

Shabbat 05 10 19 Sermon

It's not uncommon for me or for maybe for some of you to believe in magic, right? I'm a kind of magical kind of guy. Magic comes in handy, especially during sporting events. And when we feel as though the world around us is responsive to us in some organic way, something passes us and we know that it's a symbol that we should take the job or not. We open up the book and there's a direct message from the U.S. Constitution. I don't know, I'm just thinking, anything, any book. Something speaks to us and we say, ah, there's a sign.

We live in a magical universe. And for many of us, there doesn't seem to be a problem with that, walking down the street and seeing a sign for an astrologer or a tarot reader, or maybe being on the phone till late in the evening with the future on the other end of the line.

Something fundamental in our tradition asks the question about magic and its relationship with reality, with the work of being in the world. Something in our tradition speaks very profoundly to the question of whether or not magic has a place in the holy life. Whether or not magic in its, let's say, less overtly problematic, more benign form, is an impediment to the holy. And that question is fundamental when one reads chapter 19 and 20 of the book of Leviticus, the third of the five books of Moshe, the part of the Torah known as Torah Kohanim, the Torah of the priests, in critical source theory, it's known as the Holiness Code.

How many people here knew that the Torah had a Holiness Code? A Da Vinci Code, maybe? But a Holiness Code. Named that way because of the words that begin chapter 19, Kiddushim to you, be holy, says the Torah. And then the Torah goes on to tell us about what a holy life consists of. Many of the things in here we don't do, but we should. Don't hate your brother in your heart. Don't be vengeful. Be honest in business. All kinds of fundamental moral and ethical principles about what it is to lead a holy life, a good life, an effective life, a life with fewer regrets, a life that is dedicated to justice and love. But what's amazing about the Torah is that you learn something about a piece of Torah not only by what is said in the Torah, but what is said as we begin. The framing. The beginning and the middle of the Holiness Code, it deals not with the moral life, obviously, but with magic.

The Torah begins a conversation about what it is to lead a good life in verse 26 of this most important piece of the Holiness Code, L'otokhlu aladam, l'otinachashu, l'otoninu. Torah tells us that one isn't to seek out soothsayers. We're also told that we're not to turn. Al tifnu, we're told. Al tifnu, do not turn to ghosts. Don't make inquiries. No seances. There goes all the fun right there, right? Houdini, come on, seances? Really? I can't just like have a little seance? None of that, you know, Holy Spirit guides, you know, past lives, future masters, none of that. Torah tells us, al tifnu, don't turn to the ovot and the yidanim, to these ghosts or these, right, familiar spirits. And then the Torah goes on to tell us again, as it closes out in chapter 20, the entirety of the Holiness Code ends with a verse that no one, no scholar, understands what it's doing here.

After all of this, holiness, holiness, holiness, right, do the right thing, honor your parents, be just. It ends with verse 27, v'ish oishah ki yeh b'hem ov o yidoni. It returns again to magic.

Don't run after ghosts. Don't be looking for communication from the other side. And so, the centrality of the holy life is limbed in the beginning, in the middle, and in the end with a warning, a prohibition against astrologers, against necromancy, against looking into the magic.

What's at the heart of this? And why should it matter to me and to you? So one looks simply at some of the rabbis and their understanding of this prohibition, it becomes clear that at the core of the holiness code, at the core of the holiness project is an obligation to turn, not towards those sources, those magical sources that appease our anxieties about the future, but to turn from anxiety and impotency towards faith. That at the heart of the project of what it is to be a holy human being is a fundamental reduction of all of it to some emunah, some faith. Now, I don't know about you, but if you hear the word faith and you imagine I mean faith in God as supernatural, God as out there, God as everything will be okay, I mean nothing of the sort.

