

Shabbat Hagadol 5776: Focusing on the Essence

Rabbi Michael Safra

In the spirit of the upcoming Pesah holiday, I want to begin my remarks with a question – perhaps one that you can ask at your seder: What is the essence? What is the essence of who you are and what you do and how you try to animate your life? And what are the extraneous concerns or issues or traits that get in the way or distract you from that core? Your answers will not be graded and I won't hold you to them if you decide to change in a week or a month or a year.

But I want to ask this question specifically now as we are preparing for Passover because this is how the Hasidic masters described the Matzah. The Torah calls *matzah* “*lehem oni*”, poor people's bread. And Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger says that *matzah* is the essence of bread – it's just the dough itself, not having changed through fermentation. Matzah is emblematic of the essential kernel within each person that defines who we are and how we relate to others, the community, and God. Over the course of the year, that inner point becomes fermented – we get sidetracked; we lose sight of what really matters. Ridding the house of *hametz* before Passover becomes a metaphor for returning to the essential core message of our lives.

Think of it this way. You may know the story of the would-be proselyte who approached the great sage Shammai to tell him that he was interested in becoming a Jew on the condition that Shammai teach him the entire Torah while he was standing on one foot. Shammai berated the man and sent him away, but he went to Hillel and he got a different answer: “What is hateful to you, do not do unto others; that is the entire Torah; the rest is commentary; go and learn!”

What happened in that story is that Shammai seemed to have lost sight of the essential message. He wanted the whole package. He wanted his students to always strive for more and he was distracted by the lack of respect of this question. His frustrations got the better of him and he lost a student.

Now think of the story of the Exodus. It began with an essential message: We were slaves and now we are free – free from tyranny, free to know and worship the one God, free to journey towards the Promised Land. This essential message comes at the beginning of Exodus, and then the rest of the Torah is pretty much an account of how the people get sidetracked, how they lose sight of the essence and end up wandering aimlessly in the wilderness.

The essential message of freedom became fermented. It was fermented by *fear*. When Moses was up on Sinai, the people feared that he would not return and they built a Golden Calf. When the scouts visited the Land of Israel and reported back that it was going to be difficult to capture the land, the people became scared and they contemplated going back. Fear continually pushed the people away from their essential message and goal of freedom.

My daughter Rebecca asked if I could mention her in a sermon, so here goes. A couple of months ago, she came home upset about a Bible test. Never mind that she had to leaf through a series of other tests on which she had scored 97, 98, and 99 in order to find the one on which she had scored a 70. Never mind that she was out sick on the day of the review. Never mind that the test was given in Hebrew and her answers, albeit the wrong ones, were written in perfect Hebrew. My daughter was scared that the secret was out: Maybe she isn't perfect. Maybe she wasn't up to it. Her teacher and I told her that hers was an irrational fear, but it was debilitating nonetheless.

When we eat the matzah, devoid of any fermentation, we can ask ourselves: What are the fears that keep us from concentrating on our essential work? We are worried about failure. We are worried about the next generation and whether they will be as enthusiastic about our concerns as we are. We worry about enemies who seek to do us harm. We worry about germs and money and the fabric of society, and these fears slow us down. Before Passover, we are called to remove the fear and to focus on whatever good that we can for the world.

For our ancestors, the essential message of freedom was also fermented by their focus on stuff, their inability to distinguish between "needs" and "wants."

They had a miraculous source of sustenance in the *manna*, but that was never enough, and so they rebelled: "If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. Now our gullets are shriveled. There is nothing at all! Nothing but this manna to look to!" And God gets angry; are these people ever satisfied? "I'll give you meat!" God said. "You shall eat not one day, not two, not even five days or ten or twenty, but a whole month, until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes **loathsome** to you."

That's what happens when you have the attitude that you just want more stuff – it becomes loathsome. We live in an era when the accumulation of stuff is unprecedented ... and we want more; it is never enough. Beyond the material things, I'm thinking about the preponderance of technology. The ways we are connected now were unimaginable in the not too distant past, and yet it is never enough. Do you know that car commercial where the meeting organizer takes away people's cell phones and destroys them? He asks how the participants feel to be disconnected, and one woman says: "My chest hurts."

If one good thing has come out of this election season, it was the news from Ivanka Trump that she and her husband power off their cell phones for 25 hours every week to celebrate Shabbat. These are people who have everything; they can be anywhere. But at a certain point hyper connectedness becomes a distraction, fermentation that keeps us from focusing on what really matters in the moment.

One of the messages of the *matzah* is to learn the value of *sova*, of satisfaction, of being able to say "I have enough"; I want to focus on what I need right now and not on everything else that I might be missing or might be worthwhile later.

And there were other kinds of fermentation for our ancestors: resentment, jealousy – I’m thinking about Korah and his band of malcontents – distractions that rose and pushed our ancestors away from their core journey.

The process of ridding the house of *hametz* is intended to return us to the essence of what matters in our lives. The first century sage Rabbi Alexandri would conclude his daily prayer with the following note: “Ruler of the universe,” he would say, “It is well known to You that it is our desire to serve Your will. And what keeps us from attaining that goal? The leaven that is in the dough. May it be Your will that it be removed from my midst.” May it be Your will that I stay focused on my essential mission in life.

I will take the message one step further because, as we know, the Torah’s story of our ancestor’s wanderings in the wilderness ends before they ever reach the Promised Land. That doesn’t happen in Moses’s lifetime; it is only in the book of Joshua that they enter the land, and for good reason. Because the essential message of freedom does not require attainment of the ultimate promise. The Torah’s core message of freedom becomes to stop worrying about the future; don’t be distracted by the things that are missing from our lives; stop thinking about what he has or what she has or what I don’t have. Do not be afraid; concentrate on the values of Torah and what matters in the moment.

That is the meaning of the *matzah*, and that is going to be my message to the participants at my *seder*. Passover is not a test of your Hebrew level; don’t worry about when we are going to eat; don’t get sidetracked by what she said or he said or who brought what. Be satisfied. Be grateful for this opportunity to sit together, to praise God for the blessings of freedom, sing songs, and enjoy the simple bread that reminds us that the things that really matter are all right here. Shabbat Shalom and Hag Sameah.