

Willpower
Yom Kippur Morning 5773
September 26, 2012

Somewhere towards the end of Book Five there comes a critical moment in the life of an adolescent wizard. Harry Potter has Bellatrix Lestrange at the wrong end of a wand; the dark witch who just dispatched his godfather is disarmed and helpless at his feet. The teenager attempts to use a forbidden spell against an adult, the Cruciatus Curse, and it doesn't work right. The reason, as explained to Harry – by Bellatrix in the book, by He Who Must Not Be Named in the movie -- is that when you cast a spell, "you've got to mean it!"

I think this comment captures something essential about the nature of what we call "magic." And it has something to teach us as well. Ultimately all the incantations and formulas, the waving wands and smoking potions are not about getting the forces of nature right. That would be... well, science. No, hidden behind the training and the precision, magic is about something else. It is about what Freud called "*die Allmacht des Gedankens*; the omnipotence of thought." Ultimately magic is the worship of the will. It is the belief that if you just *want* something badly enough, you can make it happen. No wonder... no wonder master witches or wizards in any fantasy series never need to move their lips, to vocalize out loud, to wave anything around: it's not about the wand and it's not even about the words. It really is about the triumph of the mind.

Of course mainstream monotheistic religions are opposed to magic. Think about it. To perform magic is to make the assertion that you can manipulate divinity, that you can reach beyond what a Power in the Universe plans, and make it do what you want instead. It's not about letting God change us, but about changing God's mind. It's not about dealing with slings and arrows, but about forcing fate and fortune.

But haven't you, haven't we all engaged in magical thinking, from time to time? Don't we all do this... sometimes still? Wasn't there ever something you wanted so much that deep in your heart, you just began bargaining. Get me this, let this happen, if this works out I'll... fill in the blank as to what you will start doing, or stop doing, as an offering on the altar of desire. It could be for you. It could be about a loved one. Selfish or selfless the process is the same: "Look, God, I know I'm not one of your... best customers. But just this once, show me how, do this now, just for her, just for me, let it be. Please!!"

Sometimes you can even see yourself moving the markers, trying to trick or outwit yourself: We know it isn't rational, we know it makes no sense, and we do it anyway. When the chips are down and the stakes are high, we'll just want more strongly, yearn more intensely, ask *really* nicely! As if we could make it happen, by the very force of desire.

Maybe there is the vestige of a primitive, an ancient impulse in all of us, no matter how modern we may think ourselves to be. But with thought and reflection, in quiet and calm – do we really believe it works this way? Do we

usually behave as if God is awake and aware, watching over us, weighing our deeds, ready to measure and assess, write and record, seal us for a particular fate, freeze us into a Master Plan other than our own? Or that, with enough effort, we can escape that fate, change the decree, alter the outcome? If only... if only we just want it enough?

My friends, it is Yom Kippur, so let's ask the hard question. Why are we here? Why do we come? Is it a matter of habit? Is it a question of social connections? Or can it still and yet and once again be for... anything more?

The imagery is terrifying. *B'rosh haShanah Yikateivun, u'v'yom Tzom Kippur Yachateimun... Mi Yichye, u'Mi Yamut*; on Rosh Hashanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed... who shall live, and who shall die?" The words imply that Rosh Hashanah is indeed a chance – and Yom Kippur is the last chance – to change God's mind.

But do we buy it? And what happens to prayer, purpose, our very presence here, my teacher Micha Goodman asked recently, when we don't believe that anymore?

Goodman began his response with a reminder that there are two tasks of this season, equally powerful, equally important. One task may seem foreign to us now, empty of its traditional meaning; the other one is more accessible, approachable, more compatible with who we understand ourselves to be. There is *tefillah* – prayer, desire, ritual. And there is *teshuva* – repentance,

deed, ethical action. The first may indeed attempt to change God; the success of the second, however, depends on changing ourselves. And if that can happen... when that works... it is powerful magic indeed.

In ancient days the two forms existed side by side, almost as if they were different world-views, competing paths to the same end. The first path was performed by the priests, in cultic ritual and public display. The second was given voice by the prophets.

The Torah reading we did *not* do this morning, the one we deliberately ducked, the traditional reading for the morning of Yom Kippur, replaced by the Reform movement with a different passage – is all about the ancient acts of expiation performed by the High Priest on behalf of the people on the Day of Atonement. The central ritual features two goats, one of which is slaughtered and the other, having had the sins of the people placed upon it, is sent out alone, off into the wilderness, into the realm of Azazel, whoever or whatever that was. This act and the goat which gets away, which escapes, as it were, gives birth to a word in the English language, for when you place the blame for what you did on someone else: the word is “scapegoat.” The whole thing, the elaborate rite, the transfer of responsibility, the smoking altar and the formulaic incantations, well, if it looks like a goat, and walks like a goat... It sure seems like magic to me. A passage I would be tempted to view with disdain, to ignore, to leave behind, unless someone can save it for me. But we'll get back to that.

Alongside the priestly cult in ancient Israel, there also arose the tradition of prophecy. In words I shared with you last night, the prophet Ezekiel took aim at a popular assumption he did not like: that children should suffer, or be punished, for the actions of their parents. “Only the one who sins,” Ezekiel says, “should be punished.” Later in the same chapter Ezekiel is even more explicit – and more interesting – about punishment and responsibility. For he adds another layer, a new notion: “*v’harasha ki yashuv mikol chatotov asher asah..chaya!* A wicked one who turns, who repents from all sins... shall live!”

