

Rabbi David Ingber's Kabbalat Shabbat Sermon | 8/7/26

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We've all done this, I think, a thousand times. You're in your closet, organizing your closet. People organize their closets.

A lot. Do people organize their closets a lot? Every now and then. Just, you know, refolding and organizing.

I was leafing through some area of my closet and this piece of paper fell out from between some shirts or something. Just landed on my closet floor. Dear Tooth Fairy, I lost my tooth.

Bye. From my youngest son, Orr. I immediately thought, OK, what's on the other side? And it was like the seventh page of a sermon that I gave a couple of months ago.

I remember when this was. I remember when his tooth fell out. I remember why he wrote the letter.

And there was something in his handwriting, I'm just looking at it right now, that carries all of the earnestness of a child addressing someone he believed might enter his room during the night. And I felt that familiar parental ache. The little boy that is preserved inside of those words because it was just that week, this week when I found it, he was already telling us his theory about why we told him that Tooth Fairy was a real thing and he knows that it isn't any longer.

The little boy that was preserved inside of these words. The knowledge that children grow up while we're busy making dinner and answering emails. I was moved too by the world that the letter came from, a world in which a tiny being might arrive in the darkness, take what had fallen away, and leave a gift in its place.

Magical thinking is beautiful for a child. For a little while we sustained the enchanted possibility that when something is lost, someone will come. And then this week, a friend called me and told me that she has to have an emergency surgery this Thursday.

Because just last week, after having had a regular mammogram, she was told that she had stage 1 cancer and that they had to operate. And you know there are phone calls like that where when you get off the phone, the furniture in the room looks, maybe it looks the same, but the room is completely a different room. You don't know where you are.

I found myself wanting a tooth fairy for her. I wanted someone to enter quietly into the night and take away the frightening thing and leave only a token behind. I wanted the scan to be wrong.

I wanted to bargain with her and with reality. And that's something that I know all of us do when we're scared. If I say the right Tfilah, the right prayer, if I find the right doctor, if I make the right

promise to God, perhaps reality will renegotiate its terms with us.

And I don't say that with contempt. I don't say that negotiation with judgment. I get it.

Sometimes magical thinking gives the psyche enough time to absorb what's just happened. Sometimes denial is a temporary shelter that we need. But eventually the doctor has to look at the scan.

Eventually the surgeon has to see what is there. Healing cannot begin by editing reality. It begins with a clear-eyed diagnosis that then produces an accurate prognosis.

And that's not only true in the hospital. All of us negotiate with reality in our marriages, in our institutions, and in our politics. We explain away what someone has said because we need them to remain the person we imagined them to be.

We forgive in our camp what we would call unforgivable in the other camp, because seeing clearly might cost us our coalition, our certainty, our belonging. And when we are most frightened, we begin yearning for a savior, someone charismatic enough to name the source of all our pain and tell us, you are innocent. The rot is entirely over there.

Remove those people, defeat that group, silence that enemy, and blessing will return. The false prophet's bargain is always seductive. Give me your fear and I will give you an enemy.

Give me your fear and I will give you an enemy. And into this very human longing the Torah speaks this week, this Parsha. It begins with instruction of verb re'eh, look, see, perceive, an ocular obligation.

See. Moshe says to the people in God's name, re'eh, see clearly, perceptually. I am placing before you today the blessing and the curse.

I place before you today that choice and that choice will depend on your perceptual accuracy. Not what you want to see, but will you see what's actually there. He doesn't begin the sentence, He didn't say, trust only, blessing lies ahead.

He doesn't say anything that is impossible to believe. He only says, see what is before you if you can see it. Possibility and peril.

And before you choose, you must learn to see which is which. And then only a few sukkim later, a couple of verses later, we have a moment in the Torah that's really remarkable. It's a strange warning that appears in this week's Torah portion and it's connected to seeing.

The Torah tells you that if you will have amongst you a prophet or a diviner, somebody who reads dreams, a sorcerer, someone who will come and give you a sign and a wonder, an oath, a mouth face, something, you know, I don't know, like Oz, the mentalist or something. Someone who

comes along and tells you, let's follow the other gods because after all, I'm a prophet and I can prove it to you. The Torah says, do not heed the words of that prophet.

