

Rabbi Noah Arnow
Kol Rinah
Shabbat HaGadol - 3/27/21 - 14 Nisan 5781

Shabbat HaGadol - the Great Shabbat. Together with Shabbat Shuvah, the Shabbat between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, these were the two Shabbatot that rabbis would give sermons, about the details of Pesach on Shabbat HaGadol, about Teshuvah on Shabbat Shuva.

This year though, giving a sermon about cleaning and keeping kosher for Pesach makes no sense, as all our preparations should have been done already.

So instead, I want to think about what's hiding, concealed in our seders.

The narrative of enslavement in Exodus describes the Israelites' oppression and suffering. But it is only after decades of oppression that they cry out (Exodus 2:23), when God hears them, remembers God's covenant with Abraham, and notices the Israelites.

Why does it take so long for the Israelites to cry out because of their oppression? Maybe they were crying out the entire time. If they were crying out, though, why did it take God so long to hear them, to remember them?

Maybe actually, it took years, and years, and years until the Israelites cried out, until they were aware enough of their oppression to even cry out.

"Our greatest plight is our lack of our sense of plight" writes philosopher Martin Heidegger, quoted by Rabbi Zohar Atkins, whose writing about this inspired this sermon (<https://whatiscalledthinking.substack.com/p/from-where-do-our-cries-come>). The most oppressive element, thus, of the enslavement, perhaps, was the normalization of oppression, leading to the Israelites' ignorance of their own oppression.

Ignorance was a kind of freedom. But at some point, the Israelites realized they were actually slaves, and only then could they cry out, be heard, and begin the partnership with God that led to their liberation.

Explains Rabbi Zohar Atkins, "Our greatest need is our lack of our sense of need, our greatest concealment our lack of our sense of concealment. All hiddenness," he suggests, "is double hiddenness."

Perhaps then any sense of freedom we experience is only ignorance of the reality of our oppression. Maybe that ignorance comes from forgetting, or willful ignorance, manipulation by others, or true lack of realization. Regardless, the moment we feel free may be when we are the most profoundly oppressed.

There are times when this double-blindness is a blessing. How many times have I heard people say, "we were poor, but we didn't realize it because no one around us had more than we did."

But more often, what is the most hidden is dangerous, whether physically, psychologically or spiritually.

Put differently and famously by Donald Rumsfeld, there are the known unknowns, and the unknown unknowns--the things we know we don't know, and the things we don't even realize we don't know. And those unknown unknowns are what we really need to be worried about.

What are the unknown unknowns, the things that are doubly hidden, at our seders?

I want to put this in three categories--who's at the table, what we do at the Seder, and what we feel on Passover.

This year, some of us may be having much smaller seders than we'd like to; others will be on Zoom connecting with many, many people. Hidden in the sense that lots of people are missing from our seder is a deeper reality that the only person I need for a seder is me, and that anyone else at a seder will only distract me from the real experience of Passover that I need.

And conversely, hidden in the perfect satisfaction we can find in our small seders is reminder, "All who are hungry, let them come and eat," the first-person plural language of the haggadah, the "we were slaves" phraseology is this reminder that seder is not meant to be a solo journey.

Some of us try to say every word of the Haggadah, to do every detail just right, to break the middle matzah perfectly equally. This perfectionist, completist agenda can so easily obscure the centrality of asking real, unscripted questions, of the realization that one piece of matzah *is supposed* to be bigger than the other.

And yet, the moment we drop the Haggadah, we do a seder out of order, or ignore the details, we are losing sight of the meaning of the word "seder," which means, "order." The whole meaning of the night has been hidden.

And let's talk about the feelings of Passover. We are, I think, supposed to have a sense of cleanness, from all the cleaning, scrubbing, ridding, annulling and burning and selling, that we do of chametz, in our homes, but also of the chametz--the puffed up stuff in our souls and psyches.

But hidden in those feelings of cleanness, of pesadik-ness, is the reality that we've only scratched the surface. If we think we've gotten rid of our internal chametz, we can be sure it's still there. And yet if we are aware that we have not done what can or should to be rid of chametz physically and spiritually, the question is simply, "why not?"

The Israelites' enslavement continued until they cried out, the first point of light in their darkness. At our Seders, may we all have a moment of crying out, an instant of tears, that can reveal to us, and even to those around us, what has so far been doubly hidden.

So that our redemption may begin.