

Shabbat 07 20 18 Sermon

It's rare that I get out. Three little boys, not very likely that you'll find my wife and I out on a Tuesday night or Wednesday night, Thursday night, Saturday night, Sunday night. We're never out, never. We go out once a year. I'm kidding. We go out, I mean, come on, we don't go out frequently, but we did go out this weekend.

We saw something amazing happen, and I've been thinking a lot about it and how it relates to my life and to this Shabbat in particular and to me and you and, you know, the kind of thing I think about, we all think about. We went to see a magic show. How many people have seen a magic show recently? Or in general? Great.

Well, we went to see a show called Six Impossible Things. How many people have seen Six Impossible Things? Amazing show downtown. A friend of ours found it. It's incredible. If you have a chance to see it, it's going to be continued throughout the, like, through the end of the year. It's one of these up-close, meaning 20 people, a magic show that is literally, I mean, the things that he did, Josh J., impossible.

And what's remarkable about a magic show, I'm sure many of you have been or have thought about it, is essentially we are being entertained by allowing somebody, if they're good enough, to lie to us, and we know they're lying. And it's good entertainment if the person is good enough to make us believe what we absolutely know is not true. But the litmus test of the good magician is, were they able to pull it off even though everyone walking in knows that there's no way that it's true? A bad magician is honest. Magicians don't tell you how they manipulate. They don't tell you how they distort. And they work, more often than not, with a very simple formula, which is they distract you.

In the terminology of the rabbis who were not big fans of magic, our ancient wisdom tradition looked down on magic. The magicians of Egypt, the sorcerers, to be a magician in the tradition is not a good career. And the phrase that the rabbis coined to describe what a magician does, like there's no word in Hebrew or Rabbinic Hebrew for a magician, even what I just quoted, *chartumei mitzrayim*, are more like sorcerers, but the phenomena of a magician appears in the literature of the rabbis, and they create, they coin a phrase.

Anybody know what that phrase is for a magician in the Rabbinic literature? Someone who is *ochez enayim*, *achizat enayim*, means that they hold your eyes. *Achizat enayim*, an eye holder. Someone who grabs your vision and directs it where they want to, with sleight of hand, with misdirection, with story, with words, with something so that you are not aware of something else. You're focusing on one news cycle, and before you know it, there's a whole other news cycle. You're focusing on one crazy, impossible, I never would have imagined this could be what is real. Is it real? And the next thing you know, you're off to another news cycle, because they have your eyes. The eyes have it. *Achizat enayim*, they grab your eyes, and they direct them where they want you to, and so distraction, and staying focused. And you think you can follow it, and it's a remarkable conversation to have about reality, perception, illusion, what's true, how do we know it.

And one of the most remarkable things to realize is that not only do magicians grab your eyes, but they recognize that your eyes and my eyes are the first defense we have against

seeing what we don't want to see. Simon and Garfunkel might have said that a man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest, but we might as well have said that we see what we want to see, and we disregard the rest. We see enough, and then we come to conclusions, that's the way it works. We work with probabilities in the world, we don't look with certainties, and magicians know that, and so they grab our eyes. And when we don't want to see, we close. And not only do we close in the present moment, but we know as infants, the ocular band of the eyes, the eyes, the ocular band, this whole region of the body is the first and only defense an infant has before it is verbal, before it can say no, before it can say that's too much. We close our eyes so that we don't see what we don't want to see, or what we can't see, or what we shouldn't see, or what overwhelms us. We use our eyes strategically. We use our eyes strategically.

One of the most powerful ways that we become present is when we refuse to look away. When we refuse to close the eyes, when we refuse to not see what it is that is right before us, or what has been before us. Seeing what's there is in every religious and spiritual tradition, that's what it means to wake up. It's to not split off, to not fly away, to not wish it otherwise, to not believe in magic. But to see what's here.

So it should not surprise me, or you, or anyone here in the room, that this Shabbat, the Shabbat that is always the Shabbat before the saddest day of the Jewish calendar, the Shabbat that always precedes the ninth day of the month of Av, which is the day of calamity, the day of destruction, the day of 9-11 Jewish style, is Tisha B'Av, literally ninth of Av, is 9-11, a day in which our tradition lumped every imaginable painful event, occurrence, historical, ahistorical, the destruction of the two temples, the Beit Rishon, the Beit Sheini, pogroms, World War I, you name it.

It became the holding for our communal grief, the day in which we honor rupture, breakage, chaos, asymmetry, a lack of coherence, it's all in there. And so it should not surprise us that the Shabbat that immediately precedes that calamitous event every year for 2,000 years has a special name. It is called Shabbat Chazon, the Shabbat of vision, the Shabbat of sight, the vision of the great prophet who imagined and saw that destruction, that calamity.

It should not surprise us that in the book of Lamentations, which we will read tomorrow night, it says, A'ni, a'ni yarda mayim, my eyes, my eyes, my eyes. It's all about the eyes, the eyes that didn't believe that it could happen, the eyes that didn't trust that it would, the eyes that couldn't handle seeing what it had to see. And so it shouldn't surprise us either that tomorrow morning on that very Shabbat, in synagogues around the world, every single year, we not only have Shabbat Chazon, but we have the opening of the five books, the fifth book of the five books of Moshe.

