



Parshat Bamidbar
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Abra Kadabra
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In the 70s, Walter Mischel began the experiment that we all know and love, and which became one of the most famous psychological experiments of all time. At the time, he wanted to explore the relationship between a child's patience and ability to wait and their success later in life. To conduct the experiment, he sat four-year-old children in front of a marshmallow and told them they had a choice. They could eat the marshmallow right away, or, they could wait 15 minutes at which point they would receive an additional marshmallow.

The videos from that experiment and later repetitions are utterly delightful. We've all watched them. We've chuckled at the squirmy, adorable children trying to wait for that extra marshmallow. We've watched their resolve waiver, watched them sneak little nibbles, or the tiniest lick, hoping that their sampling went unnoticed. We've all smiled watching as they hide their eyes under the table or try to distract themselves from the treat sitting in front of them.

In those original experiments, Mischel claimed that there was a correlation between patience at age four and success later in life. He showed that children who could wait for the second marshmallow would go on to have SAT scores that were 210 points higher, were more likely to finish college, and went on to have significantly higher incomes than their peers who could not wait. Conversely, he showed that the impatient participants were more likely to be incarcerated, and more likely to struggle with addiction. But Mischel also demonstrated that children could develop strategies for patience over time, leading many parenting experts to

believe that if you could just teach your four-year-old a little patience, you could help them to find future success

As Governor Baker unveiled plans this week to begin the re-opening process here in Massachusetts, I felt very much like one of the kids in those marshmallow experiments. Here we are, sitting in front of the epic treat that is togetherness. Our lives have had precious little interaction for the past two and a half months. For the past 70 days, we've been stranded in a wilderness of solitude, only seeing each other from behind masks or behind screens, yearning for the time when we could come back together. And now, we're being told that the state is opening partially, but that we have to be patient and cautious so that we don't undermine the progress we've made. We are told that if we can wait, if we can stay socially distanced and separate, if we can continue to be extra vigilant, then maybe we'll get the bonus treat of not having a resurgence of the virus. If we disregard the epidemiologists and start eating the treat of community and togetherness again without delay, we may get a consequence that's worse than just an extended shutdown.

And like those children in that experiment, it's hard for me to imagine not trying to taste the freedom and connection just a bit. I want just a little nibble of summer vacation and time with friends. I don't want to be patient. And yet, I see how important it is. How do we develop the strength and patience to maintain social distancing in order to protect one another during this strange time?

Mischel discovered that the children who imagined the marshmallow was a cloud or a fairy or a toy were able to wait much longer than the children who thought of it as a

marshmallow. As we resist temptation, I wonder if it might be possible for us to change our thinking in a similar way to help us promote safety and proper social distance.

For example, my teacher Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld suggests that we should change our language. Instead of talking about social distancing, she suggests framing the practice of keeping each other safe as “social discretion” or “contact-free connection.” What would it mean for us to think of this time as an opportunity to connect more creatively with one another? Would it mean that we invest more deeply in sending physical letters to one another in the mail? Would it mean a practice of not just Zooming and “seeing” one another, but taking time to acknowledge the qualities we appreciate in one another in every call?

Turns out that this practice of using our thoughts to alter and improve our reality is one that has ancient roots. If you’ve ever watched a magic show, you’ve likely heard the magician recite “abra cadabra” as they wave their wand and pull a rabbit out of a hat. Abra cadabra comes from the Aramaic phrase עברא כדברא meaning ‘I create as I speak’ or ‘it happened as I said.’ This phrase reminds us that true magic isn’t so much about changing reality, but about changing how we see it. When God wanted to create the world, God spoke about God’s dreams for light and land and animals and through God’s speech, the world flowed forth. We are made in God’s image, and that means that our speech and our thoughts have creative power.

How are you using your powers of creation? How have you been speaking about the pandemic? How have you been thinking about your summer? Is there a way you can do some work of reimagining that might make space for more joy and opportunity in the coming weeks?

Let me tell you a story. Bradley Harder lives in East New York. He’s a social guy, super dialed into community, and loves the everyday interactions he gets to share with neighbors and

friends in his vicinity. When the pandemic became a threat on the horizon, Bradley became very worried. He worried about his health. Bradley lives with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD for short) and a host of other physical ailments which he knew would make him extra susceptible to a virus like COVID 19. Bradley also lives alone which made him worried that he would be extra susceptible to loneliness and the real health challenges that solitude can engender.

He decided that he needed to take care of his health and he needed to reframe this period. Instead of living in “shutdown” mode, he decided that he was going to create a new adventure for this chapter. He always wanted to create a cooking show, and so he began broadcasting a series of cooking videos called *Cooking without pants* from his kitchen. Each video was an opportunity to share recipes, conversation, and of course delicious meals with friends new and old and Bradley loved seeing people’s reactions and comments.

Bradley cooked so many meals, and shared such a sweet connection, that when he mentioned in one of his videos that he was running out of ingredients with which to cook, the community sprung to action. The next morning, Bradley opened his door to find bags of groceries.

He baked pies in gratitude. And that began the epic Pandemic Pie Project. Since the start of the pandemic, Bradley has made more than 200 pies from scratch. Some he’s given as thank you gifts to the people who have kept him supplied with groceries, others for friends and neighbors, and still more to cheer people up. As Bradley says, there’s nothing quite like the comfort you get from a warm pie. It’s like “a warm hug from your mom.... it’s just love... You can’t eat a pie without a smile on your face. That’s my philosophy and I’m sticking to it.”

Bradley has managed to transform a time that could be filled with challenge into a time that is, in his words, “ooey, gooey, and sweet.” Instead of feeling alone, Bradley has managed to inspire kindness and goodness in the people around him. Love abounds in groceries on his stoop and music videos that neighbors have shared in appreciation.

We can’t all bake pies, but we can transform the raw ingredients of this summer into something delicious. Abra kadabra. What will you say, what will you do, to make this summer something sweet?