

Shabbat 06 30 17 sermon Rabbi David Ingber

No better way, I think, to prepare for Independence Day and for the celebration of July 4th than to take a little trip with your son alone down to Washington, D.C., which I did Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, and this week. I'll never forget the trip. I hope Ber won't either. We saw so many different things together, and we're able to really take in the power, the pageantry, the potency of D.C., our nation's capital. One thing, though, that will stand out for us, two things for sure, but one, without a doubt, the one that I'll come back to in a moment is the Vietnam Memorial. But first, I'll start with something a little bit lighter.

We went to the International Museum of Spying. So we assumed identity is one of the great things about walking into that museum is that you get your own... You're like your alias, because you're going to be a spy, and we'll ask you at the end if you remembered all of your details. I think my name was Billy Cunningham. I'm not sure. Or Billy Henderson. I don't remember exactly. I would have been outed. But one of the things about the museum that's fascinating about espionage is disguises. They had a whole area about disguises, you know, the different ways that people would disguise themselves, thinking that they would, you know, whether it was their actual physical appearance they disguised with various ways, or it was the signals that they gave to the drop areas and the things that we would normally not notice that were actually used, and precisely for that reason, to convey a message. All of this was happening. And what was really profound, what was really, really profound, of course, about a museum devoted to espionage is the relationship between surfaces and depth, between what appears to be one thing and then turns out to be something else entirely. Deception and lies and faces that you thought was one face but really turned out to be another face, the whole museum is devoted to the, I guess, the art and the science of being deceitful. And living in a world where mirrors turn out to be shattered or in some way, shape or form, what you imagined was before you was really something other than what it was.

So if we could just have the kids, I'm just gonna say something a little bit on the serious side tonight. So I kind of want our little beautiful people to be with their parents. Because we're starting off with spying and espionage, but it takes a turn because I don't know about you, but I really have a hard time with the notion that a surface is not what it appears to be. I have a very, very difficult time, I think a lot of us do, with that sense that you can't really trust what's before you. And that something that you had hoped was gonna be really one thing becomes another thing. And where, I kind of wonder if this is your experience too, I don't know about you all, but for me, I wonder when I push on something if what I'm pushing on will give way to something else entirely. And I don't know if what I'm pushing on is worth pushing on. If something that I want to reveal is worth revealing. I want to know, I don't know about you, but I kind of like to know what's behind the mask. And I imagine that for you too, something about surfaces can be very, very confusing and untrustworthy on a certain level. We want to trust in a surface, but if there's no depth there, we wind up being incredibly disappointed.

Or if there's a depth there that wasn't the depth that was on the surface, then we feel deceived. And so this whole thing with surfaces and depth was so up for me. I was thinking about it and meditating, ruminating on it. And I think there's an insight into the relationship

between surfaces and depth in our Parsha. Tomorrow morning around the world, we will be invited into the depth Parsha, the Parsha that is the most densely populated with images and individuals who die. Miriam will die tomorrow morning in the Torah, so will her brother Aaron. And of course, the Torah portion tomorrow morning will begin, chapter 19 of the book of Numbers, will begin with Zof Chukat HaTorah. The Parsha's name, Chukat HaTorah, this is the law or the statute of the Torah is one chapter long with what is called the purification from death. The very Parsha that has the most densely, intensely packed death Parsha will begin as if it's purifying itself.

The Parsha will begin with its own crazy, ancient, shamanistic ritual for purifying anyone who's come into contact with death. Anyone who's come into contact with death, we know it as the red heifer, the Parah Adumah Timimah, the pure red heifer that had no hairs that were black and had never been worked. It's the red heifer story, everybody. You've heard the red heifer story. We find a red heifer, there are only nine of them. Jewish tradition says there are only nine red heifers. We're awaiting the 10th red heifer. When the Messiah will come, that red heifer will show up and purify all of us from contact with death.

There's an industry devoted to finding and locating that 10th heifer. There are people who think they have genetically modified to find the red heifer. It made it into the New York Times Magazine years ago. Because if the red heifer shows up, Messiah can't be far away. The red heifer is pure. It's never worked a day in its life. We could joke about that for a while, but there's a red heifer. It's never worked a day in its life. לֹא אֱלֹהִים אֵלֶיהָ אוּ. It is burned and the ash of the red heifer mixed together with other red substances and then water is poured on and poof, eye of newt, you will sprinkle it on people and they will be purified of death. And this entire chapter begins with these three words, one of which is so odd and anomalous that much Torah has been written about it, but we're going to find about surfaces and depths in that one word, get it? זֹאת חֻקַּת הַתּוֹרָה This is the statute of the Torah.

Thus begins the shamanistic ritual of the parduma of the red heifer. I'm wearing a wool tallit, so if you are falling asleep right now, wake up, wake up. This is wool, I guarantee you it is hot. And I am schvitzing like the Rebbe right now. זֹאת חֻקַּת הַתּוֹרָה Everybody say it together with Gary, all the way across the room, through Joe, through everybody. זֹאת, everybody, זֹאת. One more time, זֹאת חֻקַּת. That's a hard one, חֻקַּת. Again, חֻקַּת הַתּוֹרָה. חֻקַּת is this is the rule or the statute, the word חֻק of the Torah. This is the only place in Torah where those three words are used precisely for this death ritual. So זֹאת makes sense. I'm telling you, this is the death ritual. But the word חֻק means law. And it's this word that the Rabbis harp on. חֻק means for the Rabbis, a law that has no meaning. חֻק לִי הִרְעֵר. It says in the Rabbis, in Chazal, it says, חֻק, I have given you a statute, don't ask me what it means.

