

An Unhappy Human and an Unhappy Ghost

Parashat Mishpatim

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Sophie, I really have to thank you today. Not just for being an awesome kid and a beautiful bat mitzvah, but this is personal. I really needed a simcha today. I really needed a happy occasion after the week I just had. Having been in the “rabbi business” for 16.5 years, this week I broke a rather inglorious record. We had six funerals at Har Shalom this week! Six eulogies, six burials in freezing cold temperatures, six groups of families stricken with grief and mourning. I have to say thank you to Hazzan Ozur Bass for his partnership this week; if it wasn’t for him there might have been seven funerals.

The youngest of those we paid homage to this week had just turned 58. The oldest had just turned 105! I have to tell you that I am tremendously moved by funerals. I feel so privileged to learn about the extraordinary lives of so many people, and I am honored to pay respects to them in the form of eulogies and the remarkable rituals of Jewish burial. This week, for me, was filled with stories of courage and wisdom; people who faced everything from cancer to pogroms. People worked hard, who loved their families, overcame numerous obstacles, who persevered with hope and faith and optimism. I witnessed children, grandchildren, great grandchildren speak of what their elders taught them about life, and commit to remembering their ancestors and to live according to their values. Each of these funerals were truly sacred, and I will not soon forget all that I heard and all that I learned.

We have already mentioned how this week’s parasha reads like a code of law; 53 mitzvot, 53 laws of all kinds, from torts to criminal proceedings, to abortion and capital punishment, personal property law, libel and so much more fill this Torah portion. But stuck in between bride prices and not oppressing strangers is a rather unexpected stipulation. *M’chasheifa lo te’chayeh*: You must not tolerate a witch.¹ You may not have even realized that the Torah or Judaism recognized the existence of witches, but witchcraft in the Torah was a capital offence! What’s so grave, no pun intended, about witchcraft? The Torah doesn’t elaborate on what witches actually do, at least not in this verse. I’m pretty sure that riding around on broomsticks and stirring cauldrons of root of hemlock, eyes of a newt, the venom of a snake and other fanciful brew were not what the Torah had in mind. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, who wrote a scholarly commentary to the Torah in the 19th century surmised that the Hebrew word for witch, *m’chasheifa* derives from words that mean “to soothe and to enchant.”² Other places in the Hebrew Bible suggest that witches made a pretty good living by soothing and enchanting people who wanted to communicate with deceased relatives. Witches conjured spirits, facilitating communication between the living and the dead. It’s interesting, I think, that the Torah does not deny the possibility of mediums, divination, or necromancy, it just doesn’t like it.

¹ Exodus 22:17

² Hirsch Commentary on the Torah, Judaica Press, Vol. 2, p. 370

I know there have been a lot of TV shows about mediums in the past few years, and they are often depicted as anything but witches. They are said to have a gift, and they use that gift to help solve crimes or assist troubled spirits in resolving their earthly problems so they can drift off into eternity in peace. But in the Bible witches and mediums summon spirits to speak to the living; to offer instruction and guidance, as in the famous episode in I Samuel 28 of the Woman of Endor who summons the spirit of the prophet Samuel at the command of King Saul. I love that story for a number of reasons, first and foremost because Samuel's spirit is unhappy that he is revived. *Lamah hirgatzani le'ha-a lot oti*, he asks: Why did you disturb me and brought me up, Samuel says.³ In a tradition that is so mum about the afterlife, at least we know that it must be peaceful and pleasant enough that Samuel is annoyed by being taken away from it. And he doesn't have particularly good news for Saul either. The next day, Samuel says, the Philistines will defeat his Israelite forces in battle. So what came out of this episode **is an unhappy human and an unhappy ghost!** Hence the Torah's prohibition, just don't dabble in this kind of inquiry. We are meant to be focused on this world, and this life. The Torah provides all the instructions we need for navigating it without having to consult with the dead. All of the mitzvot in this parasha are about creating a just and compassionate society in this world. If the focus was on the next world or the spirit world or any other world but this one, why would anyone care about indentured servant, the captive, the injured, the orphans or widows, another person's property, or any of the other very real situations addressed in our parasha.

And I tell mourners all the time that what their deceased relative would want is not for them to be paralyzed by grief, which would only be perpetuated by endeavoring to contact the dead, but to live fully, to live meaningfully, to live with purpose in this world. Or as the Torah promises in our parasha to those who are faithful: *et mispar yameicha amalei*. God says, I will cause all your years, however many they may be, to be full, to be consequential, to be meaningful years in this world.⁴

Yesterday, at the sixth and final funeral of the week, I experienced another first. Someone asked if it would be okay to play a Frank Sinatra song at the funeral service. After the week I had, I said, "Sure, go right ahead!" It was actually a terrific song, that was a perfect tribute to person we were remembering, a woman who was born 105 years ago. Sinatra sings:

Don't you know that it's worth
every treasure on earth
To be young at heart
For as rich as you are, it's much better by far
To be young at heart
And if you should survive to 105
Look at all you'll derive out of being alive
And here is the best part, you have a head start
If you are among the very young at heart

³ I Samuel 28:15

⁴ Exodus 23:26

You see why this song was perfect for the 105 year old Gloria Eisenberg, may she rest in peace? I think that the Torah's emphasis on life, on the potential of every single day, on hope, on selflessness, on the pursuit of justice and compassion...that keeps us young at heart! Being deluded by magic and spells, quick fixes and selfish pursuits isn't good for us or for anyone else. As Sinatra crooned: [Just] *Look at all you'll derive out of being alive!*

Shabbat Shalom