Vivi, yashar koach, you've done a wonderful job this morning and you have taught us critically important Torah for this time in history. You've asked us to think about what makes a great leader and great followers. You've described a great leader as someone who is curious and patient, someone who brings people along into the big picture, and is open to being challenged by their followers. You've suggested that this dynamic is what leads toward a future we all might want to be part of.

When you began writing this beautiful teaching, I doubt that any of us knew just how prescient you'd be in exploring these questions, but you have artfully brought to this moment in time a 3,000 year old conversation.

This Torah portion has a great deal to offer us as we consider where we are in this moment and what it looks like, Vivi, to grumble against our leaders, when we're feeling so overwhelmed and maybe aren't sure how to find our voice. So, through the lens of parshat Beshalach, I want to talk about that a little bit - where we are now, how we might navigate this moment, and maybe even how to find our deepest and holiest grumbles.

So first, where are we in this Torah portion? We've been slaves in Mitzrayim, Ancient Egypt, for some hundreds of years and God, now wanting us to be free, sends Moses to tell Pharaoh to let us go. Ten plagues later and we're now fleeing from Pharaoh, heading toward what we hope is freedom. As we cross the borders of that land, we suddenly find ourselves in unknown territory. God warns Moses that Pharaoh will change his mind and give chase and say gleefully:

נְבֻכִים הֵם בָּאָרֶץ סָגַר עֲלֵיהֶם הַמִּדְבָּר
The people are astray in the land, the wilderness is closing in on them.

So this word that Pharaoh uses to describe us is: *nevuchim,* translated here as "astray." But commentators have a lot to say about what this word means. Ibn Ezra says it means we were entangled in the land. He says: "they are like a person who cannot find anyone to advise him and does not know where to go or what to do." Rashbam says *nevuchim* means "confused." Rashi says it means we were "shut up and sunk deep."

I'd suggest that "*nevuchim*" is a solid descriptor for how the past three weeks have felt. Just the sheer quantity of things we've tried to pay attention to has left us in a fog of confusion or despair or overwhelm. With the release of endless Executive Orders, reports of unelected individuals breaking into buildings and computer systems, ominous firings, wiping websites of climate data, orders to cancel Holocaust Remembrance Day and Black History Month programming, threats to freeze all federal money, the dismantling of our foreign aid for the poorest people in the world, immigrants arriving at Guantanamo Bay, attacks on refugees and asylum seekers and transgender folks, an inhumane proposal to transfer Palestinians out of Gaza, threatening to send US citizens to a jail in El Salvador, it is hard to know where to look first or next. And that's just a fraction of what's happened.

So yes, perhaps some of us are feeling *nevuchim*. Confused, afraid, angry, dizzy, lost, overwhelmed, feeling like the wilderness is closing in on us. And we don't know quite what to do. And we don't really know where to go. If this is where you are, let's take a breath for a moment and just acknowledge that we're not alone in that, and we don't have to stay here.

In Beshalach, our people didn't stay there long, in this state of *nevuchim*. So how did they break free? Because we know that in this story, they do get free. And we sing Mi Chamochah every day in our Jewish liturgy to remind us that they did.

So here's the scene: they make their way to the water's edge. And there's a huge intimidating sea in front of them. And they are afraid. But Moses turns skyward and says to them - God will do battle for you today, hush up and watch. And God says to Moses: *Mah titzak eilai?* Why are you crying out to Me - tell the people to go forward!

Now this doesn't make sense on the face of it, because the people can't go forward - again, because of the giant body of water. So the commentator, Or Hachaim, explains something very important for us to understand. He says that when God says: "why are you crying out to *Me*," God is telling Moses that the people are crying out to the wrong aspect of God. They were crying out to the God of *Din*, of Judgment, when they needed to be crying out to the God of *Rachamim*, of Compassion. God's merciful aspect. That because the people had become so accustomed to praying to idols in Mitzrayim, that they only knew God through punishment. And they only knew *gods* that were empty stone idols, pieces of rock or wood that didn't care who they were or how they acted or how they treated others. But now, to find their way to freedom, they needed to learn to see and count on a God who would care very much about their actions. They would have to learn how to call on a God of Mercy, through their own acts of mercy.

And that is the moment *vayisa'u*, that the people were able to step forward and get unstuck. That was the path from being *nevuchim* to being free - it went through mercy.

And I wonder what that might mean for us or how this might guide us right now while we're looking for a way out of this fog, out of this paralysis of overwhelm. Because yes, there are massive actions being taken every day that may make us feel powerless and may even represent bigger things at stake. That's true. But might we follow the path of our ancestors and focus first on acts of mercy and compassion and love, and how might that change us?

