

Shabbat Parashat Tetzaveh

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Weekly Teaching by Rabbi Mitch

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This week I arrived home from a ten-day trip to Israel; an interfaith trip; touring places significant to both Jews and Christians. Among the magic that one experiences upon visiting Israel is the feeling of crystallizing moments of significance. You walk upon ancient roadways, touch biblical artifacts, breathe in history, tolerance, and diversity. In Israel, you hear and feel the humming of faith all around you.

This was not my first time in Israel, I have been there before; many times; even lived there for a year or so. I knew these wonderful feelings. I knew the sense of awe, belonging, and the rendering of community values. I realized the power of the "I /Thou" encounters I was experiencing, both with people and God. However, something unexpected also crept in during this particular trip.

It began with the take off of our El Al plane when I was not prepared to experience mundane, sad, and nostalgic feelings. In the air, leaving for Israel, I said our traditional prayer for safe travel. And, then I thought of our prayers that fly to God. Our prayers fly both individually and collectively. They are framed by our desire for help and our expressions of gratitude for that which we possess. As I flew across the ocean, I knew that in Israel I

would experience a spiritual recharging, but also realized that truly such a recharge should take place each and every day, wherever we are.

I thought a lot about the need for daily spiritual recharging, no matter our location, as each and every day I called my wife and children from our Holy Land. While in Israel I was aware of this sacred place of timelessness and history, but, I also felt that Israel hadn't replaced my normal circadian rhythms. There is no magical escape, and there shouldn't be one. Life is defined by living it, not escaping it. So, while in Israel, I spoke with my children about all of their regular activities, and Roseanne and I also addressed all the planning, deadlines, decisions and arrangements that still needed to be made as we awaited our son's imminent Bar Mitzvah.

During our calls, I realized with new clarity that each human being lives his or her mortal life with an ebb and flow to our existence. We possess free will, and yet to some extent we are like "Muppets", those especially endearing creatures that the puppeteer controls. Both marionette and puppet, the "Muppet" is mobilized by the hand of the puppeteer who enters inside the head and controls the rod that moves the arms of the puppet. Like the Sesame Street characters, or the stars of the Muppet movies, we each play our roles.

We doggedly pursue our lives, and the time of our mortality envelops our flesh and blood. We have a finite time and energy that we can put into our goal-seeking behavior. It is useful to have goals and roles that determine the directions we wish to set our minds to. There exist the labels that we move our own arms to reach for: degrees we earn, the salary we strive for, the hats we wear. It is appropriate and laudable for us to chase goals and

assume roles, and yet, we might be tempted to forget that there are divine strings that pull us, like the puppeteer. Sometimes the strings of God may feel looser than at other times, but they nevertheless exist. When we look at the windows in our lives we can choose where to direct ourselves. However, when entering certain doors, no matter our intentions, we will feel trapped; trapped in a role, or a job, or a situation. In these cases the strings that pull our lives from above need to be accepted, and even embraced. God holds us at times in ways which we might not desire, and yet we are being held nonetheless. We need to learn to accept what we need to accept, and to change that which we can change.

Flying to Israel, walking in Israel, returning from Israel; my new experience represented an epiphany. Sometimes we can take a step back and change course; start a new path. Sometimes this is a luxury that we simply can't afford. Sometimes we have to accept and adjust. While in Israel, it was easy to observe the different people and religions, and physically feel the convergent history and note the different faith paradigms and spiritual paths. It was so easy to pray for all these different pathways leading to one God; hoping beyond hope that we would all be led to a period of peace. During my interfaith trip, filled with dialogue and understanding, I felt the power of brotherhood and sisterhood; I felt my prayers flying upwards. Yet, I also never forgot that our world is a volatile and gyrating place. Both the good and the bad persist side by side; always mitigated by how we pursue our daily acts of kindnesses and make connections.

My recent epiphany was the realization that we are at times the puppeteer in our individual lives, and at times we are the human Muppet. Sometimes we choose our learning, growing and experiences. Sometimes we must

reach for the outstretched Divine arm of that which is outside of us. Sometimes our choices will define us and sometimes our beliefs will define us. Ironically, it is our being both director and actor that is the most authentically human experience. I don't want to lose track of this epiphany because understanding that we live in a posture of both reaching and reacting simultaneously helps us learn the hidden habits of our hearts.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Mitch