

Shabbat Hagadol 5771

April 15, 2011

By Rabbi Maurice Harris

Shabbat shalom. This Shabbat is the Sabbath that occurs just before Passover, and it is known in our tradition as Shabbat Hagadol – the Great Sabbath. As some of you already know, for centuries, in Jewish communities around the world, this would be the Shabbat when, during Saturday's services, the rabbi would give a lengthy talk on the intricacies of the rules of keeping your home kosher for Pesach.

What I'd like to do tonight is play off of the theme of Shabbat Hagadol. But instead of explaining what kinds of counter-top surfaces can or can't be kashered and why there's a debate within Judaism about whether corn and legumes are kosher for Passover, I thought what I'd do is spend some time considering one of the great areas of higher meaning that we encounter when we celebrate Passover. And I thought a good way to do that would be to start with the Haggadah, the book we use at our seders that guides us through the order of the ceremonial meal.

Partway into the seder, we get to the section of the seder known as *maggid* – which stands for “telling the story.” One of the famous ways the ancient rabbis chose to tell the story goes like this:

עֲבָדִים הָיינו לְפָרַעַה בְּמִצְרַיִם, וַיּוֹצֵאֵנוּ יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מִיָּד חֲזָקָה וּבְזִרְעֵ נְטוּיָה

We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, but then the Eternal our God took us out from there by means of a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.

וְאֵלֵינוּ לֹא הוֹצֵיאַת הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אֶת אֲבוֹתֵינוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם, הֲרִי אָנוּ וּבְנֵינוּ וּבְנֵי בְנֵינוּ
מִשְׁעָבָדִים הָיינו לְפָרַעַה בְּמִצְרַיִם

And if the Holy One, Blessed be God, had not taken our ancestors out from Egypt, it's clear that we, and our children and the children of their children, would still be slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt.

וְאִפְּלוּ כָּלנוּ חֲכָמִים, כָּלנוּ גְבוּרִים, כָּלנוּ זְקֵנִים, כָּלנוּ יוֹדְעִים אֶת הַתּוֹרָה, מִצְוָה עָלֵינוּ
לְסַפֵּר בִּיצִיאַת מִצְרַיִם

And even if all of us were learned, all of us were wise, all of us were elders, and all of us were knowledgeable in the Torah – it would still be a mitzvah for us to tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt.

Why start to tell the story in this way? In a sense, these few lines at the beginning of this section of the Haggadah present an encapsulated version of the entire story we're gathered to tell. The first sentence is kind of the whole story, right? "We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, but then the Eternal our God took us out from there by means of a mighty hand and an outstretched arm." That's kind of the Hollywood pitch line for the whole evening.

Then come the next two sentences, which aren't really retellings of what happened to our ancestors, but actually are comments on how fortunate we are to be free and how important it is for all of us to tell the story no matter how wise and righteous we might happen to be. So in this mini-telling of the entire story, we get the one-sentence-version of the story, followed by directions to appreciate our liberation and avoid complacency.

In a new social justice oriented supplement to the Haggadah, Rabbi Yitz Greenberg writes about the early rabbis' concern about this human tendency towards complacency.¹ He says, "The Rabbis are dealing with two great dangers that arise when we sit down to a celebration of a great victory and immerse ourselves in a beautiful ritual. The first risk is that we feel so good about . . . obeying the commandment [to have the seder] that we overlook [the duty to walk in God's ways]. That means, above all, that Hashem wants us to imitate God's behaviors. God is [according to the Psalm] 'the One who does justice for the exploited, who gives food to the hungry, who sets the captives free' [Psalm 146:7]. God is the One who calls on us to 'do justice to the poor and the one without a parent, to rescue the needy and the destitute' [Psalm 82:3]. That's what God did in taking us out of Egypt. That should be the outcome of this meal." Rabbi Greenberg then goes on to describe a second danger, and I'll quote him again: "that we are so well fed that we feel too accepted and accepting of the status quo..."

