

SPIDERMAN SERMON: Yom Kippur 5769

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“With great power comes great responsibility.”¹ If these words sound familiar, it’s undoubtedly because they come from the story of Spider-Man. Spider-Man centers on an ordinary student named Peter Parker who, after being bitten by a genetically-altered spider, gains superhuman strength and the spider-like ability to cling to any surface. As you probably know, the story begins in Queens, New York. Orphaned at an early age, Peter Parker lives with his beloved Aunt May and Uncle Ben. Peter leads the life of a normal student, working as a photographer at the school paper, pining after his beautiful next-door neighbor Mary Jane Watson and hanging out with his buddy Harry Osborn.

On a field trip, Peter and his classmates are given a science demonstration on arachnids -- that’s a fancy word for spiders. Peter is bitten by a genetically-altered spider. Soon after, he discovers that he has gained unusual powers – a spider’s strength and agility along with a keen, ESP-like "spider sense". At first, Peter decides to use these powers to make money so he can impress Mary Jane. He appears in a wrestling match and, armed with his new spider strength, wins the match in record time. But the crooked wrestling match promoter refuses to award Peter the prize money. Moments later, the promoter is robbed and Peter has the opportunity to catch the burglar. Because he wants revenge, however, Peter refuses to stop him. Tragically, this same burglar later kills Peter's Uncle Ben during a carjacking. As Spider-Man, Peter apprehends the burglar but he is plagued with guilt for not having captured the burglar sooner. During his time of turmoil, Peter remembers something Uncle Ben once told him: "With great power, comes great responsibility." Peter takes this to heart and decides to use his extraordinary powers to fight crime and protect the city.

With great power comes great responsibility. Spider-Man, is a comic strip and a movie, not a great work of philosophy or theology. But its message is an important one for the Days of Awe, the Yamim Noraim. And, unwittingly, the comic strip expresses the very essence of what it means to be Jewish. One of the most profound ways to understand Judaism is to appreciate and observe Shabbat, the day God blessed and called holy, “kadosh.” People often think of Shabbat as a day of restrictions: the day we aren’t supposed to work, light a fire, turn on electricity, cook, drive, watch TV, spend money or go to the mall. By NOT doing all these things, we CAN take the time to rest, to be with family and loved ones, to go to synagogue, to pray and to study. By NOT working, and by spending time in contemplation, we CAN leave behind the cares and worries of our busy, stressed lives. Shabbat CAN become a special time for us, a “cathedral in time,” to quote Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. It CAN afford us the opportunity to connect to higher spiritual values, to connect to God.

So what does Shabbat have to do with power and responsibility? If you have ever read Rabbi Heschel’s wonderful little book, *The Sabbath*, you will recall that one of his main

¹ I am grateful to Rabbi Michael Hattin at Pardes in Jerusalem whose course on the Sabbath is the basis for this sermon.

points is this: the Sabbath reminds us that we are NOT the masters of the universe. Heschel says: "Six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath, we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul ... Six days a week we seek to dominate the world, on the seventh day we try to dominate the self." This is as beautiful and succinct description as any of Shabbat. I would even say that it describes our mission for the Days of Awe. We might even look at Shabbat as a weekly preparation for this period during which we are supposed to make a "heshbon ha-nefesh" – - an accounting, an assessment of our souls. Shabbat trains us to dominate our impulses, to control our yetzer harah – our evil impulse. This is the impulse that tempts us to engage in nasty behavior such as "lashon harah" – gossip – or to be selfish, callous, careless, venal – all those sins we spend this holiday trying to contain. By refraining from working and having an impact on the world, the Sabbath also gives us the opportunity to value ourselves for who we are, not what we do.

So many of us put such weight on our work that we often forget to value the person beneath the professional role. Particularly during these times of economic hardship, when so many have lost their jobs, it is especially important to figure out who we are independent of our careers, and to see what we can contribute to the world outside of the workplace. On the Sabbath, one hopes, we become aware that we are part of a cosmic process, that we are linked to the divine source. And it is this source that provides our lives with ultimate meaning. By recognizing this source, we also acknowledge our debt to God for our many gifts.

And here is where the issue of power and responsibility comes in. What makes human beings special and distinct from animals, is that God has given us wisdom, comprehension, and knowledge – the very powers that God used to create the world, as it says in Proverbs (3:19): "With wisdom God created the earth, with comprehension God created the heavens, and with knowledge God opened up the deep." We must be grateful for these gifts, but also humble because they provide us with the ability to create wonderful things -- as well as the ability to destroy. We can find a cure for polio, and we can also create the atom bomb. We can invent the gas combustion engine that gives us mobility, and we can pollute our planet. We can create great art to elevate the soul, and we can fashion propaganda to hoodwink the people.

