

## Sermon Eikev

Rabbi Rachel Simmons, August 2022

The first part of this sermon is group participation!

*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.* From?

...Charles Dickens, great. Let's try another one.

*It was a bright, cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen.* ...yep, 1984!

*"To be born again," sang Gibreel Farishta tumbling from the heavens, 'first you have to die.'"*

Anyone recognize it? Salman Rushdie.

*In a hole in the ground, there lived a hobbit.* Yeah, that one kinda gives itself away.

Or maybe: *Call me Ishmael.* Yep, Moby Dick.

And then one from my childhood:

*"Where's Papa going with that axe?"* Charlotte's Web!

Isn't that just one of the best feelings, remembering old books you've read again and again? Or hearing that in this room,

there are other people who have similarly spent hours and hours with the same words on the same pages, building similar worlds that shared experience....

As a child, books were my first and best friends. Growing up, there was always an abundance of reading material in our house (especially because we didn't have a TV), and there was nothing I enjoyed more than escaping into a good novel.

It's no surprise that when I discovered that my mother would purchase these large, shiny things called "magazines", I was hooked. Magazines felt like dessert, like a special treat. Like magic, they would show up in our living room: Good Housekeeping and Better Homes & Gardens and Reader's Digest and Oprah, with their glossy pages and full-color, glamorous pictures, advertisements for perfumes and watches and medicines for illnesses that I as a little kid had absolutely no concept of. I could spend hours poring through those pages, and as I began to be able read, I also began to look forward to their content.

The best part of the magazines, though, was something that my comfortable novels couldn't offer: in addition to whatever their main articles were, most of the magazines also contained a series of recurrent, interactive columns about things like personal finance, self-care, and romantic relationships.

Readers would write in with their questions, and experts would respond with advice, and guidance, and occasionally, some gentle admonishments.

Being a kid, I didn't know much about any of these topics, but they fascinated me. I didn't have a bank account to my name, much less a retirement plan, but I read about these things called "401Ks" and "Roth IRAs" and knew that one day, it would be important for me to have these mystical things. I didn't know much about self-care as a kid, either, but I loved reading advice to adults much older than me telling them to have fun, and breathe, and stretch, and get enough sleep. Child-me loved to have fun, and it felt like I was being told a secret about grown-ups when I learned that they didn't know how to play or be silly, and had to be told to do these things.

Nothing fascinated me more than the relationship columns, though. As an elementary schooler I had zero romantic experiences of my own, of course, other than what I saw in the occasional Disney movie, which, for the record, did NOT offer the most realistic model of love. But, I was lucky to have parents who were affectionate with one another and modeled communication and teamwork, both when life was good and when life was more complicated. I knew, vaguely, that some of my friends had parents who were divorced, but it hadn't occurred to me what a wide and deep variety of questions, issues, and challenges a long-term partnership might entail.

The relationship columns in my mother's magazines changed all that. They opened my eyes. In those advice columns, I read about all kinds of relationship ups and downs, presented matter-of-factly week after week.

I learned that there were couples who stayed married for fifty or sixty or SEVENTY years (which to a child still in the single-digits felt like more than an eternity) and these couples had all kinds of secrets for staying together: some said, never go to

bed angry. Some said, sleep is important, it's OK to go to bed angry. Some said, make each other laugh. Some said, always hold hands.

I loved these successful love stories, these happily-ever-afters.

But I also loved the stories of couples who didn't have such an easy go of it, of couples who struggled, and made mistakes, and wrestled as they went through life together. I learned what I didn't see in the movies: that there are healthy and unhealthy ways to disagree, that there are healthy and unhealthy ways to separate and to divorce, that abuse can come in all kinds of forms and disguises, and that so can love, and that, sometimes, good and caring people just grow apart. I learned that the presence of a grave mistake does not necessarily preclude the survival of a relationship. I learned the difference between "I" statements and "You" statements. I learned that even if one person did everything right, it still takes two to tango.

I learned that when you argue, in a relationship, you don't have to have the goal of you winning and the other person losing.

Instead, you can make the conscious choice to argue with the goal of understanding each other and being understood.

That one, especially as a little kid who loved to bicker with her two older siblings, made no sense to me at the time.

Perhaps most importantly, though, I learned that in order to communicate effectively, it was important to identify your needs and to ask for them. It seems so simple—but I learned from the advice columnists in my mother's magazines that this was a common stressor in relationships, I learned from the advice columnists in my mother's magazines, was that people often expected their partners to know what they wanted, to be able to discern their needs, without ever actually saying what those needs were.

And then, even though they never actually said what they wanted or needed, they got upset when their partner didn't deliver! They got hurt because their partner couldn't read their mind!

Does this sound familiar to anyone?

It seems so simple, and yet, I'd be willing to bet that everyone here, whether in a romantic or familial or friend or professional relationship, has been on one, if not both, sides of exactly this situation at some point in your life.

Now, as a little kid, I had no trouble asking for what I wanted. I had no trouble demanding what I wanted! I was NOT what you would call a demure, shy, or passive child. If anything, I was the epitome of assertiveness and bossiness and confidence—you may remember a certain sermon I gave here in February about me jumping into the deep end before I learned how to swim.

But then, I got older.

And it's hard to know exactly when it happened, but somewhere along the way, it got harder to say what I wanted. Perhaps because I better understood what was at stake, it got harder to be vulnerable.

It got harder to say what I needed.

Sometimes, it got harder to even KNOW what I needed.

And that precocious, confident, communicative little girl grew up into a woman who finally understood why those magazines had to coach grown-ups on the basics of interpersonal communication.

Because now I struggled to communicate, too. I struggled to say what I needed. I struggled to ask for what I wanted.

