

Shabbat Ha-Gadol 2015

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick, March 28, 2015

Shabbat Shalom! It is so wonderful to share a simcha with my extended Krupnick Family, and it is so wonderful that it coincides with the quintessential Family Holiday, Pesach. Today is Shabbat Ha-Gadol, which is a Shabbos that is always devoted to Passover teaching. Today I want to speak about the symbolism of the Matza.

The Talmud teaches that there are two reasons why Matza is called, "Lechem Oni." The more widely known is it is the bread of "Ani'im" "poor and persecuted people." But that same section of Talmud also teaches that it is called "Lechem Oni" - from the word "O-nim," which means "answers." Lechem She-Onim Alav Devarim Harbeh- "The bread about which we asks lots of questions and give lots of answers..." As in "What's with the Matza?"

Matza is more, of course than just bread that does not have time to rise. It is bread that has no yeast. And I read a wonderful explanation about this that I'd like to share. The Vilna Gaon, a famous Rabbi who lived in the late 1700's, made one of his central philosophies that a person is taught in his/her mother's womb the amount of Torah that he specifically is capable of learning in his lifetime. Man's purpose, argues the Vilna Gaon, is to simply learn and accomplish that which is expected of him, based on his own abilities, skills and talents. Therefore, the role of a Jewish parent is to open doors to learning so that the child can reach his or her full potential; to find her true individuality. That's why we place so much emphasis on study and learning because it helps a child to reach their greatest potential. But what keeps a person, child or adult from reaching that potential is the "yeast in the dough." The yeast refers to anything external to ourselves; anything that is not genuine to our true nature that has the ability to corrupt and change us. So getting rid of the Chametz, the "Yeast in the Dough" means eliminating all of the external factors in our lives that are not true to ourselves and reflections of lives that are not our own.

That was Moshe's greatest challenge: Not getting the People out of Egypt, but getting the Egypt out of the People. They had so lost their own sense of self, their own sense of mission, that they had no idea who they were, or who they could become. The matza, bread minus the yeast, was a reminder of who they were, what mattered most and what they wanted to do with their lives. Getting rid of the yeast meant restoring each individual with a personal sense of mission.

Our annual Confirmation Service is fast approaching and we have 39 kids in our 10th grade class. It's awesome! So proud! This year I've tasked them with a new final project. Instead of writing an essay, I have them digging in to find their deepest, truest sense of Jewish identity. I want them to understand how they became the Jewish people they are today; how they think of themselves as Jews at present, and who they want to be in the future. So they are doing three things: They are doing video archives of their grandparents and older family members to learn their own Jewish history. This will likely prove an invaluable resource in years to come.... They are also assembling collages that will be suitable for framing that document their Jewish family history right up today. And finally, they are writing their own personal, one sentence Mission Statements. I want them to get at the essence of who they are - just the flour and water; not the yeast of media, peer pressure, the expectations of others... The best Mission Statements are just

that - flour and water - concise, memorable, specific, and actionable, and I'm teaching them how to write their own and so I've shared with them many examples.

Organizations have Mission Statements, of course. Here's the American Heart Association's: "To build healthier lives, free from cardiovascular diseases and stroke." Simple, straightforward and to the point. It's easy to see what their mission is. Here's Google's: "To organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful." They're doing just that! But individuals can have Mission statements, too. Here's Oprah's: "To be a teacher and to be known for inspiring my students to be more than they thought they could be." I'd say she's doing a pretty good job of it. I like Richard Branson's, "To have fun in my journey through life and to learn from my mistakes." That sums him up pretty well. Here's mine: "To make others feel good about themselves and to share what is good in me."

Part of the Passover story's message is that one's life and sense of self are often shaped by a myriad of external factors that have nothing to do with genuine personal growth and more to do with the general expectations and standards of the world at large. As much as Moses had to get the Jews out of Egypt, he had a harder job getting Egypt out of the Jews. So I ask you: Could you come up with a one sentence Mission Statement? Could you filter out the yeast and get back to the flour and water? What would that sound like? Shabbat Ha-Gadol is a reminder that we have one week to get ready to come to the table. Who will show up? How can you your personal sense of mission bring you closer to being the person Gd has given you the potential to be?