Shabbat HaGadol Davar Torah - 9 April, 2022

By Arnie Zar-Kessler

Shabbat Shalom. My name is Arnie Zar-Kessler

Today is Shabbat HaGadol, the Shabbat immediately preceding Passover. Last night, Alan Lehman reminded us of the background of its impressive title and unique set of liturgical and ritual practices. On Shabbat HaGadol, it is common for Rabbis to deliver a major discourse usually only second in importance to the High Holiday talk. In some congregations, the first half of the Haggadah is recited in the afternoon, almost like a practice session before the Seder, reliving the Exodus story recreated every year. While many contemporary synagogues the high point of every Sabbath morning is the Drash as it is here, most of Jewish history until as late as 200 years ago, the Torah reading was the focus of the service, and the rabbi or the darshan delivered a sermon only on Shabbat Shuva, between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and today on Shabbat HaGadol. Universally observed in one form or another, there was no clear origin of where the term 'the great Sabbath' came from, as it exists for Shabbat Shuva the Sabbath of repentance or return. In his ***Haggadah Sheleimah Rabbi Kasher*** collects nine different reasons that shed light on this point, or a few.

The most well-known relates to the fact that the events that occurred in Egypt took place immediately preceding the Exodus the year that the Jews left Egypt, the 15th of Nisan occurred according to tradition fell on a Thursday. Thus, it was the 10th of Nisan was on a Shabbat and it was on this day that each family selected the Pascal lamb that they would use in the Seder. Since the Egyptians worshipped sheep, this was a daring and risky action, a great miracle occurred in the Egyptians remained passive, and the Israelites first obeyed a command of God. Thus, in commemoration of that great miracle, this became the "Great Sabbath". Similarly, when a Jew matures and becomes obligated in the commandments as a Bat / bar mitzvah, they are referred to as a 'Gadol 'as on that Shabbat. There's also the inverse of it is that since people are spending

longer time in the show on the Sabbath, because they're listening to the Rabbi's sermon, it's a great Sabbath. It's a big one – a long one - and therefore it's Shabbat Hagadol.

But probably this Shabbat's name's most likely source relates to the Haftorah today, taken from the last lines of the last book of the Ne'vi-im, the prophet Malachi. Just like Shabbat Shuva and Shabbat Nachamu (which is read after Tisha B'Av), so called because of the opening phrases found in their respective Haftarah readings, Shabbat HaGadol closes with the coming of Elijah and the Prophet to announce the day of God verses that just concluded from (Hebrew) "Behold, I will send the prophet and then before the great and awesome day of Hashem. He shall restore the hearts of the fathers to the children. And the hearts of the children to the fathers.". As my wife, Lorel reminded me recently, the tradition has it that no haftorah should conclude on a sour note, and thus we instead of reading the actual last line of the prophets today, 'lest I come and strike the land with destruction, we repeated "Behold I send Elijah the prophet before the great an awesome day.'

The obvious implication of Shabbat HaGadol the great Sabbath is that we have less than a week before the Seder. The very fact that the clock is ticking and all the things that lead up to the Seder feel like they are picking up the pace – almost accelerating. Getting our houses ready, preparing for the meals, making sure that to whatever extent we can be ready for the Seder itself including the details of who will be joining us where we will be going what we will be wearing. In other words, we have just a precious few days to attend to all of the things that have gone into our understanding of what it means to observe Passover are now hurtling towards this coming Friday night. Especially this year where we are at - least many of us are -now feeling more ready to be with others to sit around the table to enjoy the company of loved ones to gather as has been our tradition (and for most of us our beloved personal history) we're reminded of what is the source of this shared history, not only our personal history, but the history that binds us together as families, as communities and as a people.

While these histories and references might be helpful, these are what might call 'stable, or 'static' considerations, and thus I'd like for the remainder of this talk, to speak about the urgency of this

time-before the seder not only as it relates to getting ourselves organized for the Seder, making sure that our houses our food, ourselves, or guestlist is in order, - a sort of specific or 'immediate urgencies' - but of a sort of broader urgency that we be experiencing around this time. One possibly termed 'meta-historical, from an essay by Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, another the emerging face of the narrative and its consequence, by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks and finally, a personal urgency.