The פרָה אֲדוּמָה, the red heifer, becomes emblematic of a divine authority who gives law that sometimes defies our rational ability to understand it. Here it is, here's a red heifer, it doesn't make any sense. כִּכָּה, that's the way God wants it. For all of those who are trying to understand תַּעֲמִי מִצְוֹת, the reasons and the rationale behind the mitzvot, the Rabbis have a field day with this word חֻק. It means it's a law, all laws in the Torah that have no rational, reducible understanding are called חֻקִּים. But the word חֻק itself is much more mysterious than just a law that is given without a meaning. The word חֻק from the word חֻקָּה, חֻקָּה means to engrave. The word in our tradition for a law, a חֻק is something that is engraved.

Engraved. And isn't it interesting that the word engraved is used when it comes to death, to engrave. In English, to engrave meant to put something in a grave, to place something in a hole. חוקת התורה, this is the engraving of Torah means according to the mystical masters of our tradition, this is the immutable, unchangeable rule of Torah. Life must have depth.

The opposite of the holy, one friend of mine once said, is not the impure or the unholy, but the superficial. The opposite of the holy is not the unholy or the impure, but that which lacks depth, surfaces with nothing behind it. Words on a page that have no third dimension, no depth to them. Letters, maybe 140 characters or so that are sent out into the ether, that have nothing to them. A human life is defined, says the Jewish mystical tradition, by its חקיקה, by its depth, by its engraving. How much of life have you lived? And how much has life taken from you? Because the difference says, the Rebbe from the Chabad, the difference between writing something on a piece of paper and between engraving is that the paper doesn't have to give you something. You just put your letters in a two-dimensional way on top of the paper, but something that is engraved is something that has dug into you and it said, give me something that you have, give me from you. We are asked, זאת חוקת התורה, each and every one of us, no matter whom we are, are going to die.

There's no getting out of your life, said Woody Allen. We know that. And between the moment of our birth and the moment of our death, we are asked, חוק נתן ולא יעבור, God says, will you be engraved, חרוט על הלוחות, to be engraved into the stone? Will you let life make its groove on you? Will you give of your life? Will you cultivate death? Or will you live on surfaces and just keep skimming them? A human being who skates along on the top of things.

I think the most memorable moment for me was when I was walking with Rabbi Jessica's father, Dr. Meyer, who came to visit us and brought us to the Vietnam Memorial. And I was walking with Ber and we were looking and Ber, my seven-year-old, was looking up at Maya Lin's incredible piece and feeling this sense of overwhelm that she tried to create for us as the names began to pile up. And the walls of the Vietnam Memorial, if you've ever been there, it begins to overwhelm you.

And as you look carefully, Ber said to me, said, Abba, are all of those names people who died? And I said, yeah, Bear, all those are names of people. He said, wow, a lot of names. I said, yeah. And then he said, there are people behind the names, right? And as I came closer to the wall, you could see that each and every name had been engraved. It wasn't just an imprint of a two-dimensional experience. It was something profoundly powerful. There was some depth behind those names. There was a hook. There was a hakika. There was a story.

Maybe this is the mystery of this week's parasha. Maybe this is the mystery of beginning the parasha in which we will say goodbye to Miriam and to Aaron by saying there is a mystery called death, and we will not understand it no matter how long we live, no matter how many times we read books that justify death. No theodicy is worth being spoken. There is no rational explanation for what this thing is called death. But in between, there is a hakika.

This thing works off of us, and with each and every moment, we realize I have an opportunity to deepen, to deepen, to be engraved, to live a life about which someone will tell a story about a Miriam and her well, and a matriarch who lived her life so that her two

daughters could become matriarchs themselves and be gifts to the world through her depth, the depth of Lily, to the depth of so many others who come along and say it's not about the surface.

I want to lead a holy life. I want to ask what it is that will deepen my life. So you and me, each and every one of us, when we leave here tonight, tomorrow, wherever you go, you go to dinner, you go out, you go to a meditation retreat, you go to a yoga studio, you have a Shabbat dinner, I want to ask you where in your life you're satisfied with surfaces and where can you deepen? Where in my life can I allow life to ask me, can I go a little bit deeper with you? Can I engrave a little bit more of love into your heart? I want to ask myself as I skim the surface of different parts of my life, where is it that I might go down a little bit deeper and bring up more riches? That's what the Torah wants us to know about death.

Plummet deaths, you'll never understand it, but give ourselves over to the impermanence of life and make a decision at a given moment to go a little bit deeper and go a little bit with courage into a place where a story is much richer than a surface and a facelift.

May the God of depths bless each and every one of us tonight. May the God of depths invite us into depths. May the one who holds up the story that transcends time invite us into transcending it as well. And may each and every one of us in our own way find little hints of the espionage called the divine wherever we go, saying here I am, here I am, pull off my mask, take off my disguise, find me hidden here in the depths. May it be so. And we say amen.

Please rise.