

Shabbat Hagadol

April 14, 2000

Rabbi Lisa Edwards

BCC

Another explanation sometimes offered for the term Shabbat Hagadol is that it's one of the two services in the year in which the rabbi traditionally gives a sermon (Shabbat Shuvah is the other). On Shabbat Hagadol the rabbi reminds everyone of all the complicated rules of keeping Passover -- this takes a long time, and so the Shabbat Hagadol services tend to be a bit longer -- bigger -- hence, the big, long Shabbat.

So everybody ready for a list of all the rules? Okay...then, let's try something else instead.

Can you think ahead, for a moment, to the 1st seder next week, or perhaps back to a first seder of a previous year -- can you conjure up for yourself how good the first bite of matzah tastes every year? Just stay with the first bite, don't fast forward to the taste of matzah on the last day of Pesach (by the way, tradition only requires eating matzah on the first two nights of Passover...after that it's optional, just don't substitute bread for it).

Why does that first bite taste good? And why does it quickly become old? Torah tells us that matzah is both the "bread of affliction" (lechem oni -Deut. 16:3) that our ancestors ate as slaves in Egypt and a "bread of freedom" -- it's a bread of freedom because it was the bread they ate during the escape from Egypt, when they were moving so fast they didn't have time to let the dough rise. Matzah then, can be a bread of slavery and a bread of freedom.

Similarly, the ingredients of matzah - flour and water - can be used to make matzah or to make leavened bread, that which is forbidden on Passover. The physical difference is whether you soak the grain long enough to let it ferment, to let it become chametz, leavened -- chametz is the sour in sour-dough; it's the fermentation, it's what allows the bread to rise, to puff up.

Like the matzah itself that can be slave bread or free-person bread, the grain that is forbidden us on Passover in one form, is holy on Passover in another form. The difference is not the matzah itself, or even the ingredients themselves, but rather, the difference is in what we do with the ingredients, how we treat them. Do we make the grain into -- matzah? Or into sour-dough bread? Do we manage to keep matzah tasting to us all week like it did in that first bite -- delicious? or does it soon become for us slave bread?

The same is true of ourselves -- we can be -- each of us -- slave or free, holy or not, sweet or sour -- depending on what we do with the ingredients given to us, the ingredients of our lives.

On Pesach we focus a lot on the physical -- the cleaning, the shopping, the cooking, the eating. There is so much to be done we can easily become overwhelmed; we can easily lose sight of something else very important. But the point of the physical turns out to be something emotional. On Passover we're to rid ourselves not simply of the chametz that is in our cupboards and pantries, but also our emotional chametz, the chametz in our souls. So let's take a few moments to think about this. What is it for us? What has puffed us up? Or soured us? What keeps us slaves when it's time to be free? Of what do we need to cleanse ourselves? Take a few moments to consider this...

And now that we've considered what puffs us up, let's consider for a few moments what it will take to cleanse ourselves, to deflate ourselves just the right amount? Take a few more moments...

The Haftarah for Shabbat Hagadol, talks a lot about spiritual chametz, without ever using that term. It comes from the last chapter of the Book of Malachi, who is the last prophet in the book of prophets. In it God is pointing out to the Israelites that they've not been doing a good job of following in God's ways. The people seem surprised. "We haven't?" they say. "What do you mean? Could you be more specific?" And so God gets specific, with a fairly long list. "Oh," say some, "oh dear," while others apparently go right on doing what they were doing before God interrupted. My favorite line here is the description of the people who did take heed of what God was telling them. Do you know what they did? According to Malachi, "Then the ones who were in awe of God talked to each other. And the Eternal listened and took note." [3:15] I love the fact that the ones in awe of God didn't turn to God and start praying or asking for forgiveness, they didn't start crying or shaking with fear, and they didn't run away. Instead, they turned to one another and talked together. And when they talked amongst themselves, God listened too, and took note of them.

There are many theories about why this is the reading for the Shabbat before Pesach. But I think one reason is that it can serve to remind us that Passover, and Judaism for that matter, is essentially a celebration of people moving together toward freedom, freedom from slavery, freedom from all kinds of things that enslave us -- including the kind of slavery that happens when we don't work together or talk together.

We can, and do, thank God in all sorts of ways on Passover for getting us out of our "narrow places" -- out of our Egypts. But once out of slavery, what became important was learning to live together, and the prophets and the Torah tell us over and over again, that living together, making a community together, involves talking together, talking to each other at least as much as we talk with God. And when we do that, says Malachi, when we show our awe for God by talking with one another -- God listens and takes note. -- In other words, you don't have to do it all alone -- isn't that a liberating idea?

Perhaps it's in the conversation, then—in talking together as we prepare, in talking together as we celebrate the seders, or even in talking together about how we as a congregation can better walk in God's ways - that we come to understand why we call this time z'man cheruteinu, the season of our liberation.

Shabbat shalom