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, wrote a remarkable essay 34 years ago (1), and it was reprinted this year in Hadar's 'The Long Redemption' (2) that's been distributed here at the Minyan. In it, Rabbi Greenberg makes a convincing case that the Exodus narrative is a touchstone for all of human history because it is fundamentally a story of hope dating back 33 centuries, and has spoken to, and continues to speak to suffering people today. It is a story of hope because it promises that the weak and the oppressed will not be forgotten that God hears the cry of those who suffer, just as He heard the cry of the Israelites enslaved in Egypt.

The narrative, which we will retell this coming Friday night, reminds us that in the long arc of history, God will not be passive, but will intervene on behalf of those who are powerless. In effect we learn that, ultimately, the world will not simply operate on the basis of 'might makes right' and that one even to our own day, in confrontations between raw power and the power of ideas, that sooner or later the power of ideas - the power of fairness, the power of Justice - will overcome and prevail.

From where does this idea come? Rabbi Greenberg asks and answers, it comes from the narrative that we tell the night of Passover, at the Seder. The Seder story of one of liberation and reminds us that time is not simply repeating or cyclical, but rather there is a broad purpose to history - one in which slaves will be freed and justice will be served Thus, it is the source of hope not only for the Jews over the last 33 centuries, it is a source of hope, to this very moment and thus there is an urgency to remind people, and what we hope to teach in every Jewish Day School, even from Las Vegas to Boston.

These lessons of hope are especially important at times when hopelessness can seem to prevail, or alienation from faith in the grand scheme of history may be fading or evaporating. It is urgent to

remind everyone that this story has been, is, and we pray will continue to be that touchstone for us and for generations to come.

Rabbi Greenberg starts by noting that the overwhelming majority of earth's human beings have always lived in poverty and under oppression, their lives punctuated by sickness and suffering. Few escape damaging illness; even fewer dodge the ravages of old age, except by untimely death; and no one, to date, has avoided death.

Most of the nameless and faceless billions know the world as indifferent or hostile. Jewish religion affirms otherwise. Judaism insists that history and the social-economic-political reality in which people live will eventually be perfected—that much of what passes for the norm of human existence is really a deviation from the ultimate reality.

We know this from an actual event in history—the Exodus, and that history including the present reality itself—is a deviation from the ideal, and that redemption will overcome this divergence, we base this on a historic experience. That experience was the liberation of the Hebrew slaves, the Exodus from Egypt.

On one level, this is a very specific incident in the particular history of a small Middle Eastern tribe. The entire event was so obscure at the time that no independent record of the liberation exists outside of the chronicle of this people.

On another level, however, the entire experience forms an essential paradigm. Oppression and deprivation can become a moral and psychological reality. It is this reality that overthrown in Exodus.

The freeing of the slaves testified that human beings are meant to be free. History will not be finished until all are free. The Exodus shows that God is independent of human control. Freedom is the inexorable outcome, for only God's absolute power can be morally legitimate. The Exodus further proves that God is concerned. God heard the cries of the Israelites, saw their suffering, and redeemed them. But the God of Israel who acted in the Exodus is the God of the whole world, and God's love encompasses all of humankind.

God's involvement with Israel is a concrete expression of God's universal mother love. In Jewish history, Exodus morality, from which Jewish ethics and Jewish rituals are derived, was made universal and applied to ever-widening circles of humankind. So the Messiah and the concept of a messianic realm are really implicit in the Exodus itself. Messianic redemption is the Exodus writ large.

No, the Exodus did not destroy evil in the world. What it did was set up an alternative conception of life. Were it not for the Exodus, humans would have reconciled themselves to the evils that exist in the world. The Exodus reestablishes the dream of perfection and thereby creates the tension that must exist until reality is redeemed. This orienting event has not yet been converted into a permanent reality, neither for Jews nor for the whole world, but it points the way to the end goal toward which all life and history must go. Thus, history counts, but it is not necessarily normative; it is something to be lived in, yet challenged and overcome.

Where does Israel get the strength—the hutzpah—to go on believing in redemption in a world that knows mass hunger? How can Jews testify to hope and human value when they have been continuously persecuted, hated, expelled, destroyed? From the Exodus.

How can we create a continuing set of Exodus experiences powerful enough to offset the impact of present evil? The challenge is to make the Exodus experience vivid enough in an ongoing way to counter but not blot out the unredeemed experiences of life. The goal is not to flee from reality but to perfect it. To cope with contradiction and not to yield easily, the memory must be a "real" experience, something felt in one's bones, tasted in one's mouth.

