



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEVI’I SHEL PESACH > Seventh Day

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April 13, 2012
Shevi’i Shel Pesach

Breakthrough



Meaningful Sermons *"Words from the Heart Enter the Heart"*

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ABSTRACT

Henry David Thoreau wrote: "Most men lead lives of quiet desperation, and go to the grave with the song still in them."

Are you singing your song? Are you able to? If not, are you looking for a breakthrough in your life? Has it eluded you thus far?

Chances are that – like the rest of us – you have fallen into one of four common traps that impede progress.

But here comes Pesach to the rescue.

Pesach and Shevi'i shel Pesach, like all Jewish holidays, are not merely nice days of celebration. They bring us new energy, open new doors, reveal unprecedented opportunities – in short, they exist to transform our lives. And in particular, the Seventh Day of Pesach offers us a fresh new path for dealing with all our challenges.

As they say, half the cure is diagnosing the disease, and half the solution to any problem is knowing what it is. So we must first identify the factors that block us from growing and excelling. And this, too, is taught to us on this holiday. For on this day, 3324 years ago, an event transpired that illustrates the four most common mistakes that people make which prevent them from achieving a breakthrough.

This sermon examines these four mistakes, and presents a decisive strategy that can make all the difference. When properly applied, it can actualize our potential, transform our lives and help us sing our own special song.

SING YOUR SONG

BREAKTHROUGH:

HOW TO AVOID THE FOUR MOST COMMON MISTAKES THAT
IMPEDE PROGRESS IN LIFE AND ALLOW YOUR SOUL TO SING

1. Do You Lead a Life of Quiet Desperation?

Henry David Thoreau wrote: "Most men lead lives of quiet desperation, and go to the grave with the song still in them."

Are you singing your song? Are you able to? If not, are you looking for a breakthrough in your life? Has it eluded you thus far?

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Pesach and Shevi'i shel Pesach, like all Jewish holidays, are not merely nice days of celebration. They bring us new energy, open new doors, reveal unprecedented opportunities – in short, they exist to transform our lives. And in particular, the Seventh Day of Pesach offers us a fresh new path for dealing with all our challenges.

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We shall examine these shortly. We shall also discover a decisive strategy that can make all the difference. When properly applied, it can transform our lives and help us sing our own special song.

So ... *Chag Sameach* everybody!

2. What is Shevi'i Shel Pesach?

Shevi'i Shel Pesach, the seventh day of the Passover week, celebrates the Splitting of the Sea. On this day, it is the custom to read "the Song of the Sea" which the Israelites sang when they got to the other side.¹

Thus, this holiday has a great deal to teach us about breakthroughs and singing our own special song.

Consider the drama:

The newly-freed Jewish slaves are cornered at the sea. In front of them the roiling waters. In back of them the pursuing Egyptians. What will they do?

They don't know.

Their initial reaction is panic and complaint, as the Book of Exodus relates:

As the Pharaoh drew near, the Children of Israel looked up. They saw the Egyptians coming after them, and they became very frightened. Then the Children of Israel cried out to God, and they said to Moses: "Were there not enough graves in Egypt that you took us out to die in the desert? What have you done to us..."²

The Midrash fills in some additional details about the bedlam that ensued. It says that (in tried and true Jewish fashion) the Israelites argued among themselves:

One group said, "Let us throw ourselves into the sea." A second group said, "Let us return to Egypt." A third group said, "Let us wage war against them." And the fourth group said, "Let us cry out to God."³

¹ Exodus, chapters 14-15.

² Exodus 14:10-11.

³ Midrash Mechilta, *Shemot* 14:13-14.

3. Two Jews Three Opinions (Joke)

This is clearly where “two Jews three opinions” comes from. Which brings me to the following joke. It might be a joke, and then again, it is probably a true story:

There was once a rabbi, who was ripping his hair out because, every time it came to saying the *Shema*, half of his congregation wanted to sit, and the other half wanted to stand, and each side would shout for the other to get with the program.

Thinking that he needed to resolve this issue somehow, the rabbi tracked down one of the original founders of the synagogue in a nursing home, and went there to determine – once and for all – what was the original custom of the founding members. He explained the problem and asked the old man:

-“Did you all stand for the *Shema*?”

-“No, that’s not the way it was.”

-“So you all sat for the *Shema*?”

-“No, that’s not the way it was.”

-“What do you mean? Just *how* was it? You have to help me out here, because they are all killing each other.”

-“*That’s* the way it was.”

4. Four Reactions to Adversity

[But seriously] the diverse reactions of these four groups represent the four common mistakes that people generally adopt when confronting adversity:

- Escape – the first group of Israelites was advocating the ultimate escape through suicide for, to them, death was better than returning to slavery

- Surrender/resignation – the second group preferred life in servitude to certain death
- War – the third group was of the mind that it's better to die fighting than to go like sheep to the slaughter
- Religion/prayer – the fourth group saw nothing that they could do, save throw themselves on God's mercy

5. Modern Counterparts

In our modern world, we are often tempted to choose the option of group one – escape. We don't brood about suicide, of course, but we are very tempted to get away from it all. Our routes of escape take many forms – immersion in work or study, vacations to exotic places, meditation retreats on mountain tops. And at times, we all would love to run away from the challenges of life by playing it safe and limiting our chances of failure.