Moses stood before the land that he would never see and spoke to a people who had never seen Mount Sinai, who had never seen their ancestors sinning. And he said, let me tell you something, you are going to enter into a land, a land that I will not see. But you, when you enter the land, you will have hardship. And over and over again, Moses says, do not be distracted. Re'ei, see clearly, look, don't look away, use your eyes, be real, be present, don't turn, don't turn after eyes that run in other directions, don't. Remember this lesson and how powerful it is for me and for you as Jews, as practitioners of Judaism, as those who are

part of this community and other communities, every single year on the Shabbat that we commemorate the loss of the gift of the land of Israel.

We read about one who could not enter into the land of Israel. As if to say to us that there are gifts that we lose when we don't see them clearly. There are gifts that we lose when we don't protect them properly. There are gifts that we lose when we don't appreciate them and we don't assess them in the fullness of what that gift is. Each and every year the Jewish calendar in its brilliance, in its absolute stunning wisdom, reminds each and every one of us that we all have gifts. And the greatest one is the ability to be present with the gifts that we have been given.

To be present with the pain that we have been, unfortunately or fortunately, bequeathed and to keep our eyes wide open. So what does that look like? It's as if the Torah is weaving together magical thinking and the dispelling of magical thinking and redemption. As if Moses were standing here today and saying, you want to know what a redeemed world will look like? Let me see your 20/20 vision. Let me see how it is that you work with the very impulse to close your eyes, to not see what is ugly, to not see what is painful, to not see, as if not seeing it will make it go away. And more cynically, Moses might be saying to us, not only as individuals and as a community, but as a country, as a nation, as a world, to keep our eyes focused, to not be fooled, to not be taken, to not be distracted. See our gifts, honor them, courageously keep our eyes open and don't be led astray by magicians, whose sole role is to entertain us and distract us as they play their show.

This book was written by a man who was murdered in the Holocaust. His name was Koloman Shapira. He was the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto, he was called, but he was before that known as the Rebbe of the children. He loved children. He was a genius of pedagogy and education. He was a mystic, he was a capitalist, he was a whole world. And this is the only book, this only record of someone who wrote Torah in the ghetto. It's known as Esh Kodesh, the Holy Fire. And the last entry, the last entry in 1942 is for Shabbat Chazon, this Shabbat.

And the Rebbe asks, why is it that there are so many Shabbatot where we read about visions of prophets, but not one of those prophets merited to have a Shabbat named for their vision? Shabbat of vision. Why is vision and the naming of a Shabbat of vision associated with the Shabbat before the great calamity? And this is what he writes. He writes, the meaning of this, Shabbat Chazon, is that this is the most difficult of all Shabbatot. Because not only do we read about a prophet who had a vision, but we read about a prophet who actually saw with his own eyes, the very things that he foretold would come to play, would come to be. He said, that to be able to have the courage to see the pain and yet not look away. That seeing itself becomes an instructive for redemption.

So that even though Shabbat Chazon is the most calamitous of the Shabbatot, it takes place right before the great and awesome destruction of all that was familiar to the Jews at that time. It's still held into the seeds of redemption because the prophet didn't look away. The prophet allowed himself the full force of the magnitude of pain that was present, and didn't close his eyes, didn't wish it away, didn't say, I wish a magician would come and take it away, but looked at it in its fullness, in its glaringness.

Some tablets would call this a circumcision of the eyes. The eyes without lids, looking directly at the sun of suffering and saying, here I am. No magic. Don't take my eyes, just keep them open. Man, I... So Rebbe, here we are. Look around. Look around at all these people here. This is not a Holocaust guilt sermon. This is just a wisdom master who saw the depths of it. Saw his own children and his wife taken. Saw people killed in front of his eyes, but he kept them open. Open.

There are so many things that are happening right now in my life, in your life, in our life, in the country's life, that we want to say, will somebody just make it go away? Would that they were that way? But it isn't. Wishful thinking, magical thinking. We human beings are those who walk and have the choice of closing our eyes or opening them. Closing our heart or opening it. Closing our hands or opening them. All we have to do is look around and see what it means to live in a world where you get away with not having to be truthful.

To live in a world where we can imagine that some children are going to be returned to their parents. But as far as we know, it's so easy to say, you know, it'll work itself out. But I think the Rebbe and the Prophet Isaiah and others would say, no, chazon, open your eyes. Keep it in front of you, walk with it there, present. So homework, it's Shabbat. Soul work.

You're going to go out to dinner tonight, you're going to go to friends, you're going to have a Shabbat meal, you're going to close eyes and sing songs and open eyes and hold hands. One question, what is it in my life that I don't want to see? That's a heavy thing. So maybe sort of like, what is one thing in my life that I don't want to see that I'm willing to tell you? One thing in my life that I don't want to see that I'm willing to share. One thing in my life that I'm not willing to see that I'm willing to feel. One thing in my life that I'm not willing to see that I am now able to acknowledge, to verbalize, to express. One thing.

I thought a lot about you Nadav this week. As I was preparing and thinking a lot about Achizat Einayim and you called me yesterday and said, I don't know if I can make it because I have an eye infection, right? It's true, right? I didn't make it up. You're not a prop, right?

Tomorrow night we'll gather at the Community Plaza home at 8 o'clock. And right before we begin reading Eicha, we will hold up a candle and we'll bring our fingernails to the candle and we'll say, Shabbat is over and the week begins. The Shabbat of Tisha B'Av, where Tisha B'Av fell on the same day as the Shabbat of Chazon, where the real day is tonight and tomorrow and that is identical to Chazon, is an invitation to eye repair. An invitation to find new lenses and to have the courage to keep our eyes open.

Please rise.