The psychological function of the Seder—and indeed, to a certain extent, all of Jewish religious observance—is to confirm and strengthen the conviction of the Exodus. But one would be guilty of trivializing to see the "reliving" model in purely psychological terms. Underlying Judaism's ritual system is a metaphysical statement about the nature of reality—specifically, of time. The Exodus teaches us that history is not an eternal recurrence—ever repeating but never progressing—but a time stream with direction. History is not a meaningless cycle but the path along which the Divine-human partnership is operating to perfect the world. Time is linear, not merely circular; all humans – including us - are walking toward the end time when the final peace and dignity for humankind will be accomplished.

Throughout the generations, this view of history has been an enormous source of hope, galvanizing people to major efforts to improve their conditions. In modern times, this concept in secularized forms has powered liberalism, with its promise of progress, and revolutionary radicalism, with its expectations of breakthroughs and even of apocalypse. But in modern cultural understanding, time is perceived as only linear; once lived, it is gone. Hence, there is a strong tendency to put aside the past as irrelevant. Indeed, many modern movements dismiss sacred time as pure projection, an opiate of the masses. Thus, the urgency we feel towards standing for the hope that honors and connects the past with our vision of the future. The urgency of telling this story now, at a time when hopelessness might the true spiritual pandemic, where industries are built on promoting anxiety, where alienation is reified.

Judaism, in contrast, insists that the past is available and still normative. Judaism celebrates memory as a present channel of access to the Eternal and as a source of hope and renewal. Through the holiday cycle of the year and other rituals, the past can be summoned up to infuse the present with meaning. Pesach, the Exodus, is not some antiquarian past experience: it is present reality. With the taste of perfection in a Pesach or a Shabbat, in true Jewish dialectical fashion, time is both linear and cyclical. The implied claim of Pesach is that, in sacred time and ritual, believers can step outside the stream of secular, normal time and relive the Exodus itself.

There is a second aspect to the urgency of this time, as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks notes an intriguing element that adds another aspect of urgency to this conversation (3) (4). He suggests that it remains one of the most counterintuitive passages in all the religious literature with Moses addressing the Israelites just days before the release. They've been exiles for 210 years and after an initial period of affluence and ease, they have been oppressed enslaved, their male children have been killed in an act of slow genocide. And now, after signs and wonders in a series of plagues that have brought the greatest empire, the ancient world to its knees, they are about to go free. It is instructed by what Moses does discuss and what he does not. Sachs notes that Moses does not talk about freedom or the land flowing with milk and honey, or the journey they will have to undertake through the desert. Instead, three times he turns to distant future, when the journey is complete, and the people free at last are their own land. What he talks about is not the land itself or the society they will have to build or even the demands of the responsibilities of freedom.

Instead, Moses talks about education, specifically about the duty of parents to their children. He speaks about the questions children may ask, when the epic events that are about to happen are at the very best to distant memory. He tells the Israelites to do what Jews have done from that moment to today, to this coming Friday night. Tell your children the story. Do it in the maximally effective way. reenact the drama of exile and Exodus, get your children to ask questions make sure that you tell the stories your own, not some dry powder, but rather 'because of what God did for me. '

Sacks asks, 'why was this 'educational mission statement' the most important thing that Moses could do in this intense moment of redemption? Rabbi Sachs suggests *freedom is the work of a nation. Nations need Identity. Identity needs memory and memory is encoded in the stories that we tell. Without narrative, there is no memory and without memory, we have no identity. The most powerful link between the generations is the tale of those who came before us. A tale that becomes ours. And the one we hand off as a sacred heritage to those who will come after us. We are the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. And identity begins.*

In the stories parents tell their children that narrative provides the answer to what Sachs suggests are the three fundamental questions every reflective individual must ask at some stage in their lives.

- *Who am I?*
- *Why am I here?*
- *How then shall I live?*

While there are many answers to this question, the Jewish ones are

- *I'm a member of the people who God rescued from slavery to freedom.*
- *I'm here to build a society that honors the freedom of others, not just my own.*
- *And I must live in the conscious knowledge that this freedom is a gift of God. Honored by keeping his covenants of law and love'.*

Sachs argument, and his own urgency, stems from his claim that we have lost the capacity in the West to be able to tell our stories with integrity and with vigor. He claims that our identities are

thin, they can be interchanged, they can be promoted, they can be degraded, and without a lasting story that we tell ourselves about ourselves, our identity and mission are dissolving. Identities have become masked we were temporarily and without commitment, in a marketplace of identities, and fantasies are our only generative narratives.

