

Shabbat HaGadol 2018

Rabbi PJ Schwartz

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This morning, I hope you are prepared. I hope you are comfortable and feeling alert and awake. Because this morning is “*Shabbat HaGadol*,” literally “the Great Shabbat,” which is what the Shabbat before Passover is called. It is traditionally the time for the longest sermon of the year!

Why, you might wonder, a long sermon to prepare for Passover? Well, there is a lot to do to get ready. But the week to come is not just about buying and cooking Passover foods; it is also about our spiritual preparation and readiness. One way we experience the Passover story is by asking questions. We retell the story each year around a table of family and friends with questions old and new.

As you know, the Passover seder contains four questions, usually asked by the youngest member at the seder. Jews deeply value questions. So, as we look ahead to our Passover celebrations, let us ask four questions and explore their answers.

Question number one: What should we do with our *chametz*, our leavened products that remain on our shelves? In other words, what do we need to do to get ready?

Just as we scour the San Jose stores for matzah and other Passover products, our tradition instructs us to scour our homes and remove any last crumbs of *chametz*. The Torah forbids us to eat unleavened bread during Passover, to remind us how we left Egypt so hastily, that the dough did not have time to rise. So now is the time to carbo-load on all that pasta!

But there is one other layer. The search for *chametz* from our homes also has spiritual meaning. Yeast symbolizes arrogance: that which puffs us up and makes us look down on others. On Pesach, which celebrates the rejection of Egyptian civilization and the new beginning of Jewish freedom, the matzah represents simplicity, a desirable spiritual quality (Don Isaac Abarbanel). Eating matzah for one week reminds us that we once were slaves, and now we are free. We eat the bread of affliction to remind us that we can help bring about a more just and compassionate world.

Question number two: Why is this night different from all other nights? This is THE question asked during the Passover seder. The essential meaning of this question is: What is different about this holiday and this time of year? What do I do differently? What is different about me? This question is really a question about our Jewish identity. Passover is the time to recharge our identity.

The Exodus is the master narrative of our people. Or in other words, it is the greatest story ever told. And it is ours. This story of our journey from slavery to freedom binds us together around common values, history, and experience. So, why will next Friday night be different? Yes, we will dip twice and recline, we will eat the bitter herb and maybe if we can stomach it, some gefilte fish. We'll

debate whether matzah balls should float or if they should sink. We'll sing Chad Gadya and Let My People Go. And we hope that these customs will help us to truly feel different. We will feel grateful to be Jewish, and to be a part of the greatest story ever told.

Question number three: Why do we retell the same story year after year? Jews are masters of repetition, starting the Torah from the beginning each year, reciting the same prayers each week or even day. "Memories," said Elie Wiesel, "are not just what we own, but who we are."

The main challenge behind this question is how to keep the story relevant with each telling. How do we keep the memories alive? How do we tell the old in new ways? The central part of the *Haggadah* is when we say, "In each and every generation people must regard themselves as though they personally left Egypt."

How do we fulfill this instruction? How do we make the story personal? We do so by discovering the ways we are still enslaved and the freedoms we each celebrate with each New Year. What are ten plagues that afflict our world today? What is something in our lives that we are grateful for right now, that let us say "*dayeinu*," that is enough?

In recent history, we have especially reclaimed the seder story and started to tell it in new ways, through our eyes. We have remembered the women of the Exodus—the midwives who resisted Pharaoh's decree and saved the Israelite children. And we remember Miriam, the prophet, who led the women in song

and dance through the parted sea and sustained our people in the wilderness with her well of water. We have added an orange to the seder plate, to celebrate diversity and inclusivity.

In what ways will you retell the story and infuse new life into your Passover seder next week? Try seeking out new melodies, new recipes, perhaps a new *Haggadah*, or a new guest at your table. How will you pass on the story so that a child will continue to tell it through his or her eyes years from now? On Passover, we all become storytellers.

Question number four: Why do we conclude the seder with the words, “*I’shanah haba’ah b’Yerushalayim*,” next year in Jerusalem”? I love that even people who are in Jerusalem conclude their seder with these words. *Yerushalayim*, literally meaning city of peace, *ir shalom*, encapsulates the ultimate vision of peace.

But Jerusalem is not the key word here. The key word is *haba’ah*—future—next year. The whole seder ends on a note of hope and radical optimism for the future. One of my favorite moments near the end of the seder is opening the door for Elijah. Elijah the prophet is viewed as the messenger of peace, the bringer of peaceful days.

Passover is not about being; it is about becoming. New possibilities are always present; history can change (Rabbi David Hartman). Tomorrow will be better than yesterday. Passover is the turn of the season and the rebirth of spring.

Passover is the night for dreams, for visions about what humanity can be.
Passover is about opening the door to possibility.

So, on this Great Sabbath, and in the week ahead, ask yourselves: How will you remove your *chametz*? How will your Passover experience be different and how will it recharge your Jewish identity? How will you retell an ancient story in new ways? How will you open the door and look to the future?

L'shanah haba'ah b'Yerushalayim. Next year in Jerusalem. Once we were slaves; now we are free. It is the greatest story ever told. I wish you a *Chag Sameach*, a most joyful Passover Festival ahead.