

Shabbat Ha'Gadol Sermon
April 8, 2017; 12 Nisan 5777
Rabbi Adam J. Raskin
Congregation Har Shalom, Potomac, MD

As we prepare our Passover meals, finish up our shopping and cooking, there is one item that I am guessing nearly everyone here serves at their Passover meal. Whether your main course is brisket or chicken, whether you have matzo ball soup or chopped liver as an appetizer, the one item on everyone's menu is gefilte fish. I remember the day when I learned from my grandmother that there is actually no fish that swims in the sea called a gefilte fish. My eight or nine year old head couldn't comprehend the idea of a fish that had a particular name, even a weird one like *gefilte*, that didn't actually exist in any body of water. Then my grandmother told me about how her mother, my great grandmother, would have carp, whitefish and pike swimming around in her bathtub. Then she would scoop up a combination of those fish; remove their scales, fins, and bones, and grind the flesh together, forming little balls that she would then poach. I was traumatized...and I didn't touch gefilte fish for years after I heard that story. Now I love it, and not only at Passover. But recently I learned about another fish that I want to tell you about...Its scientific name is *Pardachirus marmoratus*...and is colloquially called the Red Sea Moses Sole (S-O-L-E). If you saw this little fish, you wouldn't be all that impressed. It's a little, defenseless looking creature that swims rather slowly, and seems like easy prey for any larger fish that would want to eat it for lunch. Turns out that looks are deceiving. The Red Sea Moses Sole has a secret weapon. From its pores it secretes a milky substance that contains a chemical that temporarily paralyzes its prey. So, for example, if a shark attempts to clamp down its jaws on a Moses fish, it sprays this chemical that causes that shark's jaws to lock just long enough for the Moses fish to swim away to safety. Marine biologists actually first noticed this fish swimming amongst sharks and other would be predators without seeming to care very much,

and wondered why. Apparently Coppertone tried to include this shark repellent chemical in its sun screen lotion, but the content wasn't strong enough to be effective. It seems to me that we ought to be farm raising these little Moses sole fish and eating them on Pesach, with all due respect to gefilte fish lobby. If there was ever a food with greater symbolism than the Moses fish, I have yet to see it.

The haggadah seems very interested in the question of how the Jewish people have repelled predators for so many generations...think of how many times the Haggadah says things like: *bechol dor va'dor omdim aleinu lechaloteinu*, in every generation—not just the generation of Israelites in the Passover story—enemies have arisen to destroy us. But we have a repellent like the Red Sea Moses Sole, and that is *Ha'kadosh Baruch Hu*, the holy one of blessing, *matzileinu miyadam*, Who saves us every time from their predatory clutches. *Beyad chazaka u'vizroa netuya*...with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, God rescued us. The Haggadah enumerates: *Kama ma'a lot tovot la'Makom aleinu*...how many extraordinary things God has done for us. *Dayeinu*, we recite over and over again...if God would have only done some of those things, or even one of those things, it would have been sufficient. Each of the four cups of wine represent God's salvation: *ve'hotzeiti, ve'hitzalti, ve'gaalti, ve'lakachti*: I will bring you out, I will save you, I will redeem you, I will take you to be My people. But there is another narrative, a more subtle narrative alongside these overt acts of supernatural deliverance that also reflects the special power the Jewish people have to repel our most dangerous predators.

It relates to that legendary seder that the sages have together in B'nei Brak. If I could have been a fly on the wall of any seder in all of Jewish history, it would have been this one! The question I want to consider though is why was that particular seder held in the town of B'nei Brak? The

attendees included Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Tarfon, who lived in Lod, which is about 15 miles to the south (and according to Mapquest is a good 5 hour walk), Rabbi Yehoshua who was from Peki'in, way up north in the Galilee, almost 100 miles from B'nei Brak, Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria was from Tzipori, also up north near the Kinneret. Who is the last participant at the seder? Rabbi Akiva...Guess where he's from? He lives in B'nei Brak. Now what's interesting about all these schlepping to B'nei Brak for Passover is that Rabbi Akiva is the youngest of these sages. Typically, one would go to the master, the elder, the most senior rabbi and teacher, not the other way around. So why did Rabbi Eliezer, for example, who was Rabbi Akiva's teacher, or Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria who was the president of the Sanhedrin come to their young pupil Akiva's house for yontiff? Was it that they just loved his wife Rachel's gefilte fish? Why did the elder sages travel to the home of the youngest among them?