I want to tell you about something CBE did last Monday night. Among the many Executive Orders issued, one of them declared that there are only two genders and demanded that within 90 days hospitals stop providing gender affirming care to people younger than 19. Now in Jewish tradition, we are taught that every single human being is created B'tzelem Elohim, in the image of God, a reflection of the Divine. In fact, as we learn that fundamental truth, we read: And God created humankind in the divine image, creating the human in the image of God—creating "them," (the first human) male and female. And the Talmud, asking what this means, suggests that the first human being is created male and female, which the rabbis name as "androgunus," a person who is neither just male or just female, but is, as they describe:

בְּרִיָה בִּפְנֵי עַצְמָה הוּא
“he is a created being of her own.”

Jewish tradition recognizes complexity as well as beauty in gender and resolves still that every human being is created in the image of God, and belongs here.

So back to Monday night. As it happens, even though hospitals had 90 days to change their policies - the CEO of NYU Langone determined that it would be one of the only hospitals in the country to eagerly begin implementing the policies, cancelling the appointments of an unknown number of trans young people. So Monday night, there was a rally outside of NYU Langone, organized in about a day, easily topping one thousand people. The speakers were NYU Langone medical staff, elected officials, trans adults, a rabbi, and very brave trans kids. It was made known that the NYU team of doctors and nurses deliver excellent gender affirming care and many or most are not behind this decision. The doctor who spoke talked about these appointments that were cancelled as ones that deliver standard care - as determined by scientists, and ultimately were chosen by parents, young people, and their doctors. He called it life saving healthcare in that we know well that trans kids who don’t have access to gender affirming care, if they want it, have a much higher rate of suicide and attempted suicide. And he said it was illegal to deny it, a sentiment shared by Attorney General Tish James earlier in the day.

So here we were, Monday night, in the cold for two hours, shoulder to shoulder with other New Yorkers - Jews, Christians, Muslims, Black, brown, and white. Old and young. Gay and straight and trans. Leaders and followers - having found our holy grumbles. This is putting our children’s lives at risk. And children are not political footballs. And they can’t always fight for themselves and they should never have to fight by themselves. And the night was electric with love. And the energy coursed through us and we felt courage begin to flow and compassion was made manifest through words, chants, strategy, and laughter. And the fog began to lift.

Because we had remembered that we never agreed to hand over our humanity or our joy or our hope. We never agreed to allow for the pummeling of the most vulnerable. We never agreed to hand over a vision of the world across the sea.

If we just focus on the things that make us feel powerless and afraid, human nature is to feel incapacitated and deflated, to doom scroll until all we are is doom scrolls. But to act, to engage in acts of mercy and love and compassion, is to force the waters to part, to feel fierce again, to remember that we are animated by love - for our neighbor, for the stranger, for one another.

And it reminds us that we are in fact innately powerful beings in community and it allows us to breathe, and redefine this moment, on our terms, as humanity taking care of humanity. And at least for those two hours, we were not so *nevuchim*. So that perhaps we might stand upright enough in our shared dignity to ask the question, “okay, what’s next?”

There are so many ways to engage in acts of compassion, and so many in need of being seen and stood with. Inside this community and outside. We have members who are federal workers at risk of losing their jobs, we have beautiful trans kids who never asked to be a target, we have folks with disabilities whose diversity we embrace, and we have friends and family who are immigrants of all kinds. If you are feeling alone or afraid, our clergy team wants you to know you can come talk to any of us, that our *chesed* team wants to shower you with care, and that this community is walking with you.

Or maybe you're feeling called to acts of Rachamim, of mercy, with our neighbors or with strangers. And you want to sign up with our Refugee Task Force to support the newest New Yorkers. Or be part of a Know Your Rights Training that we'll do to help us stand with refugees and asylum seekers, who are feeling a lot more vulnerable this month. I feel sure there will be a next step to protect our trans kids, too. There are so many ways to pass through the compassion threshold from being *nevuchim,* lost, to being *b'nei chorin*, free. Some we'll do together, some you might discover on your own. What I want to suggest is that we find the things that give us life, and that weave our lives together with one another and help us remember who we are.

May we embody your teaching this morning, Vivi, to be leaders who are open and curious and inclusive, and to be followers who know how to grumble in ways that can be heard, in ways that can turn into action, in ways that are holy. And as we make our way through the wilderness of this moment in history, may God, and we, have mercy.

Shabbat shalom.