At other times, we gravitate to the solution of group two – surrender. We resign ourselves to the so-called “reality” of life. We go through our days, carrying the burden of our responsibilities with a heavy heart and a dejected air. We go with the flow of the world rather than working to change it. In short, we surrender to a life of “quiet desperation.”

At other times, we take the approach of group three – we rise to the occasion and fight for what we believe is right. But, by the end, we wonder if this is the way to improve things. The fighters seem to end up with more enemies than friends, and for all their good intentions, the final result might be worse instead of better.

And, then there are the times when – like group four – we turn to God and beg Him to make things better. We feel stuck and lost, and so we sit on our hands and pray.

6. Moses' Answer

Now listen to what Moses said to the panicked people:

"Do not fear! Stand firm and watch the salvation of God that He will perform for you today. For you see [the last of] Egypt today; you shall no longer see them ever again! God will do battle for you, and you must remain silent."⁴

The Midrash explains that in these few lines, Moses answered each of the four groups and told them that they were all wrong:

To the group that said, "Let us throw ourselves into the sea," he replied: "Do not fear! Stand firm and watch the salvation of God." To the group that said, "Let us return to Egypt," he replied: "You see [the last of] Egypt today." To the group that said, "Let us wage war against them," he replied: "God will do battle for you." To the group that said, "Let us cry out to God," he replied: "You must remain silent."⁵

In short, he told them that all of their solutions were no good. Not only escapism and fatalism, but also war and prayer.

We can readily see the problem with suicide, surrender and resignation. But what's wrong with fighting for the right cause? What's wrong with prayer? These are proactive approaches and reveal a people who want to stand up to the challenge by either using physical means (war) or spiritual ones (prayer). Isn't that good?

The problem is that neither is a *complete* option. Was life given to us so that we spend most of our time at war with others? And is prayer alone ever enough when confronting adversity or challenge?

⁴Exodus 14:13-14.

⁵Midrash Mechilta, *Shemot* 14:13-14.

7. Move Forward!

And now we come to the correct answer which is delivered by God Himself:

“Move forward!”⁶

With this succinct command, God communicated the essence of what it means to be a Jew. God said (in so many words):

You are a people chosen to change the world. Why do you cry to me? You are empowered with a divine spark, a holy soul, a prophetic vision and Godly purpose. Use it! Move forward! Forge ahead! Journey on! Continue on to Mount Sinai to receive the Torah, which is the whole reason I took you out of Egypt.

Advance, progress, impress ... therein lies success!

Never allow yourselves to get paralyzed by doubts. Never get stuck in philosophical debates about how to deal with the enemy. You were told and commanded – and empowered – to march ahead toward a destination. So, just forge ahead. Move!

Don't make the mistake (like group one) to find escapes from the world. Do not be

tempted to immerse yourselves in the pure waters of innocence, learning, studying ... enhancing your own lives while cutting yourselves off from anything outside your circle. Don't make the mistake playing it safe to limit your chances of failure.

Don't make the mistake (like group two) of resigning yourselves to the so-called “reality” of life ... of seeing life as material, boring, routine, dispassionate ... of thinking that you are doing your part by being a follower, not a leader. Don't make the mistake of leading a life of quiet desperation.

And don't make the mistake of thinking (like group three) of slugging it out. You might think you are fighting the good fight, combating evil and sin, but do you see progress? Blood flows, yes, but the poetry doesn't. You aren't moving forward, are you?

⁶Exodus 14:15.

And, don't make the mistake (like group four) that you can avoid what's expected of you by throwing "your burden upon the Lord." It's a good thing to pray if you also put your shoulder to the grindstone. But it is never a substitute for inaction.

There is a better way!

Look up and journey forth!

March forward to your purpose and destination. I, God, who created the sea in the first place, will open it up for you, if you just move forward!

8. It Takes Just One

One person heard that message from God before the others. As the Midrash relates:

While the Israelites were arguing [and Moses was beseeching God], Nachson ben Aminadav, stood up and walked right into the sea ... And the sea saw and fled.⁷

Nachson understood what God had told the Israelites. There is a time to pray and a time to act. Torah is not about submission; it is about action. Yes, we must acknowledge God, but we must also make the necessary effort. We are God's partners in making this world a better place, and as such, we have already been given all the tools necessary to fulfill our life's mission.

When faced with challenge, with adversity, with the difficulties each of us encounter in life, instead of spending time ruminating about our options, instead of being paralyzed by doubt, forge ahead! Movement is the key to success. Moving forward will bring a breakthrough. How this breakthrough will happen, we cannot always know in advance. But we have to move, and when we do, we can be sure that things will open up.

There is no obstacle too large that can keep us from our goal. Not even a roiling sea.