Yet, the biblical insights still stand to create and sustain a free society you must teach your children the story of how we achieve freedom in the first place. And what its absence tastes like the unleavened bread of affliction and the bitter herbs of slavery. us lose your story and eventually you lose your freedom. That is what happens when you forget who you are and why.

The greatest gift we can give our children is not money or possessions. But a story a real story, not a fantasy, one that connects them to us and to rich heritage of ideals. We are not particles of dust blowing this way or that by passing one's a fad or fashion. We are heirs to a story that inspired 100 generations of ancestors and eventually transformed the Western world. What you forget, you lose. The West is forgetting its story. We must never forget ours.

Never forget the hindsight of 33 centuries. You can see how right Moses was, Sachs tells us the story told across generations is the gift of an identity and when you know who you are and why you can navigate time with courage and countenance. It's a life changing idea whose urgencies is every bit as great now as it was last year, the year before or perhaps any years since we've been around. The notion of what is the story that we tell that will have significance that will be the stories that our children tell their children and for those of us blessed so that our grandchildren will tell their grandchildren just as in some ways our grandparents told it to us the story has morphed. The story has found its way to find the sort of meaning.

The final urgency, the personal one, is present for each and every one of us. I am reminded of a brief interchange maybe 15 years ago – which means it may have never happened, or at least not anything like what I recall. We were visiting our close friends, Bill and Ellen Gertzog in Rochester and took time on a Sunday to walk through the city's annual lilac festival. It was a glorious spring day, and the color and fragrance were wonderful, almost intoxicating. We stopped at one

particularly glorious bush, and I remember Bill saying, 'it's good to really appropriate this because how many more seasons of lilacs will I have?'

And so it is for us, today. We can ask ourselves, 'How many more years will we be blessed to be able to tell our story how many more opportunities will we have like this Friday night, to be able to be present amongst loved ones gathered together to be able to remind ourselves and to remind those around the table of what that great story of identity of transformative views of history of the hope that it provides to every one of us on the table?' Every one of us in the community, every one of us ultimately in the world. How many more chances will we have to do that? If ever it was, ha-z'man he-giyah", the moment has arrived for us to take our place as the transmitters of this narrative, to the critical links in sharing this story of hope, this gift of identity.

As we approach the task, I warn you that we will inevitably fall short. I promise you that whatever goals we have to be able to transmit that story, they will largely be unmet. Despite our sense of urgency because the time is short - or perhaps because of our sense of urgency, we will not fully realize our mission. There will be children crying, there will be people who are disagreeable. There will be shortness of the hour, there will be the rush to eat.

But, for those very same children, Stephen Sondheim said it far, far better in many fewer words as he closed 'Into the Woods'

Look, tell them the story of how it all happened

Children may not obey
But children will listen

On Seder night, everything will stand in the way, but nothing needs to prevent us from renewing our commitment, our conviction, our passion and our love. Whether it is summoning up the urgency of bringing the urgency of the story of hope to a time marked by hopelessness, to reviving the potency of our narrative in order to rebuild identity, memory and mission, or our personal sense of urgency while the time is still afforded us - to the degree that we can be those people who are the transmitters of the great story and to the degree that we can be those who are the source

of holding and sharing that narrative, and thus serve as links in that great 'shalshelt ha-dorot', that sacred chain of tradition, then perhaps we can hasten the day the Great day when God will restore the hearts of the fathers and mothers to the children and the hearts of the children to the mothers and fathers.

Kein Y'he Ratzon

A guten pesach to you and yours

Shabbat shalom.

(1) Greenberg, Rabbi Irving; The Jewish Way (1988); Summit Books, New York
(2) Greenberg, Rabbi Yitz in The Long Redemption (2022) Machon Hadar, New York
(3) Sacks, Rabbi Jonathan; Judaism's Life Changing Ideas (2020) pgs. 77-80
(4) Sacks, Rabbi Jonathan 'The Story We Tell' https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/bo/story-we-tell/