



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## SHEMOT > Shemot

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January 2, 2016

Shemot

**The Staff of Wonders**



# Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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## **ABSTRACT**

Imagine if you were gifted a magic wand, a wish-fulfilling genie’s lamp, a supernatural totem whose otherworldly powers would allow you to realize your mind’s most sublime dreams and achieve your soul’s deepest desires.

What would such a magical instrument look like? From whence would it come and where would you find it? What would its backstory be and how would you utilize it in the present and the future?

In this week’s Torah reading we discover that such a magical object does indeed exist and that its legendary wonders are at our disposal ... *if* we recognize it for what it is.

When properly applying this heavenly instrument, we have the potential to realize all our and the world’s dreams, transforming this natural earth into a supernatural oasis.

## THE STAFF OF WONDERS

### 1. Magic Has Its Limits (Joke)

A woman was walking along the beach when she stumbled upon a genie's lamp. She picked it up and rubbed it, and lo-and-behold, a genie appeared. The amazed woman asked if she was going to receive the legendary three wishes.

The genie said, "Nope ... due to inflation, constant downsizing, low wages in third-world countries and fierce global competition, I can only grant you one wish. So, what'll it be?"

The woman didn't hesitate. She said, "I want peace in the Middle East. See this map? I want these countries to stop fighting with each other."

The genie looked at the map and exclaimed, "Gadzooks, lady! These countries have been at war for thousands of years. I'm good, but not THAT good! I don't think it can be done. Make another wish."

The woman thought for a minute and said, "Well, I've never been able to find the right man. I am looking for one who is kind, considerate and fun, likes to cook and help with the housecleaning, takes out the garbage, gets along with my mother, isn't glued to the television, thinking he's an athlete because he watches sports all the time. That's what I wish for ... my heavenly soul mate."

The genie let out a long sigh and said, "Let me see that map again..."

### 2. If You Had a Magic Wand

The people who are closest to us are usually the ones who most frustrate us. Any parent can attest to the wonders of a child's creativity as bedtime approaches: "Mommy, I'm hungry. Daddy, I'm thirsty. I want a story. Fix my blanket. It's too hot. It's too cold. I have a booboo..." anything and everything to delay the inevitability of sleep.

We love our children, of course, but it is precisely because we love them so much that they can frustrate us to no end. May we be frustrated – if we can even call it that – by our loved ones only by such inconsequential and natural occurrences like the stalling of bedtime.

Unfortunately, it is true that the people whom we love the most can also hurt us the most. The people whom we cherish and want to bring close sometimes seem so far away. Children may rebel against their parents, sometimes to the point that the love seems left behind. Parents may, intentionally or not, be absent from their children, neglecting to see what their children really need. Spouses, through carelessness or ignorance, may alienate themselves from their better halves.

### 3. Parshat Shemot

This week we begin reading the second book of the Five Books of the Torah, *Shemot*, the Book of Exodus. It begins by describing the increasingly harsh living conditions in Egypt, where the Jews have gone from safety and prosperity to slavery and oppression.

It also speaks about the birth of Moses – how he grew up in Pharaoh’s palace, and how he had to flee to save his life, ending up in the land of Midian where he settled down and got married.

In the land of Midian, Moses came across a man named Jethro – a mysterious individual about whom the Torah says little, except to call him a *kohen* (which could mean “priest” or “minister”) and to imply that, whoever he might be, he was then living the life of a farmer out in the boondocks.

Relates the Torah:

*Moses consented to stay with the man [Jethro], who gave his daughter Zipporah to Moses.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 2:21.

How did Jethro know that Moses was the right man for his daughter?

The answer to that question is a story and a half, related in the Midrash. This story speaks about a staff that was stuck in the ground, but no one could pull it out until Moses came along. Let us look at this narrative together.

But, before we do, I have to point out that this Midrash is found in a collection called *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer*, whose author lived in the 1st century CE and was the teacher of Rabbi Akiva himself. Therefore, this Midrash predates – by at least one thousand years! – the famous Camelot legend of Excalibur (immortalized by Disney in *The Sword in the Stone*.)

