

Yashar Koach Henry and Oliver. You have both offered beautiful Torah this morning, identifying within the multiple and diverse narratives of parshat B'ha'alot'cha two separate teachings on seemingly disconnected verses and yet they also weave together in a way that teaches us something bigger than the sum of its parts, which is really quite magical.

Henry, you did such a beautiful job unpacking this multi-part ritual that the Levites go through in order to ready themselves to act on behalf of the people. In the shaving, the water, and the laying on of hands, you found a people trying to prepare themselves for a new role, for leadership, through purification of the body and the mind. And you saw in our own rituals, this one here today, and so many of other ways that Jewish tradition provides us with song, prayer, life transitions, holiday rituals like seder, and more, to not just talk about our experiences, but to embody them in a way that changes us - from one thing to another thing, one life stage to another, one frame of mind, to a state of becoming, with ritual affording us a readiness that is otherwise hard to attain.

And Oliver, your discussion of Moses's engagement with God at such a vulnerable moment for him is so powerful. You understood Moses' experience of leading all by himself, his overwhelm, and how he courageously asked God to give him some helpers, a team of leaders, instead of just one. And I appreciate particularly how you land on the idea that Moses seemed to understand well - that we are not diminished because we are part of a team, part of a community - in fact, we are, and can do, and can survive, much more when we are part of something bigger than ourselves. And it gives us, as you taught, a way to even better find our own specific role in leadership.

AND, somehow, even though you, Henry, talked about the ancient transformational rituals of the Levites, and you Oliver, talked about the benefits of working as a team - somehow you have managed, with your teachings, to give us a coordinated way forward in this difficult time we are living through.

To get to that, I want to introduce a third narrative from parshat B'ha'alot'cha. Near the end of this parsha, we find a frustrated and somewhat gossipy Aaron and Miriam. Now, you might recall that Aaron and Miriam are Moses' brother and sister. We find them being a little bitter about their brother, Moses - about his leadership and his special relationship with God. They say - uh, aren't we also special? And oh my God, did you see that woman he married? So they are being unkind, jealous, and judgey. Okay.

But God overhears them, and this biblical God is very displeased. And so God strikes Miriam with tzara'at, a skin disease which, in this case, seems quite serious and painful. Aaron, seeing this, begs Moses please to help her, to ask God to take this punishment away.

And Moses loves Miriam, and so he cries out to God: El na r'fa na la! Please God, please heal her. Five words - one of them, being said twice. So four words. El NA, r'far NA la. El - is God. na- we read as please. R'fa, means heal. Na again is a second please. And Lah is her.

Torah is a lot of things, but rarely is it emotionally fervent. But here it is. And the commentators pick up on this.

Chizkuni says: the first NA is meant to indicate that this is a request. But the second NA reveals Moses' deep distress and the urgency of this moment. He is so worried about his sister. He sees she is in pain. He sees she has been pushed out of the community. He sees that she is afraid. And he doesn't have the power to help her by himself. And he is undone. So he calls out from the depths of his distress and asks God to please, please, heal her.

For the last five months, and for the last year and a half, and for much longer before then of course, we've been living in some kind of an "El na r'fa na la" state of being. We have seen people we love suffering, hurting, our neighbors pushed out of community, and afraid, and we have not always known what to do or how to help or how to lead. It's been overwhelming at times. We have felt urgency. We have felt undone. And from our distress, we have cried out time and again - el na r'fa na la, or lo, or lahem - please God may she find healing, please may he be okay, please let them be made less afraid on this night.

Since October 7th, we've cried out this way for the hostages still held in Gaza, literally in a place where no one **here** can heal their pain and so we've cried out for their release and just that they're okay. We've been crying out for innocent civilians, including children, in Gaza who feel so far away and so vulnerable. We've cried out for the people of Ukraine, for trans kids, for immigrants - especially as we watch these raids unfolding in Los Angeles and across the country, for Jews facing shocking violent antisemitism, for Muslim neighbors facing Islamophobia. Even just for people we care about - our kids who maybe are struggling, or our parents who are aging, or our loved ones who are sick - el na r'fa na la, who have we not prayed for with words like these in recent months?!

And for the past day, of course, we have been fervently praying for all of the people in Israel, in bomb shelters, the ones who have no bomb shelters to go to, every innocent life in the region, those injured and those terrified. This is what the human heart does, it cries out with urgency even for the things we don't have the power to stop or change or heal. Even for the things we don't **yet** know how to make better. And Moses captured it with his most raw and simple of prayers.

But we don't have the same God-tools, the way Moses could call on a biblical God to intercede, so we must use human-tools. If God will act, then it's going to have to be through us. So how do we get ready to act on the fervency, the urgency, the heartbreak that we feel? Well, we turn to your teachings, a one-two punch of spiritual and communal ready-making.

Your teachings are the two fundamental things that we **can** do when we are crying out in our distress as Moses did for Miriam. First we use ritual to turn inward to steady and ready ourselves, to find our center, our *teivah*, our inner refuge, if you were listening during my Yom Kippur sermon from last fall. And then we turn outward to find our team. To find that we are part of something much bigger than ourselves.

These are the two tools - inner transformative ritual and then joining with others - that have helped us these many months and will continue to help us navigate the waters of our distress.

So, first the ritual that helps us build inner readiness: it can come in the form of song or prayer or water or movement or foods or smells or fire or Torah study or being in nature, really anything that deliberately grounds us in what we are trying to become. If you have never chosen to engage with a ritual before - there is literally no better time than the present.

Henry, you shared some of the rituals that do this for you, help you become more ready for leadership. What might ready any of us in these hard times? Maybe when we smell the spices at Havdalah, the ritual that ends Shabbat, the scent might remind us to keep our senses heightened through the week, reminding us to look for the sweetness and the beauty when things are unraveling. Or when we fall asleep at night, we might sing to ourselves or to our child, the Sh'ma, to remind ourselves with ancient words that we are all in fact, ECHAD, one and oneness, even if the harshness of the world tries to trick us into thinking we're irreparably fractured. Or we can gather here on Shabbat each week so that when despair creeps in, we might remember that we each have the capacity to create joy or quiet or love. And so many more.

And the second - team. When we are in isolation, we start spinning. This week, I had the sacred opportunity to sit with our breast cancer support Small Group and I saw how their being together in their journeys was transformational, too. Being in community or part of a team - it doesn't change a diagnosis, it doesn't remove pain, or magically correct an injustice, but to be with others on a shared journey when things are most difficult and confusing, most anxiety producing - it lights the path. We make strategy together, we're smarter together, we're stronger together, we're more effective and resilient together. So consider: who are your people, who is your team, that helps you feel part of something bigger, that helps you to lead the way you feel called to lead? And is now, today even, a good day to reach out to one of them, like Moses reached to the elders?

This all is some of why we'll be going to the march for democracy together this afternoon and to the Brooklyn Pride parade later tonight - both as ritual and as team. Our sign-making and our chanting and our glitter wearing and our joy - these are transformative inner rituals that connect us to our core and give us the vehicle by which to become. And our standing shoulder to shoulder, to see that none of us are alone, this is the power of Moses telling God - I'm gonna need a team to do this well.

At difficult times, we need a plan in order to keep on going. And Oliver and Henry, this morning, through the lens of ancient Torah and your own wisdom, you have reminded us of the key elements of our plan. We are so proud of you, how you have shown up here today, what you have taught, and we can't wait to see how you will lead, inwardly and outwardly, as you help us all find our ways forward. Yashar koach and shabbat shalom.