In Buddhist terminology, when they speak of faith, they use the word saddhah, which means literally to place your heart upon something. Sharon Salzberg, a wonderful American Buddhist teacher, says that saddhah means to give our hearts over to, give our hearts over to or place our hearts upon something. Its meaning can vary a lot depending on what we put our heart upon or the quality with which we give our hearts over to. It sounds a lot like, **וַיִּהְיוּ דְּוָרֵימָאֵלָה אֶלְבָּבְךָ** Place these things on your heart, but what are we to place on our heart if faith means to place something on your heart? What does that look like?

So in our tradition, in the Jewish tradition, to have faith means many things. We can speak about faith as trust, a fundamental belief in and trust of your own heart, your own way. Faith can mean confidence in, having confidence in oneself, I have faith that I have the power to make it through.

Faith can mean that I can conjure up in moments of deep anxiety and not knowing when everything in me is wanting something to assuage my sense that things are not right, that I have the faith that I can wait until it unfolds. What would faith look like right now in the holiness project in our country? Would it be a fundamental faith that human beings like Kendrick Canstillo, and Riley Howell, the two courageous young men who sacrificed their own lives for others, might faith mean that we have faith that that is what is best in all of us, not what they fought against. Might that be faith? Might emunah or faith or sada, the things we place on our hearts this evening and this week, be about a fear that something horrible is coming and we can't imagine what it is, and yet we have faith in the present moment in our ability to find strength. Might that also be sadha? Might faith that begins and ends the holiness code be the kind of faith that you wake up in the morning with every single day saying, today is a gift, what will I do with it? Might faith be in this moment, checking in, even as I'm speaking, and noticing that it's effortless to find your breath.

So go ahead, take a moment everybody to find faith in your body. Close your eyes. Is the heart being faithful at this moment? And as the ears hear sounds, might there be trust that sounds happen without your having to make them happen? What is it in you at this moment that you might find that is rooted in trust and faith? And as you open your eyes and as you return to this moment, might it be possible for us to imagine that the work of the Torah is to turn us from faith in magic to the magic of faith? And might the work of the holiness project

be to instill in each and every one of us daily, weekly, monthly, as all manner of moments assail us, illness, health, unexpected vicissitudes and the ups and downs of living. Might the holiness code, even as it begins to tell us the direction that we must take, be telling us the context of what our heart should be placed upon? And munah, trust, faith. It's not going to be all good. That's magical thinking. That's not the magic of faith. The magic of faith is it might not be all good, but come what may, I have confidence that we'll be together in it, that we will make it through if we remember that at each and every one of us in our hearts, there is that place.

Of course, it's not lost on me that this week we moved in our Jewish architecture of time from Yom HaZikaron Memorial Day in Israel, as we do every year, we made the turn towards Yom HaTzima'ut. And as we remember this year, the 23,741 soldiers whose lives were the toll that Jewish self-determination demanded, or the 3,150 victims of terror, even as over 690 missiles rained themselves down again on the southern areas of Israel, we are reminded fundamentally that our people have forever begun a conversation about holiness and ended one with a belief that we turn not to the Ove and the Yidoni, not to those chroniclers, those oracles of the future, but to hope, to Tikva, to wake up each and every day and say, even so, as far as we have to go in this country to eradicate racism, we will make it because we will come together. And we will have the strength, as far as we have to go in this country to ensure that a woman's body is a woman's body is a woman's body and that the right to choose should forever be a part of what it is to be an American, we will still get there.

To be a holy people, whether as Jews or Americans or wherever we go, begins with faith and it, in the middle is faith. It's a faith sandwich. Come on. So the Torah turns us from faith and belief in magic, your rabbit's foot, your astrology, your tarot card, your lucky, to the magic of faith. Because in the end of the day, the holiness project wants to bring magic to each and every aspect of our lives, faith to each and every aspect of our lives. It won't be satisfied with holiness in a temple or in a church or in a synagogue, holiness in every walk of life.

So every little thing you do is magic. Magic. Magic. Every little thing you do. Magic, magic, magic, magic, magic, magic. Don't turn to magic. Lift up the magic of faith.

Please rise.