

Tzav 2017 - Shabbat Ha-Gadol

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 4/8/17

This Shabbat has special name, it is called "Shabbat Ha-Gadol," "The Great Shabbat" - the Shabbat when we are reminded about all that is good and great about our People. A man once rushed into the home of Rav Joseph Soloveitchik a few days before Pesach with a question. He asked the Rav if he could fulfill the obligation of the Four Cups by drinking milk. Rav Yosef answered the man by saying, "Wait here and I'll be right back." He hurried into the kitchen and told his wife to prepare a good Pesach meal for this man to take with him then and there from what they had already prepared for the holiday. His wife, who had overheard the conversation, turned to the Rav and asked, "How do you know that he is in need of provisions for Pesach? He did not ask you for food. All he wanted to know was whether one can fulfill the mitzvah of the Four Cups with milk."

The Rav answered his wife in this way: "Understand that the third cup is drunk after the meal. If he ate meat at his seder how could he drink milk right afterwards for the third cup? It is most likely that he has no meat and very little else for seder. I think he was embarrassed to ask outright for a handout on Pesach, so he couched his desperate situation in this manner, by posing that question." As the man walked away both agreed that the Rav was right.

There are many people who are in difficult circumstances but too proud or embarrassed by their situations to ask for help even though they are in need. That sensitivity - that Derech Eretz - is reflected in the Hagadah we will read at our own sedarim. "Ha-Lacmah Anyah" - We begin the story of the matzah at the beginning of our seder with an invitation: "This is the bread of affliction that our ancestors ate in the Land of Egypt. KOL DICHFEEN YAY-TAY V'YAY-CHOO --- KOL DITZREECH YAYTAY V'YIFSACH. - "Let all who are hungry come and eat, Let all who are in need come and share the Pesach meal." At first blush, these two invitations seem redundant - "Let all who are hungry come and eat; let all who are in need come and celebrate..." But they are not. Kol Detzreech means "those who are in need," but not necessarily in need of bread. Whoever is in need of bread -KOL DICHFEEN- is hungry, but KOL D'TZREECH - refers to many other kinds of need. There are people who indeed do have enough matzah and wine and food, but have other needs they cannot speak of - the need for community, companionship and connection. The invitation for all who are in need is not, "Come eat with us," but rather "Come and celebrate with us."

The Torah is quite explicit in Exodus 12: "Speak to the whole community of Israel and say that on the 10th of the month each of them shall take a lamb, a lamb to a household. But if the household is too small for a lamb, let him share one with a neighbor who dwells nearby..." On the eve of the first exodus Gd's top priority was creating a sense of peoplehood, of solidarity, and of community. So those who were alone had to find a larger family with which to share the Passover lamb. In Second Temple times, a minimum of 10 people, a minyan was required to eat the Passover lamb. The slaughtering of it had to take place in front of at least 30 people according to Jewish Law. Torah knew that it would be awkward for people to have to ask to be invited so Tradition created these requirements that would bring people together and thereby be able to extend invitations to those who are hungry AND to those who are in need. And THAT is why this invitation opens up our seder.

And yet, one could argue that by that point, after Kiddush and the Karpas, and Breaking the Middle Matzah, it is too late to invite guests. Nonetheless we maintain the invitation in Aramaic, the lingua franca of Talmudic times, to remind us that this is an important priority of our People; that it is emblematic of who we are as a culture.

Ha-Lachma Anya is, as it says in the Hagadah we use for our shul seder, "A renewal of a pledge of solidarity among the Jewish People - solidarity between individual and individual, and between individuals and the community as a whole. It is a proclamation that we are one People, and that we are ready to help one another. Pesach night is a time of sharing."

That invitation to share includes but also goes beyond inviting people who might need an invitation. It also means allowing people who are at your seder table the opportunity to share in a way that makes them feel more at home. When we have guests around our table we might start our seder by asking, "What are your favorite seder memories? What was seder like growing up in your home?" When we start our sedarim with questions like those we become better hosts. We then understand more about the people around our table - where they come from, what they are feeling, and yes, KOL DETZREECH - what their needs might be.

Pesach is a time of sharing; not just of our food, but of our spirits. It is a time to draw closer, as families, as a community, and as a People. A little forethought about the needs of others, particularly at seder time, goes a long way toward welcoming them, and toward being more open ourselves.