If you ever wondered what they were talking about all night at that seder, it is possible that Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Akiva were arguing about the blessing to be recited after singing hallel at the seder. The Talmud records that Rabbi Tarfon wanted to say *Baruch Atah Hashem Elokeinu melech ha'olam asher ga'alanu ve'ga'al avoteinu mimitzrayim*. Blessed are You Lord our God who redeemed us and our ancestors from Egypt. That is in our Haggadah. But it doesn't end there. Just before we drink the second cup of wine, we add the words that Rabbi Akiba wanted in that beracha: which begin with *ken Adonai Eloheinu*...So God and God of our ancestors may you bring us to celebrate other holidays and festivals in peace, rejoicing in the building of Your city, and happy in serving You... There may we be able to eat the offerings of the Passover lambs...we thank you with a new song of our freedom, and for saving our lives, Blessed are You *Ga'al Yisrael* who saved the people of Israel. Now what's the difference between the version

Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Akiva? Rabbi Tarfon's blessing only focuses on the past, only on the redemption from Egypt. Whereas Rabbi Akiva's insisted on focusing on the future as well. It is about the redemption to come, about celebrating holidays together in Yerushalayim, about singing a shir chadash a new song to celebrate the ultimate freedom to come. Is it any wonder that the Sages wanted to be in the home of Rabbi Akiva, who not only understood the importance of the past, but also had a forward looking, optimistic view of the future?

Another famous story in the Talmud places these same scholars walking upon the ruins of the Temple mount. Upon seeing that destroyed holy place, the sages tear their garments in mourning. Just then a fox ran out from beneath the rubble of the Holy of Holies. And Rabbi Akiva laughed! The other rabbis thought he was crazy! How could you laugh at a moment like this? How could you be happy when we are standing on the ruins of the Holy Temple? Rabbi Akiva replied the prophecy of the Temple's destruction has been fulfilled, and now that it has, we only have to look forward to the prophecy describing its rebuilding and the renewal that is promised to come to Jerusalem. To that the sages replied: *Akiva nichamtanu, Akiva nichamtanu...* Akiva, you have consoled us, Akiva you have consoled us. It seems that the sages looked to Rabbi Akiva for his perspective, his reassurance, his encouragement. It didn't matter that he was younger...they didn't attribute it to youthful naiveté; they regarded him as a scholar and a master in his own right. It was a dark time in our history when those sages sat around Rabbi Akiva's seder table.^[1] There was a bounty on his head, a rebellion was underway, Roman oppression was at its worst. And he sat there and told them not to lose hope, not to give up, not to lose faith.

^[1] I am grateful to have learned this analysis from Rabbi Kenneth Brander, "Rabbi Akiva's Seder Table, An Introduction" in: *Yeshiva University, The Benjamin and Rose Berger Torah To-Go Series, Nissan 5773*

That is our Moses fish serum, our secret weapon, our paralyzing power against our enemies. No matter what they did to us, no matter what Temples they destroyed, books they burned, punishing edicts they passed, they could never stamp out the hope and optimism that is in the heart and soul of every Jew. Isn't it poetic that the pupils barge in on the seder to tell the Sages that morning had broken, that there was light on the horizon? In the glow of that morning light it was time to recite the affirmation of Jewish faith: Shema Yisrael. Rabbi Akiva himself was arrested and executed for teaching Torah. He used his last breaths to recite the words Shema Yisrael. As long as we can see light on the horizon, as long as we can get up and say Shema Yisrael each day with faith and confidence, no enemy can threaten us, no adversary can stand in our way. So let us follow Rabbi Akiva's teachings and sing joyfully and gratefully at our sedarim not only for the great redemption of *Yetziat Mitzrayim*, but for the hope of an even better future, when redemption and restoration will not only come for the Jewish people but for all people.

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Sameiach!