

“The Power of Intention; the Power of Thoughts”

In Nobel Laureate Issac Bashevis Singer’s short story, “Fire” a man living in a poorhouse recounts the burning of his brother’s house. Never close, the two brothers’ relationship had deteriorated over time to the point where one Friday night during the winter, the younger brother – and narrator – Leibus - wakes up in the middle of the night and packs a bag with shavings. He carries them to his brother’s house planning to burn it down.

He trudges through the snow, and as he approaches his brother’s house, he sees a glow. As he nears it, he sees that his brother’s house is – already! – on fire. “I had come to set a building on fire and it was already burning” Leibus says. Once the bag of shavings was found, he was accused of arson, and a series of events ensued which ultimately led to his living in the poorhouse.

Singer’s stories are far from happy-go-lucky. They present ambiguities, foreseen consequences, and troubling endings. “Fire” is no different.

Fire is also a feature of this week’s *parsha*. *Tzav*. In fact, much of the Book of Leviticus is about sacrifices, which necessarily entails fire as well. Fire is a reminder of the primitive nature of man. Without it, we never would have been able to develop civilization.

The role of fire in sacrifices was one step toward the monotheism that Moses taught. Pagans were apt to worship the forces of nature such as fire. By

instrumentalizing fire for the purpose of sacrifice, the Torah was able to diminish the human urge to worship fire or its “god.”

Eventually, further distancing from fire divinity’s was required. Not just the bringing of the sacrifice, but the *intention* involved in that bringing became the key to prayer, which replaced sacrifice after the Temple’s destruction.

Bashevis Singer’s “Fire” plays with the role of intention in human behavior. Even though Leibus did not actually use the shavings to light his brother’s house on fire, he had *thought* about and had prepared for doing so. Leibus asks the same question at the story’s conclusion: ““There’s only one thing I don’t understand ... why did a fire have to break out in my brother’s house on just that night? Some time ago it occurred to me that it was my anger that started the fire. What do you think,’ he asks his listener.”.

The question is an intriguing one. We might ask, Are a person’s thoughts powerful enough to shape external reality? Or more precisely, how important is intention in the construction of reality?

Here is one of those instances in which the ways of God and the ways of man differ. “For My plans are not your plans, nor are My ways your ways declares the Lord” (Isaiah 55:8-9). In the ways of God, His intention can never be known to us. Consider COVID-19. As this virus has swept across the globe, people have tried to make sense of its rapid rise. Is humanity being punished? Did not God send

plagues in the time of the Bible as an expression of His disappointment? Might this be the same?

These questions are unavoidable, but they are also dangerous. We can never completely know God's will. To presume that we do, to presume that when events happen in the world we *know* that God's hand is the mover behind them is an act of hubris. The proper response to COVID-19 is to search for a reason that accords with what we know about God's ways. Micah teaches that God's ways are justice, loving-kindness, and modesty. These are the attributes we have to redouble in order to respond as God desires us during the COVID-19 pandemic.

How does this relate to intention and the power of thoughts in worship? The Haftorah on Shabbat HaGadol from the Book of Malachi addresses this question: "Then the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of yore and in the years of old. But [first] I will...act as a relentless accuser against those who have no fear of Me: Who practice sorcery, who commit adultery, who swear falsely, who cheat laborers of their hire, and who subvert [the cause of] the widow, orphan, and stranger, said the Lord of Hosts" (3:4-5). Sacrifices are only effective if one practices the proper moral behavior. Sacrifices and moral behavior can only be executed properly when the proper intention is cultivated beforehand.

Sacrifices might seem to depend less upon intention, but given that the acceptance of sacrifices depends on moral behavior, which depends upon intention, we cannot deny the power of thoughts to shape reality. That is why positive thinking is so important.

Our thoughts cannot generate reality without many other factors, but they are indispensable to right action. While Leibus' intention to burn his brother's house down could not have started the fire, Leibus still learns from this incident how powerful one's thoughts can be. Would you have reacted any differently were you Leibus?