⁷Talmud, *Sotah* 37a.

9. Message to Us

And this is the ultimate message to us:

Just forge ahead. Don't look at the obstacles. Look at the opportunities!

All you have to do is take the first step, and a leap, and a jump forward.

And what happens when you take that first step? The sea will part before you! You will have achieved a breakthrough. And you will be able to sing your song.

Since God created the sea, He can split it wide open. Your task is to forge ahead. When you take the first step, the sea is bound to part. That is the power of human initiative to make unbelievable miracles happen.

This attitude of not getting stuck in philosophical debates – the four different approaches – and just forging ahead

If you want to live life to its fullest (not one of quiet or not so quiet desperation), if you want to sing your song (and not allow it to die inside of you) – you need to move forward, and not get stuck in philosophical debates.

10. You'd Never Believe it (Humor)

-A little boy once returned home from Hebrew school and his father asked, "What did you learn today?"

-He answered, "The rabbi told us how the Children of Israel crossed the Red Sea?"

-“How?”

-“The Israeli Corps of Engineers build a huge pontoon bridge. Once they got on the other side, they blew up the bridge while the Egyptians were trying to cross.”

-The father was shocked. “Is that what the rabbi taught you?”

-The boy replied, “No. But you'd never believe the story he did tell us!”

11. The Deeper Meaning of the Splitting of the Sea (Kabbalistic Insight)

And that brings us to the deeper meaning of the splitting of the sea.

Our sages tell us that miracles do not happen in vain.⁸ So why the need for this one?

Consider that no sea separates Egypt from Israel, so there was no need to part the sea for the Jews to make their way to the Promised Land. God took them on a long detour so that the parting could take place! Why?

The Midrash⁹ further complicates the puzzle by stating that not only did the Sea split, but *all* the seas and water bodies in the world did likewise at that very moment! What could the Midrash mean by this?

The mystics of the Kabbalah supply the answer. They explain that something very deep happened here, for the land and the sea represent two forms of consciousness: the “revealed world” of dry land represents our conscious experiences, while the “hidden world” of the sea represents our unconscious experiences.

In truth, these two states are one seamless whole. Thus, as the Book of Genesis tells us, in the beginning of time all earth was submerged in water ... just as each of us begins our life submerged in the embryonic fluids of our mothers' wombs, for each us is a universe in microcosm. Then, the primal water-world underwent a dramatic change – a parting took place, a parting that divided “land” consciousness from “water” consciousness.

This happened for man's benefit, and in fact, it is only true from our perspective. If we think about it, we realize that our world is still very much a water-world. All land on earth is actually a series of islands jutting out of water. About 75% of the globe is covered with water, leaving only 25% uncovered. The same is true of the microcosm of our body – most of it is made up of water. Our conscious minds are just a “tip of the iceberg” jutting out of our unconscious.

⁸ *Deroshos HaRan Drush* 8. See Talmud, *Shabbat* 53b.

⁹ Midrash Mechilta, *Shemot* 14:21.

However, a separation between land and water, between conscious and unconscious, defines our reality. Still, this separation is not total. At the outset of creation, when God divided the land from the sea, He did so on the condition that the sea would always remember that, one day, it would have to part again and allow man to walk through its depths as if on land.

So this is the mystics' explanation for this bizarre miracle – the parting of the sea (in which “water was transformed into land”) was a demonstration of the naked truth that sea and land are two dimensions of one reality.

The goal in life is to take that which is hidden – the sea – and reveal it, turn it into land! The world of the sea is the world of concealment; the vast waters conceal everything within. The world of land is the world of revelation; minerals, plants and creatures are revealed and seen on dry land.

12. The Goal of Life

When we have the courage to wade in – to move forward – we split the sea and we reveal the true divine potential lying hidden there.

And this is why the splitting of the sea was the culmination of the Egyptian Exodus. Before the splitting of the sea, our freedom was not complete.

Freedom comes in two stages: 1) running away from our past, and 2) running towards our future. Leaving Egypt was running away from our past. We left Egypt trusting in God, trusting that there was something better out there. But until we actually discovered something better, our freedom was incomplete – at any moment, we could have lapsed, becoming discouraged, frightened of our new, free reality.

It was at this crucial impasse that the Israelites at the edge of the sea found themselves, and they had to decide: Should we move forward into the unknown, or should we look for another means of escape?

The argument among the four groups shows that they were looking for another means of egress, not the ultimate means of progress!

The ultimate means of progress is forging ahead and splitting the sea – not only escaping the past, but also running toward the future!

For us to truly be free, we cannot only have something to run away from, but we also must have something to run towards!

This is what ultimately leads to a breakthrough – single-mindedly focusing on our goal.

So, to truly move ahead in life – to achieve a breakthrough, to overcome obstacles in our path – we must press fast forward without pause. We must split the sea ... and reveal our hidden potential with all its fascinating and infinite power.

And when this is done, we shall truly sing the *Az Yashir*, the ultimate redemption song. Amen.