finish the march and to bring voting rights to Black people in the South. And, he did that. It happened. I know about Shelby and its after effects - all the injustices around voting. I also know that's only one of many ways you see the world falling apart. But remember this: at 25, John Lewis was beaten within an inch of his life, he checked himself out of the hospital, finished the march and moved the needle on voting rights. And then he kept going for fifty plus more years of marching and fighting and making "good trouble."

We need to change how we see ourselves. Shake it off. Pick yourselves up. I hear your cries and I feel your pain. I wake to the same news and I talk to you regularly. You are facing significant trials. These may well be the hardest days of your entire life.

¹ <https://onbeing.org/programs/avivah-zornberg-the-transformation-of-pharaoh-moses-and-god/>

But if you think we are on the precipice of something terrible. If you want to do something to honor their legacy and if you want to know where Torah guides you in 5781 it's off your couch and out of your gloom. It's time to persevere.

One of the first things God does for Moses at the Burning bush is to send Aaron, brother of Moses, to be his partner. And it's only with Aaron that Moses agrees to answer God's call, go to Pharaoh, and persevere through all Pharaoh's denials and the plagues. One of the greatest examples from the life of Moses though is in Exodus 17, when the Israelites fought Amalek in battle. Moses stationed himself on a lookout over the battlefield with his hands and staff raised. Whenever his hands would tire and fall, the Israelites would start to lose. Aaron and an otherwise obscure character named Hur, literally hold up Moses arms and they shlep over a giant rock for him to sit on when his strength fades. We need that too. In the course of the pandemic, when my wife, Elizabeth was in the midst of chemotherapy treatments and we could not leave the house much, friend after friend cooked meals, ran errands, and on occasion just came sit and keep company. And in comparison, we had it pretty easy. As your rabbi, I am well aware that many of you have been through far worse in the past months.

Anyone who's followed the story of Justice Ginsburg's life knows about the incredible partnership she had with her husband Martin. His support for her and hers for him were critical to each of their successes. They not only overcame the discrimination against women of that time. They fought and survived cancer and its ravages in their life. As this pandemic lingers, we can become more isolated from each other and from things are important to us. But, we don't make it through life's hardest trials without at least one person by our side to share the burden, advise us, and lighten our spirits. Commit yourself to keeping company of your family and friends. Be smart, socially distant when together, masks on when needed, and wash hands but commit to maintaining your relationships. Keep people close to you and be available to them as the support they need.

3. Start with the WHY? Simon Sinak

Finally, we need to start with “Why.” I know, that’s Simon Sinak’s line from his book of the same name and not the Torah’s – at least not in those exact worlds – but shifting your focus from what to why is the same shift that Moses makes over the course of his life. There is a lot of “what” in the Torah and much of it expressed in Moses’ voice: the 613 commandments most notably is a lot of “what” needs to be done. But at every critical moment, especially in Deuteronomy, do we hear God or Moses spend much time on the WHAT. Moses doesn’t talk about his accomplishments, he talks about the divine mission and the responsibility to stay engaged in life. At critical moments, like Moses needs to plead with God not to destroy the Israelites, Moses does not list all the mitzvot and ask who will do those if the Israelites are gone? Moses consistently returns to the divine promise made in Genesis 12 to Abraham and Sarah and their descendants to be a blessing to all humanity, and Moses makes that mission his own. He goes from denying God’s call to lead the people to teaching them that they are an “am segulah” and “mamlechat kohanim,” special partners with God to carry a message of love and dignity and human worth across generations. THAT sense of purpose carries Moses from the burning bush to the summit of mount Pisgah.

There is likely a long road ahead for us. Winter is coming and maybe, God forbid, that long predicted second wave, and the flu, and the election, and the kids still need to do Zoom school while you Zoom work, and keep up with groceries and the laundry, and the economy, and the suffering of people at the border and in detention, and the stress of the coming election, and the constant reminder that things can get worse... And they can get better. But through it all, we each have a choice: will we catalog the injustices? the obstacles? Re-tell all the things we cannot do – that were taken from us? Or will we find within ourselves the courage and stamina to shed tears and then wipe them away so we can be committed to living life well and doing the best we can with purpose.

We must see ourselves as more worthy and more open to our own deliverance. We have tasted bitterness and we know we can still laugh. The Psalmists wrote: weeping may tarry for the night but joy comes in the morning. That is not a prediction but a reflection. It’s not a statement of hope it’s a recollection of what was. Turn to your friends and family and receive and give the love and support that keeps your arms

elevated long, long into the battle like Moses. And remember that life is best lived with purpose. We are not here to simply get through the day to check things off our to do lists. We are written and sealed in the Book of Life to live, to love, and to make the world better. I'm here for you. The whole clergy and staff team is here for you. Your family and friends – at Sinai and around the world – are here for you. RBG didn't keep a closet full of dissent collars because she never expected to wear them. John Lewis didn't remain as the conscience of the Senate into his old age because his colleagues were doing such a great and upstanding job. It won't be easy but we have got to prepare ourselves for more twists ahead, winter is coming and after that the spring. We have inner strength, we have other, and we have purpose. We can do this together. Gamar tov.