

Last week at kiddush, I learned that for some families in our community, the Tooth Fairy pays double for teeth that are lost on Shabbat. She understands that it's hard to wait an extra day for the reward, so the Tooth Fairy offers a special Shabbos bonus. Even though my kids are not yet at a tooth-losing stage, this wasn't the first time this year that I found myself in a conversation with an adult, about the Tooth Fairy.

Earlier this year, I learned about a book called Fair Play, written by Eve Rodsky. A Harvard Law School graduate who worked in foundation management at JP Morgan, Rodsky realized that her organizational management expertise could be useful beyond the charitable foundations with which she worked. She applied her knowledge and skill to family systems.

While I am still planning to read her book, I have heard Eve speak, and I purchased a game that she created, with the same title as her book, Fair Play. As someone who tends to like games, I wouldn't exactly call it a fun game. But it was eye-opening.

The game contains task cards such as: dishes, laundry, home maintenance and garbage. The basic idea is to sit down with one's partner or roommate and decide who will take responsibility for each task card, at least temporarily.

These cards are broken up into categories. The tasks I just named are from the "home" category. Some of the other groups of responsibilities are called "Out" and "Caregiving." One of the groupings is called Magic. In this category, some of the cards include: birthday celebrations, hard questions, good deeds, romance, spirituality and magical beings. Ethan and I had not previously discussed magical beings, but in case you're curious, we did decide to keep the card in our deck. Perhaps for the Tooth Fairy, but certainly for Elijah's cup on Passover.

Why do we teach our children to believe in magical beings? Why does magic play such a large role in childhood, only to peter out or become laughable, in our adult lives? As adults, while we may have to define magic a bit more broadly, what if magic – at least in some sense – is real? Our parasha this week certainly thinks it is.

From the strange and upsetting ritual of the Sotah, to the extreme power of the Nazirite's vow, to the sacrifices performed by our ancestors that brought about purification and forgiveness, Parshat Nasso is all about magic.

And in the middle of all that magic, right after we read about the Nazir, we have the Priestly Blessing.

Some commentators assert that Birkat Kohanim follows the passage about the Nazirite to teach the priests that, similar to the Nazir's abstention from alcohol, the Kohanim may not recite the Priestly Blessing while drunk. But it's also no surprise to me that Birkat Kohanim follows these passages about the Sotah and the Nazir, because prayer is also magic.

By using the word magic, I don't mean to trivialize the significance or meaning of the Sotah ritual, Nazirite vows, sacrifices or prayer. On the contrary.

In the case of the Sotah, what is unknown and hidden magically becomes apparent. For the Nazir, as well as other cases of vows, both in the Torah and in rabbinic literature, mere words have the magical power to become a speech act – to achieve a significant change in identity and status. The most notable example of this, are the statements uttered at Jewish weddings, which legally bind two spouses together.

While the sacrifices we read about in the Torah may seem irrelevant and inaccessible to us, our ancestors believed that these sacrifices had the ability to transcend the human world and reach God. The Priestly Blessing, our oldest biblical text, is the inverse – a magical declaration that brings God's presence and blessings to the people.

While the Torah is full of sacrifices, it does not contain many examples of prayer. Unlike the prayer that Moses will recite at the end of next week's parasha, imploring God to heal his sister Miriam from leprosy, Birkat Kohanim is still recited regularly today, retaining its importance since Torah times.

It is used to bless children on Friday nights, in welcoming new babies to the world, or bringing Jews into the covenant. It is sung frequently under the wedding canopy, at rabbinic and cantorial installations and ordinations, and the Priestly Blessing is inserted in the repetition of the Amidah every single day. If you're only familiar with a few excerpts from Jewish liturgy, chances are that the Priestly Blessing is one of these highlights.

Rabbinic tradition recognized the significance of this prayer as well. From the standpoint of Jewish Law, the ancient rabbis did not generally have a strong preference for praying in Hebrew, but they mandated that Birkat Kohanim not be rendered in translation. Because of its importance, the Priestly Blessing must be recited while standing, it may not be rushed, and you can't be blessed in absentia – if you aren't there in person, you don't receive the blessing.

This last point may be hard to swallow in today's age of technology, with livestream and Zoom so readily available. However, this rabbinic opinion can serve as a reminder to us that while tuning in virtually is absolutely a necessary tool for inclusion, there are some blessings we can only receive in person.

