

**“Symbolic Objects and Symbolic Acts Are Powerless
without Sustained Commitment”**

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I don't know how many of you have read *The DaVinci Code* by Dan Brown, but I loved it. It was such a “page turner” that I couldn't put it down. I think I read it as fast as I have read any other fictitious book. The mysterious and adventurous nature combined with the religious content, made for a wonderfully convincing storyline. Unfortunately, I never read *Angels and Demons* because I am not a fan of sequels or, in this case, prequels. So, when Dan Brown's latest book came out I decided I wanted back in and rushed to the store and bought *The Lost Symbol*.

Apparently, I wasn't the only one who wanted to buy this book because it had a first printing of 6.5 million, the largest in Doubleday history. On its first day, the book sold one million copies in hardcover and e-book versions in the US, the UK and Canada, making it the fastest selling adult novel in history. It was number one on the *New York Times* Best Seller list for hardcover fiction for the first six weeks of its release and has remained near the top ever since. I have to tell you that I was not disappointed. I found myself bringing this book anywhere I went so I could read a few more pages here or there.

As you might know, it is about the Free Masons. This added another gripping element, as my grandfather, after whom I am named, was a Mason. Of course it did make me a little nervous reading the book in public because you never know who is watching you. In any case, I won't give away any of the storyline but I will say that the book works on many levels. I will tell you that there is a twist I never saw coming and I was totally blown away. However, I do have to say that although I try never to read too much into modern fiction, there is an important message embedded within these pages that Brown makes clear every so often in the words of the protagonist, Robert Langdon.

A number of times the reader will hear Langdon remind us that symbols represent something and that they do not carry power in and of themselves. From this we are to surmise that symbolic objects are important and symbolic acts are compelling but, in and of themselves, they are powerless. Shabbat candles don't change anything in the Jewish home, but oh, how they do. A wedding ring doesn't necessarily carry great value, but it does mean a great deal. This week's reading offers us a number of commanding symbols both in object and in action.

Let me share three of them with you. The first, on Page 418 verse 31, reads that the Jewish people are concerned they are going to die of hunger in the desert. God has just performed the miracle of the parting of the sea, yet they are afraid that God has brought them out to die in the wilderness. So God provides ample portions of manna, a food which fell from the sky. It was enough for all of Israel to survive. Moses is instructed by God to store a sampling *l'maan yiuru et ha'lechem*, in order that the Israelites would see the manna and be reminded of the miracle God performed while taking them out of Egypt. It was as if the action of actually seeing the miracle first-hand didn't leave enough of an impression. Moses was to set aside some of the manna to remind them of what took place. I suppose it's conceivable that the people would get

on with their very busy lives and grow to expect the appearance of the manna each morning, so it wouldn't seem so supernatural. Or possibly, the next generation who settled the land would have never seen the miracle of the manna, therefore Moses sets aside a symbolic portion as a reminder. *L'maan yiru*, "You have to see it for yourself and even then the impression doesn't always last."

The second comes near the beginning of the parasha and offers one of the most challenging questions of the entire Torah, so let me set the scene. You can follow along with the text in your Humash on page 403. The initial leg of the Exodus has been completed. The Jewish people are out but have not yet crossed the sea and, in fact, they have no idea that this miracle is coming so they start to complain. They see the Egyptians advancing in their rear view mirrors and they panic. They cry out, "What have you done, taking us out of Egypt? What were you thinking? We told you how it was going to end up." Moses responds, "Don't worry, we have this under control and it will be fine."

In a moment that seems absent from the text and before Moses turns to God and says, "Can I have a word in private with you?" Moses must say, "What's going on here? Do You have a plan?" To which God responds, *Ma'titzak ali?* "Why are you crying to me? Tell the Israelites you are going forward and then lift up your rod and hold your arm over the sea and split it." This becomes one of the most famous images we have. In fact, the act of raising an arm with a rod to perform miracles becomes the expected and most common method for executing miracles. We see it with Charlton Heston, and with every magician since then. It is so much more impactful than Elizabeth Montgomery wiggling her nose in *Bewitched* or of Barbara Eden blinking her eyes in *I dream of Jeannie*.

