

You Can Do Magic!
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The movie selections on the trans-Atlantic flights both to and from Israel a few weeks ago left a lot to be desired. I'd like to meet the highly-paid professional at Lufthansa who thought that Garfield would be a hit for the 500 passengers on our 747 for a 10-hour flight! One movie though, I believe it was from Frankfurt to Dallas, did grab my attention, and was worth keeping my jet-lagged, weary eyes open to watch. It was the 2006 film, *The Illusionist*, a fanciful, exciting, and sometimes eerie portrayal of an early 20th century magician named Eisenheim, played by Edward Norton. *The Illusionist* is a story loosely based on a Jewish hypnotist, magician, and astrologer named Eric Jan Hanusen, who packed theater houses, and even built his own, called the "Palace of the Occult" in turn of the century Berlin. It was there that none other than Adolf Hitler became mesmerized by his magic and showmanship, and although his father was the *shames* of the synagogue, Hitler consulted Hanussen regularly. His most famous act of "precognition" was his prediction of the February 1933 fire in the Reichstag, which catapulted the Nazis to power in Germany and Hitler to the chancellorship. Fearing that Hanusen was a dangerous interloper who had Hitler's ear a bit too often, and a Jew whose identity could no longer be hidden, Goebbels and Goering had him executed in March of the same year. Though the antagonist in *The Illusionist* is the would-be Kaiser of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the fascination and marvel of throngs of gawkers and spectators who were enthralled by *The Illusionist* is quite accurate.

And we too love illusions and magic. Why my daughters watch with rapt attention as Paul Koch performs wondrous tricks with cards, and balls, and coins, astonishing them with every slight of hand. I myself remember watching the 1983 television special when David Copperfield, another Jewish illusionist, made the Statue of Liberty disappear. How many crowds gathered to watch David Blaine spend 61 hours in a box of ice, or 34 hours standing on a 90 ft. pedestal without food or drink, or submerge

for seven days in a tank of water in front of Lincoln Center? Magic, illusions, hypnosis and the like have been a fascination for time immemorial...Including Pharaoh's time.

In our parasha this week we encounter another cast of professional magicians...though certainly not Jewish. A real class act. The parasha contains an epic encounter between the magicians of Egypt and Moses and Aaron. Recall that the first miracle was matched: Moses's staff turns into a snake, the magicians' staffs turn into snakes (forget about the fact that Moses's snake eats the others). Moses turns the Nile water into blood; Pharaoh's magicians do the same. *Ha!* scoffs Pharaoh, your God is not so great after all. Stop wasting my time, Pharaoh cries, when his magicians are also able to bring swarms of frogs as Moses and Aaron do. But that's where the competition ends. As Moses and Aaron bring about lice from the dust of the earth, the sorcerers are unable to duplicate it. They confront Pharaoh with stinging words: *Etzbah Elohim hi...* This is surely the Finger of God. Come the plague of boils, the Torah reports, the magicians are not even able to confront Moses: *Lo yachlu hachartumim la'amod lifnei Moshe mipnei ha'sh'chin...* They couldn't even stand up, because they too were afflicted by the boils. If they could make themselves immune to the effects of the prior plagues, they were now utterly defeated. They were shamed and humiliated, adds the Ramban, because their bodies too were covered by boils.

The Torah seems to entertain the reality of magic to a certain extent; but it also exposes its pretenses as well. The Egyptians' magic is affected by wild spells and incantations. Four times the Torah goes out of its way to tell you that the magicians prefaced their magic *b'lahateihem...* with spells. The jocular scene in the *Prince of Egypt* comes to mind, as Steve Martin and Martin Short give voice to two Abbot & Costello looking magicians who draw the shades, dash colored dust about, and blabber about their own power as they produce a madcap charade for Pharaoh's court. Contrast that with the quiet, unpretentious power of Moses and Aaron. There are no spells. No words. No incantations. No hocus pocus or theatrics. A simple staff is sometimes, though not always, employed to initiate the miraculous. And Moses himself is not known for his elocution. Recall that in hesitating from God's command to free his people, Moses

admits to a speech impediment. He is singularly unsuccessful at convincing either the Jewish people or Pharaoh through the spoken word. While the magicians pad their magic with raucous incantations, God decidedly uses Moses's silence as an antidote. While the priests of Egypt, like the illusionists throughout history, make themselves the marvel of the magic, Moses and Aaron are only conduits to a much Greater Power, whose wisdom is at work throughout.

And therein lies, for me, a profound Jewish teaching. Shammai, the great 1st Century Jewish scholar said: *Amor me'at, ve'asei harbeh*. Say little, do much. The Egyptians were the polar opposite of this worldview. Their doing was little more than thinly veiled trickery, packaged in vivid language. The image of Moses and Aaron quietly but forcefully acting to free their enslaved people would be a symbol for future generations who would commit themselves to quiet acts of loving kindness, heroism, strength, and leadership. Think of the quiet power of Mother Theresa, Mahatma Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Hannah Szenes, Yitzhak Rabin. Judaism would never become a religion of images, histrionics, or drama. To be a Jew is to feel God's presence by living a life of Torah and mitzvot. My faith is animated by the power of simple deeds, not shrieking spells, to conjure God's embracing presence. Abraham Joshua Heschel related the following teaching:

It is said in the Talmud: "A person must ask, When will my deeds approach the deeds of the patriarchs?" The patriarchs are Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In the Torah, nothing is said about the books they wrote or the ideas they innovated. Instead we are told tales of their adventures, their deeds, how they wandered from place to place to find food for their households, how they searched for brides, and so and their actions became Torah. Hence, writes Heschel, we learn the purpose of Jewish existence: we are obligated to live lives that will become Torah, lives that are Torah.

It doesn't take a spell or incantation, magician or illusionist to do that; Just a simple Jew, like you and me, who wants to walk through this world with God.