

Shabbat Hagadol 5763

April 11, 2003

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A couple of summers ago, Tracy was helping Shoshannah Weinreich - then 3 1/2 years old, to put on her swim suit - Something Shosh likes to do with great regularity. She loves the water. Tracy, however, isn't all that adept at helping a 3 year old put on a swim suit - she got it on her hum, sideways is the best way I can describe it. Shosh was in one of her most polite moods -- "it's a little tight," was all she said.

I'm not sure why I think of Shoshannah's response as often as I do - it seems the perfect response to so many things, and not just trying on clothes either. Maybe I think of it especially this time of year, as Passover approaches, and we retell the story of the Israelites leaving Egypt. The Hebrew word for Egypt, Mitzrayim, means "narrow place" - literally then, "a tight space," and it is, as we often note, such an appropriate metaphor for so many things in our lives. And this year - as Passover arrives - is no exception - the times themselves feel a little tight lately.

Way before the war started or ended or did whatever it's doing right now, Davi had wanted to unveil this 8th window tonight - on Shabbat Hagadol, right before Pesach begins, so that the rush and roar of the waves in the glass could resound with the weight of the upcoming festival of freedom - the holy day, which even more than our daily prayers, recalls that central moment in our peoples' shared history - the moment when the waters parted and made possible our escape from slavery into lasting freedom.

Larry gave us a moving description already of part of how these windows came to be. And some of us have heard Davi speak at other times of her own inspiration for this design. But I wanted to remind you tonight, or tell those of you who haven't heard it before, about some of what brought Davi and the other artists to this moment - when they can stand (or sit) and look at their work in the sanctuary completed (which is not at all to diminish the art work that will eventually appear over the front doors, it's just that these 8 windows are a piece complete unto themselves).

In her journal in January of 2001, Davi talks to herself about coming up with the Red Sea image. Jerry Hanson had posed the problems of the windows to the other artists: to Davi and Haim. How do we keep people's attention to what is happening on the bima, he asked, with the windows on either side of it? Davi jokes about imagining a stained glass yad, a Torah pointer hand, in the window on either side, pointing toward the bimah - that should draw people's attention to the center! She thought about the matter endlessly for weeks/months, and her journal says:

Then came one Friday night at Shabbat services, I was sitting in the front row, head spinning as I was looking at these windows in front of me, at a loss. During the Amida I stood up, but instead of looking out the windows to see the billboard and neon lights across the street, I decided to stare at the surface of the windows to see if I can see

something, my mind was blank, I was hoping to see a pattern in the glass. To my surprise, because of the interior lighting, when I looked into the windows, I saw multiple reflections of myself staring back at me. It gave me a chill, besides saying prayers from the heart during the Amida, isn't it also a time for self-reflection? Then my mind started to click: Beth Chayim Chadashim - House of New Life. Looking harder into the windows now, I see multiple reflections of others in the room, all facing the same direction. A mass of Jews, I thought, moving in the same direction - Exodus! Parting of the sea! The path to freedom, our freedom is towards the Torah, where the Ark is in the middle of the room! Then these images came into my brain: the wall of the Reed sea standing on each side of the Bimah, making the Bimah the dry land the Israelites walked on -- the path toward freedom, .. [slightly adapted from Davi's journal January 7, 2001]

I love Davi's description of how this design came to be (there's more description - equally wonderful by the way - of the inspiration for the other windows too). Whereas some of us might sometimes experience this comparatively small bimah as being "a little tight," Davi experiences it for what it is - a broad expanse, a road to freedom. It is, as always, in the eye of the beholder - how we look at things. One person's freedom might be another's slavery.

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 that 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 ingredients themselves, but rather 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?

And 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. 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?

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, are -- like our new windows -- 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 or make art together.

We can, and do, thank God in all sorts of ways on Passover for getting us out of our narrow places, our tight spaces -our Egypts. But once out of slavery, what becomes important is learning to live together (something the people of Iraq will surely have to do quite soon, as will all the governments of all the countries that have fallen out in the past few months, as will all of us citizens of the world), 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.

Thank you Davi, Haim, Victoria, Jerry - for your willingness to talk to one another, and in so doing to create such a gift of freedom to this congregation. Thank you Larry Bloustein, (and all the other 25th anniversary sponsors) for freeing our artists so they could make for us such freeing art.

z'man cheruteinu sameach, HAPPY season of our freedom, of our liberation. and shabbat shalom