Notice that the Torah doesn't say that the false prophet is always factually wrong. The Torah says that the false prophet might actually produce a real sign. Are you all getting this by the way? Because I know what happens when people sit down to listen to a rabbi at 740 on a Friday night.

Are you all awake? Should I check in in the next three minutes to see if I'm still holding your attention? You with me? I promise you. Seven more minutes. Can you hold that attention for seven minutes? Can you give me that? Notice that when the Torah tells us to be wary of a false prophet, it doesn't say the false prophet will be false.

It doesn't say that he's a false prophet because he's not really a prophet. He actually might be a prophet. He might actually produce a miracle.

He might actually wow you with his capacity to predict something or maybe super charismatic. Wow, this is a leader. Wow, we don't want one of those schmendricks that can't rouse the crowd.

We need them to rouse the crowd. And not only that, he's telling us that we can all have free meals and free apartments and free supermarkets. We have visions of ideals and utopias the likes of which you've never seen before.

No one else did it before but I, the great prophet, the great Oz, I will bring it about. And I produce a miracle. It's not even, by the Torah standards, it could be a real miracle.

I'll make the waters of the river go backwards. The story in the Talmud of a great rabbi who said, let heaven prove that I am right and brings raya, he brings proofs. If I'm right, let the carob tree bring forth carobs.

If I'm right, let the walls of the study hall incline towards each other. Miracles left and right and the rabbis say, no, no, no, no, no, no. No, no, no, no, lo bashamayim hi.

What's the big deal to make a miracle happen? In India and other eastern traditions, when you see a saint, they would say, ah, siddhis, siddhis are miracles in eastern religion. Somebody who can produce ash out of nowhere like Satya Sai Baba. Miracles, no big deal.

What is he telling you? The Torah wants to hear what he's telling you. What is he saying? The sign may work. The prophet may correctly identify a wound in society.

The prophet may fill an arena. The prophet's candidate may win. The prophet may even say some things that desperately need to be said into the space and they will still be false.

Why? Because the test of a prophet is not charisma, it isn't popularity or victory. The test is this, where does this voice lead you? What does it make you willing to excuse? What does it make

you willing to excuse? Whom does it teach you to blame? Our age has many gods, power, nation, race, ideology, grievance, and the intoxicating innocence of our own side's justice. The false prophet tells us that salvation requires no self-examination, only enemies.

And that's why the false prophet is the spiritual opposite of the work of tshuva, of the work of repentance and preparation for the high holidays that will begin in earnest this coming week with the beginning of the month of Elul, the month that precedes Rosh Hashanah. Tshuva, repentance, begins not by saying, whom can I blame? But it asks us, what is it mine to see? What is it mine to name? What is mine to repair? When Maimonides, the great scholar, talks about tshuva, he says there's a requirement, azivas hachet. You have to release the pattern that we've been holding on to, and then duvidui, confessing honestly what we've done.

There's no euphemism, no scapegoat. This is what happened, and this is what I did, and this is where I must begin again. But the demagogue hands us a clear target.

Tshuva hands us a mirror. The demagogue hands us a target, and tshuva hands us a mirror. The demagogue says, you would be whole if not for those people.

And tshuva says, you cannot become whole by refusing to see yourself clearly. Every political movement is vulnerable to the person who can turn legitimate pain into a theater of villains. The right in our country has Tucker Carlson.

Louis Farrakhan performed a related role in a very different political and historical setting at a time. Candace Owens on the right, and increasingly Hassan Piker performs this function in the progressive world. These men are not identical in ideology, history, or degree, but they play an analogous spiritual role.

Each one takes real wounds and organizes them around scapegoats, offering the narcotic pleasure of knowing who has ruined the world. Hassan Piker has said that someone who has ever exhibited positive feelings about the state of Israel should not be permitted to serve even as a local dog catcher. Notice that that's not a criticism of Netanyahu or his government.

It is not advocacy for Palestinian dignity. It would disqualify the overwhelming majority of American Jews from public life. And this week, when Bernie Sanders was challenged about Piker's place in the progressive political world after Abdel Asayed won his primary in Michigan, Sanders said, Piker belongs in my party.

If James Carville cannot accept that, then let him start his own. So I need to say honestly how that lands for a Jew like me. It feels like a tent being widened for the demagogues while Jews are pushed toward the flaps.

It feels like being spat upon and then being asked to call that rain. The coalition is bargaining with reality. Yes, the rhetoric is ugly.

