

Rabbi Chai Levy Shabbat HaGadol 3/28/26 Congregation Netivot Shalom

The Shabbat before Pesach is known as Shabbat HaGadol.

Different reasons are offered for this name.

“Great Shabbat” might come from:

- The haftarah, because it ends with the words “I will send the prophet Elijah to you before the coming of the “great” and awesome day of God [*yom Adonai **HaGadol** v’ha’norah*]
- Or because there is a tradition that rabbis would give a *gadol* -an extra long - drash on this day, dealing with all the laws of Passover.

I’m going to try to make it not too *Gadol* because there’s a No Kings protest happening at 1pm that many of us want to get to.

But I do want to talk about how we might prepare for Pesach this year.

Not in the sense of getting crazy about cleaning and hechshers and Kosher for Passover Cocoa Puffs.

But in the sense of what might Pesach be about for us this year?

How might we prepare spiritually so that we can internalize the message of Pesach? As you know,

The story of *yitziat mitzrayim* is universal and eternal.

In every generation and every year, we are meant to find ourselves in the story, both by traveling back in time to the original exodus, and by bringing the original exodus forward in time to be real for us today.

What is Pesach about this year? Especially when it feels like we are IN the narrow straits, which is what Mitzrayim means, when we are feeling the oppressive forces of Pharoah in our world, and we haven’t yet crossed the sea?

I want to offer 4 things. There are a lot of fours in the haggadah:

4 cups of wine, 4 children, 4 questions.

Here are 4 questions for us this year. Real questions.

After all, the Talmud explains that the rabbis provided the four questions in our haggadah as back-up in case we weren’t clever enough to come up with any of our own real questions.

But I have a lot of real questions right now, and I'm guessing you do too. Here are four to start with:

The rabbis tell us that Israel was redeemed from Mitzrayim on account of the righteous women. Women who engaged in civil disobedience against a cruel and oppressive ruler.

The midwives defied Pharaoh's decree to kill the baby boys.

Yocheved, Miriam, Pharaoh's daughter, also all defied Pharaoh and made it possible for Moshe to rise to leadership.

Question #1: How far might we be willing to go to defy a cruel and oppressive ruler? Today, all over the country people are standing up to say No Kings in America! We will not be ruled by a tyrant.

What else might we be willing to do if necessary to be like the righteous women of the Exodus?

My second question has to do with the four children.

The Haggadah lays out for us how to fulfill the Torah's instruction to *V'higadeta levincha* (tell your child the story of the Exodus) (Ex 13:8)

When we have different kinds of children, with different learning styles, and different feelings of connection to Jewish tradition. AND

We're living in a time when many families are acutely feeling the ways that children might relate differently to their Jewish identity, to Jewish history, to Israel, to Zionism, to the wars of the last few years.

The four children remind us that it can be hard to sit together with our family and that we might be tempted to judge or dismiss our family members as "wicked" or "simple."

So, my second question for us this Pesach is how might we lovingly stay connected to the different types of children (and different types of adults too), especially those who are asking challenging questions.

How might we draw closer, even to the "*rasha*,"

by not only *telling* the story, but also *listening* with an open heart, with a willingness to understand and be challenged and grow together.

It might even fulfill what it said at the end of our haftarah today:

That Elijah will come and “turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents.” (Malachi 3:24)

My third question is how we relate to our enemies.

These days, it’s not an ancient myth to say *V’hi she’amda*, as it says in the haggadah, that “in every generation they try to destroy us....”

Our people is at war with enemies - with countries that want to destroy Israel and kill Jews, with antisemites who are making us less safe around the world, and by the internet, which is growing increasingly more filled with hate against us. The haggadah gives us a complex message about how we relate to our enemies:

On the one hand, we recite 10 plagues and give our children cute little tzotchkes, puppets, and toys to celebrate the 10 plagues inflicted upon our enemy.

And on the other hand, we drop wine out of our cups for each plague, diminishing our joy, as the midrash teaches: when the angels wanted to sing songs of celebration as the Egyptians drowned in the sea, God said, “How can you sing when my creations are drowning?”

So, how are we to relate to our enemies during this frightening time? Do we celebrate their downfall or do we reduce our own joy as we battle them? Or something else? That’s my third real question this Pesach: How are we to relate to our enemies?

There’s much that is of a dual nature in the seder.

The symbolic foods ask us to (literally) internalize contradictory messages simultaneously. For example,

The karpas - the green rebirth of spring in the salt water of tears;

The matzah - it’s both *Lechem Oni*, the bread of affiliation, and the bread of our freedom.

The Hillel sandwich - we eat the sweet charoset together with the bitter maror.

Another one of these contradictions in the seder is: what is the take-away message of our knowing enslavement and oppression?

That's my 4th question, and it's a big one.

And one that our people is wrestling with today: that is,

What are we supposed to learn from this story?

Is it: we are an eternally victimized people who always needs to be freed from Pharaoh and needs to fight to survive in the face of our enemies?

"Shfoch Hamat'cha - Pour out Your wrath upon the nations"

Or is it: We are a freed people fighting against all oppression because we know what it's like to be oppressed?

וְאַהֲבַתֶּם אֶת־הַגֵּר כִּי־גֵרִים הֵיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם (Deut 10:19)

Love the stranger because you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

This is essentially the cultural conflict playing out in our people today.

What's the take-away of our people's core narrative?

Is it the ADL? HIAS? AIPAC? If Not Now?

In other words, Is it Never Again for us? Or Never Again for anyone?

We all *read* the same story of Yetziat Mitzrayim, but

What story do we *tell*?

What is the message we are meant to learn from the story?

These are my 4 questions. To review,

1. What would we be willing to do to defy an oppressive ruler?
2. How might we stay connected to the 4 children, especially the "rasha" who asks challenging questions?
3. How are we to relate to our enemies?
4. What's our take-away message from the story of our freedom?

There are many more questions. These are my four to get you started.

And I'm not offering answers, just real questions for how we might approach

Pesach this year - when we are both celebrating our freedom and also

feeling that we're not completely free.

Chag Sameach. Shabbat Shalom