Fast forward a couple decades:

But bit by bit, I learned. Bit by bit, I came to understand that real, honest love, and real, honest communication are a result of intention, and communication, and making the choice, again and again, to be vulnerable.

I came to understand, and then to deeply, deeply appreciate, how much of a gift it is when friends, and family, and loved ones just come out and say what it is they truly want or need.

In fact, I came to see it as a key mark of a healthy relationship, be it a romantic or a platonic or a professional one, to be able to say what we want, to be able to ask for what we need, without playing games or beating around the bush.



Not to order—not to demand—but just to ask.

Which brings me to this week's parasha.

Every year when we get to Devarim, to the final book of our Torah, there's a part of me that's kind of had it up to HERE with all of the wandering in the desert and all of the commandments. There's a part of me that can't wait for the emotional release of the holidays, for the shofar, for Elul, for the dancing and joy of Simchat Torah, and then I want the mystical wonderment that comes with Bereishit, with Genesis. I want to watch the universe and the world begin again.

And if I'm being honest, there's a part of me that is ready to see God as the Creator of the Universe again, as this immense source of metaphysical Wonder.....

Instead of seeing God as the Maker of Laws, the Giver of Commandments, the One Who Tells Us What To Do All of the Time.

I struggle with this sometimes, because while I believe that God is immense and powerful and beautiful beyond comprehension,

I also don't want to see God as ONLY a top-down ruler who informs us of the way things will be, and we simply do it-- with no room for discussion or exploration.

I want MORE out of my connection with *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*. I don't just want an obligation: I want a relationship.

And as we have established, a healthy relationship requires communication. A healthy relationship takes two to tango. A healthy relationship requires that we express what we want and then make ourselves vulnerably by asking for what we need.

And this is the week, y'all.

This is the week where instead of just commanding, we see God's more intimate side; we see God asking, requesting, and acknowledging the choice humans have in how we interact with the Divine.

In Deuteronomy 10:12 **וַעֲתָהּ יִשְׂרָאֵל מָה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ שֶׁאֵל מַעֲמֹךָ כִּי**  
we read: **אִם-לִירְאָה אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לָלֶכֶת בְּכָל-דִּרְכוֹ וּלְאַהֲבָה אוֹתוֹ**  
**וְלַעֲבֹד אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל-לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ:**

“And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you? To stand in awe of the Lord your god, to walk in God’s ways, to love God, and to serve the lord your God with all of your heart and all of your soul. “

מָה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ שֹׂאֵל מֵעַמּוֹ? What does the Lord your God ASK of you?

This word שֹׂאֵל, to ask, means something different than [tziva], to be commanded. After all of the wandering, all of the arguing, all of the directions and statutes and lists, here at the end of our journey, God is asking—not just ordering—God is asking us not just to follow those directions and commandments, but also to open our hearts. To love. To serve with our hearts, not just with our brains.

With these words-- מָה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ שֹׂאֵל מֵעַמּוֹ—God invites us into true Relationship with the Divine, beyond a simple top-down narrative. God knows that we, as humans, have a choice about whether to open ourselves to true love, to bare our souls. Commandments only go so far. At some point, the beauty of being human is that *we have a choice*, and God is

asking us, saying—please. This is what I want. This is what I need. In our relationship, this is what you can do, for me. You can show me love.

When we show up in this space, with each other, every Shabbat and every holiday, we live that choice: we can either limit ourselves, and only focus on the letter of the Law, on fulfilling our obligations. That's good! That's a start. But we also have an opportunity to go farther. In addition to those Laws and rituals, we can open ourselves to a deeper, personal, emotional relationship with God and with Judaism.

This is what God asks of us in this week's parasha. To make that choice, again and again, to take the risk that intimacy requires.

As we prepare to enter into the month of Elul, heading into the High Holidays, we will begin to say the Psalm for the Season of Repentance, Psalm 27, daily. This is the psalm that includes one line that mirrors our parasha today, and mirrors that verb, שאל, when God asks us for our love. Psalm 27 reads:

אַחַת | שָׁאַלְתִּי מֵאֵת־יְהוָה אֹתָהּ אֲבִקֵּשׁ

“There is one thing I would request of God, one thing that I ask for.”

That’s right—we get to make requests, too. If the Psalmist, in their wisdom, has the courage to be vulnerable and ask for what they need, then we get to ask for what we need, too. We may not get it, mind you—but we get to ask.

This might seem a little out of the normal rhythm of things, but it actually isn’t—if we read through the words of our daily Amidah, some of it is amazement, some of it is thanks, but a lot of it is asking—asking God to help rebuild Jerusalem, asking God to keep us strong, to restore just and rightful rulers. When we sing *Oseh Shalom*, that is also a request—may the One who brings peace bring peace to us. Not only is there nothing wrong with asking for what we want, it’s a requirement for being in relationship.

President John F. Kennedy’s inaugural address was an instant classic, speaking to all Americans as he exhorted us to “ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what YOU can do for your country.”

For Judaism, though, and for anyone who wants to be in true relationship with God, we need to tweak this quote a little bit. For us, it has to be “Ask what you can do for your religion. And, ask what your religion can do for you.”

This isn't a business transaction. To ask, to say what we want and what we need, is not a sign of selfishness. It is a sign of love. It is a sign of wanting to grow and nurture a healthy relationship.

מָה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ שָׁאַל מִעַמּוֹ --- At the end of the day, God asks us for our love.

אַחַת | שְׁאַלְתִּי מֵאֵת־יְהוָה אוֹתָהּ אֲבִקֵּשׁ

--What do you ask and hope and long for in return?

Shabbat shalom.