One more unique facet of Birkat Kohanim can be found in the verse that follows it:

וְשָׁמוּ אֶת-שְׁמִי עַל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

In reciting this threefold blessing, Aaron and his sons link God's name with the people of Israel, and God says, I will bless them

וְאָנֹכִי אֲבָרְכֵם:

Birkat Kohanim is unique because upon its recitation, God promises to follow through by enacting blessings upon the people!

In Tractate Sotah¹, the Babylonian Talmud questions who exactly are the recipients of this blessing. When the Torah says, "Thus shall you bless B'nai Yisrael," perhaps these words only apply to B'nai Yisrael, narrowly translated as the "Sons of Israel. How do we know whether women and converts receive the blessings too? The Talmud resolves this query by quoting other Hebrew words from the introduction to the Priestly Blessing: "Emor lahem, you shall say to them," establishing that all of the Jewish People receive this blessing.

This Talmudic passage emphasizes that the Priestly Blessing applies to all Jews. I believe it also has something to teach us, about prayer in general.

In any setting where public prayer happens, everyone who is present can be affected by the prayers, whether or not they themselves are actively praying. This is the true magic of prayer. And because of this magical quality, prayer can also feel threatening.

This summer, the Supreme Court will make its ruling in the case of Joseph Kennedy, a former assistant football coach at a public high school in Bremerton, Washington. Kennedy, who described coaching football as his calling, had the practice of praying at the fifty-yard line after every football game. Some members of the team began joining Kennedy to pray, which made other students and their families feel both pressured to participate, and generally uncomfortable.

¹ Sotah 38a:12

It was ultimately the coach of an opposing team who inadvertently alerted the principal at Bremerton High School to what was happening. The other coach mentioned it because thought it neat, albeit surprising, that a post-game prayer practice at midfield was permitted. Kennedy was eventually suspended from his job because he refused to stop his prayer practice, and subsequently, he sued the school district in federal court for violating his First Amendment rights. This past September, Kennedy brought his case to the Supreme Court – for a second time – and this time, the court took the case.

What most interests me about this legal case is not the politics, although I'd be more than happy to hear your thoughts about that. What I find fascinating in this story is the effect of, and response to, public prayer, especially when it is instigated by someone in a leadership role.

Kennedy's prayer was powerful for a host of solely interpersonal reasons. As an assistant coach, he was in a position of authority – a role model whom the players emulated. His prayer had power because it became communal, and because it was a regular practice. And the power of Kennedy's prayer extended even beyond his own team. It became noteworthy to another coach, and we can assume that the fans in the stands noticed it, if they were paying attention. Even if the praying simply sparked curiosity, Kennedy's act of public prayer touched everyone who witnessed it. And that's only for the people who were physically present.

That's a lot of influence for a prayer practice, without even mentioning the spiritual power that Kennedy's prayers may have held. That religious element is impossible to measure.

Over the past few months, I have found myself fixated on this news story, and at first, I couldn't quite figure out why. But thinking about the magic throughout Parshat Nasso, and the Priestly Blessing in particular, helped me understand.

When the Kohanim recite the blessings, the Israelite People are passive. But part of the magic of prayer is that praying affects us even if we ourselves aren't praying, as long as we are present. Prayer can have power even if we are actively resistant to it, or simply don't believe in it at all. As long as we're in the room.

There have been several times in my life when I couldn't bring myself to pray. Even, and especially in those dark, challenging moments, I wanted to be in the room where it happened. Perhaps to protest, to feel less alone, or to experience something familiar that could ground me and bring me some comfort and relief. Most likely, all of the above.

Prayer is actually a lot like the tasks on the cards from the Fair Play game. It's frequent, sometimes tiring, repetitive and time-consuming, and can easily feel burdensome and uninspired. But, just like maintaining a household, or tending to a relationship, regularity and frequency are essential. The same is true with the maintenance of our relationships with our community, and with God.

Prayer must be a regular practice to truly touch us. If assistant coach Kennedy had prayed once after a game, he would not have been suspended. So too, we can't show up to Neilah at the end of Yom Kippur, having not attended any other High Holiday services, and expect to be moved and inspired. Perhaps we pray so frequently, and services are so long, so that once in a while, we might experience the magic, as ephemeral as it is. And if the spiritual connection doesn't come, we can take comfort in the fact that communal prayer has a power of its own.

In a few moments, I will recite the Priestly Blessing in Musaf. While we cannot be certain that God's blessings will reach us in that moment, perhaps you'll feel a sliver of magic. And if not this time, maybe the next.

Shabbat Shalom!

Cantor, Rabbi Shoshi Levin Goldberg