

A note from Rabbi Seth

May 1, 2020

Dear ones-

Before your weekly Judaism-related email, a few quick notes:

1) Friday night services are today at 5pm EDT. It would be great to see you at <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/8321750148?pwd=eUVKRFRwNHBhdm1hR1FISnhEaTd6dz09>

2) Do you want to know more about the COVID-19 grief support group for students taking place on Wednesdays? Email me for the details.

3) Are you looking to connect, talk, or just be with a listening ear during this time? Email me or any of the chaplains; we're here to help.

As I've moved through the last couple of months working from home, I've found that I've developed a kind of routine. It's shaped by the people and animals I live with and their wake up times, the meetings and zoom calls that I get to take part in, and my attempts to keep the rest of my life in order by cleaning up my house and yard, stay on top of bills, go shopping, and exercise.

But sometimes, it can feel a little hard to focus on what I'm doing. Maybe you're like me, and have found that spending lots of time on Zoom, Netflix, or just on the computer in general can make you feel a little hazy and unfocused, disconnected from the people and actions that make up my life. So I want to share a teaching with you that I discovered this morning that I think might be helpful. It was written by an early Hasidic master, Dov Ber of Mezeritch (from his collection, *Or Torah*, #110)

In this week's Torah portion, Acharei Mot, there is a line in which God tells the Israelites, "You shall keep My laws (chukai)...that you should live by them" (Leviticus 18:5). The idea behind this verse is that by engaging in Jewish practice - by doing mitzvot, or the religious practices of Judaism - they bring us life. It's a sweet idea, and maybe it's something you have felt at some point. Doing a mitzvah - like lighting Shabbat candles, saying kiddush over a cup of wine, or remembering to love your neighbor as yourself - can make you feel inspired, connected, or just better about life.

Dov Ber takes this idea and expands on it in some pretty remarkable ways. He says that whenever we do a mitzvah, we connect all the levels of seen and unseen reality in which we live through our action, speech, and thought. For example, a tallit is the prayer shawl that some people wear at religious services. It is often made of wool. Wool, by itself, is not necessarily holy. But when it is shorn from a sheep, made into yarn, woven

into a garment, and then the ritual fringes called tzitzit are put on it, then it becomes a sacred object, namely, a tallit. And when a person says a blessing and wraps herself in it, she connects thought (having the intention to put on a tallit), speech (saying words of blessing when putting on a tallit), and action (making a tallit and wrapping it around your body). Dov Ber says that when we do that, when our thought, speech, and bodies are in alignment, we make connections between the different dimensions that we live in, connecting the levels of seen and unseen reality, connecting us to God on all sorts of different levels, and giving us life.

In the verse from the Torah we mentioned just above, God says, "You shall keep My laws (chukai)...that you should live by them." The word "chukai," Dov Ber suggests, sounds like the word "chakika," or engrave. He suggests that when we do a mitzvah, the words of the prayer and the actions of the mitzvah are engraved in our minds. And that is what gives us life, drawing life from worlds unseen into our reality. When our thought, speech, and actions are in alignment - when we are focused on what we are doing, giving it our loving attention - we can tap into unseen sources of energy and life and feel more alive.

I think this can be a helpful teaching for us. That when we bring awareness and intention to whatever it is we're doing - a mitzvah like lighting Shabbat candles or a simple everyday activity like brushing our teeth, preparing dinner, or making eye contact with a loved one - we make connections between worlds seen and unseen, giving us life. That by being as present as we can in different dimensions of our life, we can live more fully.

I hope this weekend and this Shabbat bring you opportunities for connection, moments of presence, and a feeling of aliveness and depth that we all deserve to feel.

Wishing you a Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Seth