

Shabbat Ha-Gadol 2016

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 4/16/2016

This Shabbat has a special name in the Jewish calendar; it is called Shabbat Ha-Gadol, "The Great Shabbat." Why exactly it's called that is not clear. Some say it is because this was the Shabbos on which Rabbis gave their longest sermons, outlining all the rules of Pesach. Not to worry, that won't be happening today. But I think that it's called the "Great Shabbat" because it always comes the Shabbos before Pesach, and it is at Passover that we tell the Greatest Story of the Jewish People, our exodus from slavery to freedom. Passover IS the story of our People.

For me, the story reaches its peak right before the 10th plague as the Jewish People are preparing to leave Egypt and begin life again; a People reborn. (Which is why, incidentally, Passover has to be observed in the spring. The rebirth of nature after the dormancy of the cold winter is a physical, weather-related reminder of the dormant period; the winter of our slavery, if you will, in the land of Egypt.) And so, just as our blossom is about to bloom; just as our People are about to be reborn, Moses gathers the People and gives them their charge.

Here is the scene: Moses has assembled the people to tell them they are about to go free. Enslaved for generations, threatened by a Pharaoh who has commanded that every male Israelite child be killed, these same people have witnessed a series of wonders performed on their behalf. And now they come together as one to listen to their leader. So what would you say to them if you were in Moshe's shoes? You'd probably want to talk about what freedom will feel like. Or, you might want to speak about the destination that lay ahead: the "land flowing with milk and honey." Or perhaps you'd want to warn them about the arduous journey, the upcoming march across the wilderness with all its hazards. Any of these would have made for a great speech. But, interestingly, Moses shares none of these things. His message is both unexpected and profound... If you examine the text in Exodus carefully, you will see that three times Moses repeats the same theme: children and education. We get the text for three of the Four Children in the haggadah right from this section of text. "And when your children ask you, What does this ceremony mean to you?"..."On that day tell your son, I do this because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt". "In days to come, when your son asks you, What does this mean?" Moses speaks not about freedom but about education. He fixed his vision not on the immediate but on the distant future, and not on adults but children who are our future. In so doing he was making a fundamental point: The only way to guarantee a Jewish future is to educate Jewish kids. That's why we built our new school building many years before we moved the entire shul. The kids come first.

Freedom begins with what we teach our children. That is why Jews became a people whose passion is education, whose heroes are teachers and whose fortresses are schools. Nowhere is this more evident than on Passover, when the entire ritual of passing on our story to the next generation is set in motion by the questions kids ask. Freedom is won not on the battlefield but in the classroom and the home. Teach your children the history of freedom if you want them never to lose it. And that is what Passover is all about - Freedom.

But what is the Jewish notion of freedom, especially for a generation that has enjoyed privilege and comfort in a country that protects our rights as Jews to practice our own religion. What is

Jewish freedom all about? It's the freedom to be able to live as a people who are different than everyone else. We have our own language, our own holidays, our own culture, our own Holy Land. And for many years, for centuries, all we wanted was the ability to be left alone to do our own thing. All we wanted was to be left in peace.

We craved the freedom to be a people apart. But of course our notion of freedom today is quite different. In fact, many people would say that this notion of freedom, the "freedom to be a people set apart" does more harm than good. Isn't the whole goal unity and togetherness? If we want to bring people together, why emphasize our freedom to be left alone and set apart? Doesn't a strong group identity, a People set apart, only serve to pull society apart?

No. We believe that Gd took one nation, one People, and singled them out to teach the world the dignity of difference. The ancient world was plagued with a DISLIKE OF THE UNLIKE, people held back their hearts and their hands from people who did not look like them or believe what they did. But have things really changed so much? No, not really. We need to teach our children that the more we respect our own identities, and our own freedoms, the more we will respect that in others. We need to teach our children at seder time that our story is about the dignity of difference. The more confident we are in our own identity the more accepting we are of other people's right to be themselves. Dislike of the unlike, whether it is in religion, or politics, in disabilities or a person's personal appearance, their weight, their style of dress, what they choose to put on their bodies - dislike of the unlike runs rampant in every generation. But true freedom means our working together to guarantee the rights of everyone. We take wine from our cups to remind us that none of us can be fully happy or free when others are suffering. Our freedom brings us a fuller appreciation of the freedom of others to define their own lives and destiny in the same way we have always tried to do. True freedom is our ability to show the world the holiness of the individual, and the uniqueness of others so that we can all live in a world based on mutual respect. That's what we need to teach our kids at seder - about freedom. We need to tell them: the stronger you are in your own identity the more likely you are to respect others who are forging their own identities. When everyone is just like everyone else we can be tempted to fall to the lowest common denominator. But we want to teach our kids that they are not "just like everyone else" so that they can realize that NO ONE is just like everyone else. But of course this is not simply a sacred duty, it is an existential challenge. We need to know who we are, on the inside. We need to know what it means to be part of a people set apart. We need to understand why that separate community's shared identity not only makes us more confident, but gives us the confidence to go out and change the world.

At seder time we regroup. We remind ourselves of what it means to be part of this people set apart; a People who know, first-hand the sting of dislike of the unlike. The antidote to this social poison is not to make everyone the same. Every effort in human history that has tried to do so has ended in disaster. The path to true freedom is a stronger sense of self, and a willingness to foster that in others. That's the message of the seder, of freedom, and of the Jewish People. Chag Samayach!