Yes, most Jews hear the warning. But he is useful. He attracts young people.

He advocates our candidates. So let us forgive what we would never forgive from the other side. Let us forgive what we would never forgive from the other side.

But forgiveness without tshuva is not forgiveness. It's an exemption. Forgiveness without true tshuva is not forgiveness.

It's an exemption. We'll let you off the hook. Political movements grant exemptions to their prophets.

Conservatives excuse cruelty because the speaker fights the left. Progressives excuse contempt for Jewish peoplehood because the speaker champions social justice or Palestinians. And some Jews have false prophets they excuse because they promise to defend us even as they flatten every Palestinian or other into a threat and make every moral boundary a luxury.

No one is immune. I've been speaking about this for three years. No one is immune.

When people try to put me in a camp, I say, where are you going to put me? I don't want to be in the right. I don't want to be in the left. I don't want to be any place that isn't being honest about what is real.

I don't want to worship a false prophet. I'm not interested in being saved by you, Mr. Progressive, and you, Mrs. Conservative. I'm interested in sanity that comes from naming what is true.

That's tshuva. The point of tshuva is this. Tshuva interrupts the sentence just before we say, but my side is different.

Tshuva is that moment before we say, yeah, yeah, but my side is different. It asks me, it asks all of us, which hatred have I renamed realism because it makes me feel safer? Which cruelty have I overlooked because the person committing it protects something I love? Where have I wanted a savior so badly that I accepted a scapegoat as the price? We are quite literally in the equal and opposite reaction to the horrors of over a decade of right-wing populism, and it is happening as we speak. It's not as if what looks like the horizon point right now is another 10 years of right-wing populism or another 10 years of back to what we might call moderation and centrism, liberal democracy, liberal, let's say, liberal Zionism.

We're quite literally looking down the path of another decade, but this time on the other side of the pendulum, re'eh. And this week, Moshe says to the people, behold, I place before you blessing and curse. See clearly, honestly, courageously, not only what the other side refuses to see, see what your own side is asking you not to see.

And that, that, says our teaching is shuvah. And so, here we are. Don't only see the false prophet who threatens you, see also the one who flatters you.

My friend that was facing surgery this week doesn't need false reassurances, but she's not without hope because the surgery itself is hope. The doctors and the nurses are hope. The people who will bring food and sit in the waiting room with her and did and called her and sent messages and hold her fear without explaining it to her, they are also hope.

And so, that's not magical thinking. It's reality-based hope. It's hope with its eyes wide open.

And perhaps spiritual maturity is not the movement from enchantment to disenchantment. Maybe it's the movement from fantasy to wonder. From waiting for a magical savior to recognizing the ordinary acts through which salvation actually arrives.

The letter in my closet that fell out of my pants, that letter was addressed to an imaginary being. That being is not real. But the love surrounding it was.

There was no fairy that would enter my son Orzy's room, but there was a parent who forgot and then had to be reminded by the other parent, but anyway it happened anyway. There were no wings in the darkness. There were just ordinary human hands.

Someone read the letter and someone entered quietly and someone tried to teach a child that what falls away need not be only lost and that change can also leave a gift behind for us. The fairy was imaginary, but the love was not. Imagine a political culture in which we judge leaders not by how thrillingly they humiliate our enemies, but by whether they return responsibility to us.

Imagine movements capable of saying this person may help our cause, but the price of their contempt is too high a price. Imagine coalitions with doors wide enough for disagreement and boundaries strong enough to keep dehumanization outside. Fantasy says someone will come while you sleep.

The demagogue will tell you someone will save you if you hate the right people, but the Chuva voice will say, wake up, look clearly, release the story that makes you innocent and powerless. Begin with what is yours to repair. I want Orsi to have believed in the tooth fairy.

I'm glad that he once trusted that someone would come, but I also want him and all of us as we begin this journey to Rosh Hashanah in Yom Kippur to learn that there is a harder form of hope. Someone may not come to save us from reality, but we can come to one another inside it. We can tell the truth.

We can refuse to scapegoat or to be scapegoated. We can choose leaders without worshipping them, and we can look into the mirror without despair and at the world without illusion. See the blessing.

See the curse. See the prophetic, and then choose the kind of seeing that Chuva gives us and grounds us in and perhaps helps us to heal as we move forward. Please rise.

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