And that's exactly what the Rabbis seem to have understood when they forbade various activities on Shabbat. Even though they call the forbidden activities work, it's not the expenditure of labor that concerned them, but, rather, the activities that impact on our world – activities that, if not performed responsibly, can result in chaos and destruction. As you may know, the Rabbis forbid 39 categories of work on Shabbat. They derive these categories from the tasks that were needed to build the Mishkan, the portable Sanctuary in the desert.

Now, at first glance, this forbidden work seems to have nothing to do with our lives today. Let me quickly enumerate these tasks for you: Ploughing, sowing, reaping, sheaf-making, threshing, winnowing, selecting, sifting, grinding, kneading, baking; sheep shearing, bleaching, combing raw materials, dyeing, spinning, weaving operations, separating into threads, tying a knot, untying a knot, sewing, tearing;

trapping or hunting, slaughtering, skinning, tanning, scraping pelts, marking out, cutting to shape; writing and erasing; building and demolishing; kindling a fire and extinguishing it; the final hammer blow that puts a finishing touch to manufactured material; and finally, carrying from the private to the public domain and vice versa. Basically, we can group these activities in the following categories: Preparing food, making clothing, dealing with animal products, writing, making fire, dividing labor and engaging in commerce.

Michael Hattin, a brilliant Instructor with whom I studied at Pardes this summer, understands these activities as representing revolutionary events in the history of humankind – events that transformed human society. For example: Agriculture transformed society from a nomadic to a sedentary one, giving us the time and opportunity to develop institutions, laws, the arts, the sciences. Clothing allowed us to emerge from our caves, to live and engage in other environments. These activities have allowed us to remake our world, placing us at a level just below that of God. But, God is limitless, and we are not. There is danger when we think we have no limits, when we think of ourselves as God. When we forget our place in the universe, we unleash the forces of destruction.

The very first story in the Torah is a warning about this. Adam and Eve are unwilling to accept their limitations. There is one tree from which they are forbidden to eat, but they do not respect this lone boundary on their behavior. As a result, they lose Paradise, for themselves and for the rest of us. Many myths in the world warn us to beware of this kind of hubris – or, as we would say, chutzpah -- particularly in Greco-Roman mythology. Daedalus, a talented craftsman, fashions a pair of wax wings for himself and his son, Icarus. Before they take off, Daedalus warns his son not to fly too close to the sun. Overcome by the sublime feeling that flying gives him, Icarus soars through the sky, coming close to the sun, which melts his wings. Icarus keeps flapping, but soon realizes that he is only flapping his bare arms. And so, Icarus falls into the sea.

In another legend, Niobe has the audacity to compare herself to Leto, the mother of the two gods, Artemis and Apollo. The gods are insulted and strike all of Niobe's children dead, turning her into a rock that weeps perpetually. There is even a story about a spider. Arachne is a fine weaver, as skillful as the finest artist of the day. This goes to her head. She becomes so conceited about her skill as a weaver that she begins to claim that her skill is greater than that of Minerva, the goddess of wisdom and war, AND of weaving. Minerva is angered and warns Arachne not to offend the gods. Even so, Arachne challenges the goddess to a weaving contest. Arachne's tapestry features multiple episodes of the god's infidelity. Minerva recognizes that Arachne's work is flawless, but is outraged at Arachne's disrespectful choice of subjects. So she turns Arachne into a spider.

Judaism, too warns us about hubris – about chutzpah. That's why we are given a day, every single week to remind ourselves that we are not God, that we do have limits. It is a lesson well worth remembering. We are the first generation with the ability and

the power to actually destroy the world. The father of the atomic bomb, Robert Oppenheimer, in looking back at the Trinity test in New Mexico, where his Los Alamos team first tested the bomb, understood this all too well. In commenting on the power of the bomb, he famously recalled this quote from the Bhagavad Gita, the sacred Hindu text: "If the radiance of a thousand suns were to burst at once into the sky, that would be like the splendor of the mighty one. Now I am become Death, the shatterer of worlds."

Let us not be shatterer of worlds. Let us be healers of the world. Let us remember our limitations, and not take upon ourselves the role that God alone can and should play. Today, it seems like we need Shabbat more than ever to remind us of our place in the world. With power comes great responsibility. Let us endeavor to keep this always in mind.