So here is what this very ancient Midrash says:

#### 4. Midrash: The History of the Staff

*At the first twilight [in the beginning of time], a staff was created and given to Adam in the Garden of Eden; and Adam gave it to Enoch; and Enoch gave it to Noah; and Noah gave it to Shem; and Shem gave it to Abraham; and Abraham gave it to Isaac; and Isaac gave it to Jacob; and Jacob brought it down with him to Egypt and gave it to Joseph his son. When Joseph passed away, all of his possessions were taken and placed in the Pharaoh's palace.*

*Now, Jethro<sup>2</sup> was one of the wizards of Egypt, and he saw the staff, and all that was written upon it, and he desired it in his heart. So he took it [when he left Egypt] and implanted it in his garden, and no person could approach it henceforth.*

*When Moses arrived at his home, he entered into Jethro's garden and saw the staff and he read what was written upon it. Moses extended his hand and took the staff. Jethro saw what Moses did and he said, "This man is destined to redeem Israel from Egyptian slavery." Therefore, he gave Zipporah his daughter to Moses as a wife ...<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>2</sup> See Radal ad loc, whether it was Pharaoh himself or Jethro.

<sup>3</sup> Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer, chapter 40.

It is well documented in rabbinic literature that Jethro, Moses' future father-in-law, was one of three top ministers and advisors to Pharaoh. The Talmud explains that when Pharaoh began plotting against the Jews and consulted with his advisors regarding how to exterminate the Jews once and for all, Jethro ran away from this evil as fast as possible.<sup>4</sup>

But not, evidently, before taking this awe-inspiring and highly-desirable staff from Pharaoh's royal palace.

Being a wizard, Jethro knew that this staff held otherworldly, supernatural, magical powers. He also knew that not everyone could access them. Someone magical was required to access the staff's magical powers.

So, when he arrived in the land of Midian, Jethro stuck this staff into the earth of his garden. But alas – no matter how he or anyone else tried – it would not come out again. It was implanted firmly and immovably into the earth.

Until Moses arrived...

Moses walked into Jethro's garden, took one look at this legendary staff, and pulled it out.

Seeing this immovable, otherworldly staff moved by Moses, Jethro knew immediately that Moses was no ordinary guy. Jethro realized that Moses was destined to take this heavenly staff and lead the Jewish people out of Egyptian exile – to freedom, to redemption, to the Promised Land.

This is why Jethro wanted his pure and holy daughter, Zipporah, to marry this extraordinary man.

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<sup>4</sup> Sanhedrin 106a, based on a verse from our portion, Exodus 1:10.

## 5. The Twilight Zone

As we will read in the coming portions, Moses used this staff to perform a number of miracles – turning the staff into a snake and then back into a staff again in his first encounter with Pharaoh ... using it to command each of the plagues to begin ... and doing more stuff with the staff as the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for forty years.

But what exactly was this mysterious staff? Perhaps by examining its origins, we shall come to discover the secret of its otherworldly abilities.

As *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* asserts, we know that the staff was created during the first twilight – that is, between Friday and the onset of the first Shabbat of creation. This is sourced in the Mishnah,<sup>5</sup> which enumerates ten things that were created during that very first twilight. And one of those ten items was this most famous staff.

The staff was then taken from the Garden of Eden by Adam, was passed down from generation to generation, and arriving in Egypt with Jacob. Then it was stored in Pharaoh's palace along with Joseph's property, taken by Jethro from the palace and planted immovably in his garden. And there it stayed ... until Moses came.

Moses was destined to be the leader of the Jews, the man for whom the staff was actually created, and he pulled it out in order to use it to free his people.

The secret of the staff and its purpose lies in the unique time of its creation –twilight. This was the time the sun set on the workweek ... the time of transition into Shabbat.

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<sup>5</sup> Avot 5:6: "Ten things were created on Shabbat eve at twilight. They are: the mouth of the earth [which swallowed Korach and his co-conspirators], the mouth of the well [which accompanied Israel in the desert], the mouth of the donkey [which rebuked Balaam], the rainbow, the manna, the staff [of Moses], the shamir worm, the script [of the Torah], the inscription [on the Tablets of the Ten Commandments], and the Tablets. Some say: also destructive spirits, the burial place of Moses, and the ram of Abraham [which he slaughtered in place of Isaac]. And some say, also tongs – which are made with tongs."

## 6. The Bridge between Natural and Supernatural

Twilight<sup>6</sup> is the dimension between day and night – in this case, the end of the day of the workweek and the beginning of Shabbat eve, which starts the 24 hours of rest.<sup>7</sup>

Day, the workweek, represents the natural world. Shabbat represents the supernatural, transcendent world. And twilight is the bridge between the two – between the natural, predicable, biological workweek and the supernatural, miraculous, transcendent Shabbat.