This is an amazing innovation! In the first part Ezekiel asserts that you are not punished for the sins of your parents because, well, *that’s not you!* Now, he says, do *teshuvah*, really change, and you can’t be punished for what went before because... *that’s not you either!* That person who did those things... is no more! *Teshuvah* is not about appealing to God the Creator to change God’s mind; it is about a belief in the ability of human beings to be the authors of ourselves. To recast, refine, and re-create who we are.

So which is it? Do we separate ourselves from wrongdoing with words and ritual acts, by ducking, by hiding, by shifting our sins onto someone or something else? Or do we separate ourselves from sin by recreating ourselves, by changing, by becoming someone...else? Magical formulas selling false assurances based on wishing and wanting, versus internal work and genuine effort towards personal growth and real change.

Two totally different paths, different world-views, almost in competition with one another... unless... unless someone can show that they are two sides of the same coin. That ritual and repentance, desire and results, can actually... help each other. And that, perhaps, coming here isn't either an empty exercise in nostalgia, or a total waste of time.

It was left to perhaps the second boldest rationalist in Jewish history, Maimonides, to harmonize the two approaches. He would never have admitted this in his legal work meant for the masses, the *Mishneh Torah*. But in his philosophical treatise, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, where he puts forth a new, intellectually consistent vision of Judaism, Maimonides asserts: that priestly ceremony -- it's a metaphor! He doesn't – given who he is he can't – take the goats literally. Instead of imagining, God forbid, that our sins were somehow automatically cleansed through a ritual act, Maimonides asks: what happens to a person who participates in such a ceremony? What happens inside? What is the impact here?

It's not about the goat but the goal. Here, we act out the imagery! It is like a play, a dramatic trope. And the main point, says the Rambam, is the notion of taking our sins and getting them out of us, off of us...

Today we might call this projection, and transference. But we also know it is a necessary part of healing. Because if we *see ourselves as sinners*, that blocks our ability to change! The transfer reminds us that we are *people who sin*, rather than *sinners*, that our actions are only a part of a larger picture;

they need not – they should not, they must not define the essence of who we are. It is only in changing how we view ourselves that we are then able... to change.

What parent has not had the same conversation with a child? You are *not* stupid, what you *did* was dumb! There is a difference! It's a crucial distinction. Because despite the old nursery rhyme, words and names and labels and images can stick and hurt and harm in deep and lasting ways. If we are to have a chance to be better it will only be because we can expunge what we have done, purge it, bring it out of the connection to our *self*, isolate the deed from the doer, prevent a pattern of negativity from integrating itself into a damaged identity.

The purpose of ritual is to present an alternative, stimulate the imagination, create a climate in which a different world is envisioned as plausible, and even possible.

Why are we here? Imagine! Imagine that the words we say are not descriptions of the way the world works – if they were that they would surely be wrong. Imagine instead that this is a sacred drama, an act meant to induce, initiate, inspire. Kol Nidrei: an incantation indeed, a formula, where we release ourselves from our verbal connections, separate from who we were. The prohibitions of Yom Kippur – injunctions against not just eating and drinking, but intimacy, adornment, wearing leather, even bathing... these are ways we separate from the everyday, the physical and

tangible, to act out an idea, to get over our *selves*, to get beyond the old. I am not the one I was but the me who might be. I begin anew. The Book of Life, the Ten Days, Ne'ilah – the gates are closing: the time has come, a one-day offer, to make an end to delay and procrastination.

That prayers we read are prescriptive, presumptive, filled with hope. It is not the notion that what we say will change God, but that stepping into a new view of ourselves and the world around us can change us. It is not that we literally *believe* all of the words as much as that we proactively *allow* what we say to work its way into our lives. It's not magic; it's psychology. "Those who rise from prayer better persons, their prayer has been answered."

This, then, is the most crucial blessing of coming together now: a communal articulation, a recitation of the idea that if we but want to do so, *we can be better!* We give voice, we name who it is that we want to become. And we discover that we will have help; we are here to support each other in our growth. The community cares... about your journey.

We can be free of the acts of our past; we can re-envision our roles and recreate our lives. And sometimes, if we want something enough, sometimes it is actually possible that we will do what needs to be done... to make it happen.

A strange story, from the First Book of the Bible: Jacob is afraid and alone, and far from home. The sun sets, and he has but a rock to use as a pillow. In a made-for Hollywood scene, he has a dream: a stairway to heaven, a ladder upon which angels ascend and descend. And then there is a vision of God, unexpected, overwhelming, filled with promises. Everything he is afraid he will lose – safety and comfort, friends and family, a place called home – God assures Jacob he will retain, and return to.

And then he wakes up, and what he does next is truly bizarre. He takes the rock he had slept on and he sets up as a pillar! And he makes a vow, almost bargaining with God: *if I get these things...then I will dedicate myself to God, and build God a house here, and pay my Temple dues on time, and a host of other things.* Commentators are amazed at the, well, the chutzpah! The unmitigated gall! Jacob is making a *conditional* vow? But aren't these things he is bargaining for... isn't that all of what he had just been promised?

Commentators are stunned. But I am impressed. Because... Well, look at the visual imagery here. He saw a ladder. And he set up a pillar. To my mind, this is Jacob, *acting out* – physically recreating the scene of the dream! As if to say I have a role to play... in making these wishes come true. This is Jacob, doing what he can in the light of day...to make sure that his vision, his dream, his deepest desires... actually happen. Now that... that's powerful magic.

Did you know, by the way... did you know that the killing curse, “*avada kadavra*,” and the older and more familiar phrase “*abra kadabra*,” are actually... Aramaic. Close cousins of Hebrew. The words mean: “I will destroy, as I say” – or, “I will create, with my words.”

If the hand follows the heart, then in our words, and in our will, is the power... to change the world. If... if.... We've got to really mean it.

L'shana Tova.