I think that bears repeating. He says that the rabbis who compiled the Haggadah over 2000 years ago designed the way we go through the reenactment of the story in such a way as to help counteract the danger "that we are so well fed that we feel too accepted and accepting of the status quo..." Greenberg goes on to say that the whole purpose of the seder is to help us to "know the soul of the *ger*/outsider, because you were *gerim*/outsiders in the land of Egypt" [Exodus 23:9]." I want to quote him further at length:

The Torah wants us to know the soul of the exploited in the Biblical sense—in our bones. In our gut we should feel that we were the (undocumented) immigrants in Egypt who had to take on the dirty work that the Egyptians would not perform. The Torah wants us to taste what it is like to be treated like an alien or an unskilled worker. The Torah wants us to feel that we were the ones whose wages were not paid on time (a violation of [Deuteronomy's laws]), who did not get paid for overtime, who had to accept lack of safety on the job, to being exposed to toxic chemicals, to overbearing supervisors—because the alternative was to starve. When our soul is seared by this memory, we can no longer be

¹ "This Is the Bread of Affliction: Food & Justice Haggadah Supplement" by Uri L'Tzedek, 2011.

bystanders. When we swallow the bitter maror and it tears up our kishkes, only then we will rise up and reject our own status quo, our own playing it safe, our being at ease while the others are tormented.

Oh man I love it when social justice rabbis get on a roll! Don't you? In writing about the purpose of the seder, Rabbi Greenberg gives special attention to the moment in the seder when the person leading holds up the matzah in front of everyone and says *ha lachma anya*. "This is the bread of poverty." Some translations have it as, "This is the bread of affliction or oppression." The entire passage that the leader at this part of the seder recites is in Aramaic, and it goes like this:

Ha lachma anya di achalu avhatana b'ara d'mitzrayim.

This is the bread of suffering that our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt.

Kol dichfin yeitei v'yeichol, kol ditzrich yeitei v'yifsach.

Let all who are hungry come and eat. Let all who are in need come and share in our Passover.

Hashata hacha, l'shanah habaah b'ara d'yisrael.

Now we are here (in exile). Next year we'll be in the Land of Israel.

Hashata avdej, l'shanah habaah b'nei chorin.

Now we are slaves. Next year we will be free.

The matzah that is held up so everyone can see it signals that even though in a while we'll be having a luxurious meal, the purpose of our gathering is to empathize with those who are still oppressed and to reenact the experience of going from slavery to freedom. We call the matzah both the bread of affliction and the bread of freedom – the bread of poverty and the bread of liberty. The dynamism of experiencing both states of being – degradation and dignity – is introduced for all too see at the table. This is special bread – bread of transformation.

The Reform movement has a lovely translation of the line that goes, "Let all who are in need come and share in our Passover." The original Aramaic that these words are based upon is sparse to the point of being a bit unclear. With a teeny bit of poetic license, the Reform movement website gives us the words, "Let all who are in want share the *hope* of Passover."² What a powerful thought. Let those who are struggling, those who have lost hope, those who are stuck in a narrow, constricting place come and join in the hope of Passover.

I'd like to close with a final thought that brings to mind another well-known part of the seder. There's a stage of the seder called *karpas*, which is the Hebrew word for a green vegetable. When we reach this stage, the festive meal is still quite a ways off, and yet our tummies might be beginning to growl a bit, especially if we're close enough to the kitchen to smell the food. We make a blessing and dip the vegetable – parsley works well – into salt water, symbolizing the salty tears shed by the Hebrew slaves. Many people take this opportunity to pass around platters with various veggies on them, which we're welcome to eat since we've just made the

² http://rac.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=3256&pge_prg_id=11105&pge_id=2818

blessing over foods that grow from the earth. This is a well-known strategy for staving off hunger pangs as the seder continues on for a good while before finally arriving at the big meal. And, in fact, Shlomit Cohen, a graduate student in advanced Talmudic studies at Yeshiva University, writes that one famous commentator states that the reason for the *karpas* part of the seder is to prevent guests from suffering, even for a couple hour stretch, from hunger. Hunger and suffering isn't the purpose of the seder, and Cohen writes that she sees this teaching as part of a larger stream of thought within Jewish values. This has implications for Judaism at large. Here's what she says:

Judaism does not view human suffering and the inability to access necessary material needs as an expression of religious worship; Judaism is a religion that responds and affirms our humanity. This is highlighted in the way that our own religious rituals, such as *karpas*, reflect these basic needs. Rather than claim that poverty or injustice are the means to reach greater spiritual heights, Judaism constantly and consistently emphasizes our imperative to ameliorate suffering, whether our own or that of our fellow human beings. We are given the ritual of Karpas lest we suffer for a few hours until it is time to eat our celebratory meal.

And then she adds the haunting question, "How do we respond to the 925 million people worldwide who do not know where their next meal will come from?" This is the challenge of the Passover seder – to inspire us to take the message of liberation seriously, seriously enough that we decide to take action to assist the process of liberation – from slavery, from poverty, from injustice – wherever it is needed.

I want to wish all of you a wonderful and meaningful Pesach! Shabbat shalom.