But if creation was finished by then, if everything necessary for man to exist was created in the six days prior, why did God create ten more things during twilight? If these ten things were necessary for man to live, they should have been created earlier, so that man could enter Shabbat without delay. And if these ten things were not necessary for man to live, then why create them at all?

The mystics reconcile this conundrum with a profound teaching:

Everything necessary for man's survival was created during the six days of the natural workweek. But, having every commodity necessary for survival isn't why we were created.

We were created in order to transform the mundane and profane into the holy and the sublime. During that twilight just before Shabbat, God created all the tools we would need for this mission of bridging these two (twi-light) worlds – the natural and the supernatural; everything we would need for transcendence.

And these ten magical items specifically paved the way for the transcendence of Shabbat.

These ten things were not created on Shabbat itself but during the twilight before. For, although they lead toward the supernatural, they are still connected to the natural. They are the bridge between the two.

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<sup>6</sup> For the following, see Sichot Kodesh 5737 vol. I, pp. 764-771; Likkutei Sichot vol. IV, p 1220-1224; Toldot Yaakov Yosef, Shemini (p. 304-305).

<sup>7</sup> See Mefaneach Tzfonot, p. 177.



## 7. The Mystics Explain Further

The mystics explain further that the staff<sup>8</sup> (in particular) was physical, but it was infused with the spiritual.

The staff had dual properties, for it was fused from the wood of the Tree of Knowledge and from the Tree of Life.<sup>9</sup>

The Hebrew word for staff or rod is *mateh*,<sup>10</sup> meaning “conductor,” as in an object conducting electricity, light or energy.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, the staff was like a lightning rod which conducts and channels divine energy from above to below.

An ordinary lightning rod (or lightning conductor) is a metal rod mounted atop of a building and connected to the ground with a wire. If lightning strikes, its fierce electrical energy is diverted via the rod and conducted to the ground instead of passing through the building, where it could cause serious harm.

In a lightning protection system, the lightning conductor requires a connection to earth to perform its protective function.<sup>12</sup> Moses’ staff was just such a heavenly conductor, a divine lightning rod that spread and channeled the light from its light source on high down to the earth below.

This is why this bridge between heaven and earth – between the workweek and Shabbat, between the natural and the enchanting – was created during twilight, bridging day and night. And this is why only Moses, the leader of the Jews and himself a bridge between heaven and earth, could move this immovable staff.

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<sup>8</sup> For an explanation on the “Mouth of the Earth,” another of the ten objects that were created on that first twilight before Shabbat, see Meaningful Life Sermon, Korach 2014.

<sup>9</sup> See Zohar II, Mishpatim 114b-151a. Torah Ohr, Va’eira 50b. Ohr Hatorah Va’eira, p. 232; Matot, p. 1295. Torat Shmuel 5631, vol. I, p. 287; Radal to Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer Ch. 40.

<sup>10</sup> Torah Ohr, Va’eira 57b, connoting hamshacha and hatiya.

<sup>11</sup> See Torah Ohr *ibid*, where it explains how the staff, a holy energy conductor, is the polar opposite of the snake, whose very existence is created by the energy conduction. To note: the shrewd snake encouraged Adam and Eve to eat from the Tree, whose antidote is the Tree of Life from which the staff stemmed.

<sup>12</sup> See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lightning\\_rod](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lightning_rod)

## 8. Our Light Conductor

Each one of us has – at our disposal – such a staff,<sup>13</sup> such a lightning rod, which functions as a divine channel, bridging the workweek and Shabbat, the mundane and the miraculous, the ordinary and the extraordinary.

We each have a body, made of earth, and a soul, made of divine energy. Like Adam, whose body was formed from the “dust of the ground” and a soul imbued into him by the divine breath (“He breathed into his nostrils a soul of life”).<sup>14</sup>

Every soul – your soul and mine – is embedded in your grounded body.

All we have to do is recognize its wondrous abilities and pull it out of the ground. That may take effort, but the “staff” you uncover will empower you to reach great heights.

No one can access the divine staff of your soul but you. Your divine power can seem stuck in the ground, until you come around and free it for its true purpose.

What does it look like?

You and only you know.

Discover that thing in your heart and soul that has been created during the first twilight and passed down from generation to generation, until it embedded itself into your essence.

It is what makes you Jewish.