Remember, it was not the action of Moses lifting his arms that made the sea split. It was the symbolic act that was associated with the miracle. This is why at the end of the parasha when Moses raises his hands, once again they win over their enemy. On Page 421, Moses said to Joshua, "Pick some men for us, and go out to battle with Amalek. Tomorrow I will station myself on the top of the hill, with the rod of God in my hand." Joshua did as Moses told him and fought with Amalek while Moses, Aaron and Hur went to the top of the hill. Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed; but whenever he put his hand down, Amalek prevailed. "Moses hands grew heavy; so they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it while Aaron and Hur, one on each side, supported his hands; thus his hands remained steady until the sun set." (Exodus 17:9-13)

The Torah teaches one critical detail: "And Joshua overwhelmed the people of Amalek with the sword. **And Joshua overwhelmed the people of Amalek with the sword.**" Moses played a role in inspiring and being the religious exemplar, but it was Joshua who overwhelmed the people of Amalek with the sword. It's as if the Torah was highlighting the influence Moses carried and the role he played, but let's be perfectly clear, it was Joshua who overwhelmed the people of Amalek with the sword. Not with magic and not with hokus pokus. He got in there and fought the fight. Just like we all need to do in our lives. No matter the battle.

I am not minimizing the role Moses played. Symbolic actions are authoritative. Moses seems to split the sea when he raises his hands and the result is the defeat of the Egyptians. God, through Moses, splits the sea. The Jewish people witness this and they feel the redemptive capacity of our God. So when the scenario unfolds again, and the same actions occur, of course they believe. When Moses raises his hands against the Amalekites, the way he did against the Egyptians, of course they believe the result will be the same. So, when he drops his hands of course they lose confidence.

On February 10, 2007, then Senator Barack Obama announced he was running for President of the United States with the following statement:

“It was here, in Springfield, where North, South, East and West come together that I was reminded of the essential decency of the American people – where I came to believe that through this decency, we can build a more hopeful America.

That is why, in the shadow of the Old State Capitol where Lincoln once called on a divided house to stand together, where common hopes and common dreams still exist, I stand before you today to announce my candidacy for President of the United States.”

From that day on he has never once underestimated the power of symbolic gestures, making key announcements in specially selected locations. He has bowed at the right times and shaken the right hands. Unfortunately, the American people still grow disillusioned even as his popularity rating continues to plummet and as the economy rebounds for many far too slowly. As Cindy Lee Miller Sheehan, an American anti-war activist whose son was killed during his service in the Iraq War on April 4, 2004, put it best when she said, “Symbolic actions don’t solve real problems.”

I never underestimate the healing that takes place when we, your clergy, visit you in the hospital. I don’t for a minute discard the impact a simple meeting in the office of the clergy can have on a person’s life. I thank you and God almighty for granting me that influence. However, today in a softer way I ask you the same question God asks Moses and the Jewish people, “*Ma T’tzak ali?*”

People want me to make a case for belief in God. They want me to solve the problems they are having with their children, spouses and parents. They want me to heal their loved ones and make their problems with addiction go away. I thank God I am asked to be part of the solution. It is a truly holy place to stand, but I say to you that I have to do the work as well. I can lay my hands, because I know the power of loving touch. However, that alone will never cure anyone.

You, too, have to do the work. You, too, have to fight the fight. Often as I leave a hospital room I ask for a person’s name so that I might pray for them. Sometimes I get the response, “That’s alright Rabbi, I don’t really believe in that stuff.” To which I say, “Look, I assume the doctors will do their part, you’ll do your part and I’ll do mine and hopefully that will be enough.”

So, together we must work, together we must support each other, and together we must move forward strengthening our faith and bringing healing to the world and to ourselves.