

Shabbat Shalom.

Usually, when Rabbi Samuels asks me to do a Friday night d'var Torah, the Torah is somehow involved. Torah portions are set from week to week, and I'll know what they are. That gives me a fixed place to start figuring out what I want to talk about.

Tonight, before Passover ends, is the start of a shabbat called Chol Chamoed Pesach, and there are differences in the choice of the appropriate sidrah on different calendars. Some say it should be Exodus 33; some say Leviticus 9; still others say Deuteronomy 14; and if you look at the monthly calendar Congregation Beth Israel sends out with the Shofar, you'll have noticed that there's no sidrah chosen for this week at all.

Indeed, the email the rabbi sent me to ask me to do the d'var Torah contained the sentence: "You could talk about Pesach, the omer, or anything else you'd like." That kind of liberty doesn't come along very often, but I did figure out that one of my limitations was that whatever topic I chose should probably bear a relationship to Judaism. But that wasn't much of a limitation—with a little thought, I can usually link just about anything to Judaism.

So, in the spirit of a d'var Torah about both Pesach and anything else, I decided to talk a little about the work of Dr. Rupert Sheldrake. Rupert Sheldrake was born in 1942, in England, got a doctorate from Cambridge University in biochemistry, studied at Harvard, had all the right scientific credentials, and is now considered—and openly called—a heretic and a charlatan by the science establishment because he keeps asking questions that scientists don't believe are worth dealing with, largely because science hasn't been able to satisfactorily answer them.

I could give you lots of examples, but only one is relevant to tonight's Torah-lite d'var Torah. That question can be phrased as: "What if memory is not contained in the human mind? What if, in other words, memory is a function of time, not of matter—matter in this case being the tissue of the brain and its neurons?"

Now hold onto that question while we look at another question, one that is undeniably familiar to nearly all Jewish people. We hear it every time we sit down at a Passover Seder, which is the Jewish ritual that more Jews perform than any other. The question is: "Why is this night different from all other nights?"

We are also familiar with the four standard answers to that question: because we eat only unleavened bread; because we eat bitter herbs; because we dip food twice—all of which we still do; and because we eat reclining, which most of us don't, but never mind.

Those are the answers we know. Once I thought about the question, though, I asked myself—as I am wont to do—what if there's another answer? One we don't recite in the same part of the Seder, but one that we're called upon to mention every year in a slightly different context.

Let's return, for the moment, to the outcast and maverick scientist, Dr. Sheldrake. In his 1988 book entitled The Presence of the Past, Sheldrake writes: "Rituals really can bring the past into the present. The greater the similarity between the way the ritual is done now and the way it was done before, the stronger the . . . connection between the past and present performers of the ritual."

A lot of the ritual we do at the Seder was created by the rabbis in the Mishnah, in the first century of the Common Era, so what we're doing today has a lot of the past built up into it. Every year, we keep it going. But we do that with a lot of our other holidays as well—it's not unique to Passover.

What is unique to Passover also comes to us from the Mishnah, and we find it enshrined in the Haggadah. The Mishnah tells us that in every generation, we are commanded to regard ourselves as if we have personally gone forth from Egypt. Think about that. We may be commanded to remember what happened on our other holidays like Purim, Sukkot, even Yom Kippur. But on Passover, we are commanded to relive what happened. And that's a whole different kettle of chicken soup.

Another statement from Sheldrake's The Presence of the Past goes: "Recognition and recall are different kinds of memory process: recognition depends on a similarity between our experience now and our experience before and involves awareness of familiarity. Recall, by contrast, involves an active reconstruction of the past on the basis of remembered meanings and connections."

If there is any truth in Sheldrake's theories and arguments—and we may not know whether there is for many years, or even in our lifetimes—if he's right that memories may exist independent of us—then the slavery of the Israelites in Mitzrayim, the signs and wonders, the exodus itself all are somewhere out there, waiting for us to bring them alive again the way the rabbis of the Mishnah wanted us to.

Passover is different from every other night because we are ordered to, literally, recall it from wherever it is, and to live it all over again.

Sheldrake wrote: "The past can exert a direct influence on the present." Judaism demands that it do so. But it mandates a greater level of commitment only on Passover, and that's what I think makes the night different from any other. On Passover, we don't just remember the past; we take hold of it and bring it into the present.