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<sup>13</sup> The Midrash (Yalkut Shimoni, Chukat 763) tells us that the staff was passed down from generation to generation and was in the possession of the Judean kings until the First Temple was destroyed. In Samuel I, 17:40, it is said concerning King David: “And he took his staff in his hand.” According to tradition, this is a reference to Moses’ special staff.

<sup>14</sup> Genesis 2:7.

## 9. Our Hidden Strengths (Story)

How do we reveal the “staff” we each carry within?

Often our extraordinary strength emerges through pressure. As we read about the Jews in this week’s Torah chapter: “the more they were oppressed [by the Egyptians], the more they proliferated and spread.”<sup>15</sup>

I just read a story that powerfully demonstrates this point:

It was about 8:30 P.M. on a warm summer evening in Tucson. Tom Boyle, Jr., was sitting in the passenger's seat of his pickup truck, his wife Elizabeth at the wheel, waiting to pull out into traffic from the shopping mall where they'd just had dinner. The Camaro ahead of them hit the gas, spun his wheels, and jerked out onto the avenue with a squeal of rubber. "Oh my God," Elizabeth said. "Do you see that?"

Boyle glanced up to see a shower of red sparks flying up from beneath the chassis of the Camaro. And something else: A bike, folded up from impact. The Camaro had hit a cyclist, and the rider was pinned underneath the car. Boyle threw open the door of the truck and started running after the car.

For a few gruesome seconds, the Camaro plunged on, dragging along the rider, 18-year-old Kyle Holtrust, with it. One of Holtrust's legs was pinned between the chassis of the car and the frame of his bike, the other jammed between the bike and the asphalt. After 20 or 30 feet, the Camaro slowed and stopped. Holtrust screamed in agony, pounding on the side of the car with his free hand.

Without stopping to think, Boyle reached under the frame of the car and lifted. With a sound of groaning metal, the chassis eased upward a few inches. "Mister, mister, higher, higher," Holtrust screamed.

Boyle braced himself, took a deep breath, and heaved. The front end lifted a few more inches. "OK, it's off me," the boy called out, his voice tight with pain. "But I can't move. Get me out!" The driver of the car, 40-year-old John Baggett, pulled Holtrust free. At last, about 45 seconds after he'd first heaved the car upward, Boyle set it back down.

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<sup>15</sup> Exodus 1:12.

The biker was badly hurt, in a lot of pain, and frightened. Blood was pouring out of his wounds. Boyle knelt down and wrapped the young man in his arms, comforting him until the police and fire department arrived.

The local media celebrated Boyle's feat of compassion. The YMCA gave him an award. Newspapers and TV stations interviewed him. The fanfare flattered him and he felt extremely proud of himself. Yet to this day there's something about that evening that he can't figure out. It's no mystery to him why he did what he did – "I would be such a horrible human being to watch someone suffer like that and not even try to help," he says – but he can't quite figure out how.

"There's no way I could lift that car right now," he says.

Boyle, it should be pointed out, is no pantywaist. He carries 280 pounds on a six-foot-four-inch frame. But think about this: The heaviest barbell that Boyle ever dead-lifted weighed 700 pounds. The world record is 1,008 pounds. A stock Camaro weighs 3,000 pounds. Even factoring leverage, something extraordinary was going on that night.

That something was the body's pressure response. When we find ourselves under intense pressure, the pressure unleashes reserves of energy that normally remain inaccessible. We become, in effect, superhuman.

## 10. Your Magical Gifts (Conclusion)

Today, thank God, we are free of the oppression of our past. However, in our blessed time, we need to pressure ourselves in healthy and positive ways to achieve great results.

Our comfort zones and material successes are “earthly” forces that can pull us down, with its gravitational intensity, into the ground, leading to apathy and complacency. We must see this as a challenge – challenging us to discover the divine staff that lays buried in the ground.

With a sense of urgency, with the power of Moses within us, we can pull our Jewish spirit and divine staff out of the ground.

That is what it means to be Jewish. To do whatever it takes to achieve the extraordinary, and reveal the supernatural in the natural.

You have been gifted with every tool you need – be it magical or natural, be it a genie lamp, a magic wand, or a supernatural staff – in order to achieve your purpose here on earth.

If, for whatever reason, it feels as if you don't have the right tools to fulfill your life's desires, perhaps it is time to reassess your life's desires, perhaps the issue isn't your tools but your dreams.

Bottom line:

Know that – as a Jew – your life is full of magic, so never settle for the mundane.

Shabbat Shalom!

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