



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

PESACH > Second Day

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

April 5, 2015

Pesach

**The Greatest Pesach in
History!**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

When was the greatest Pesach ever?

In the year 622 B.C.E. That was the worst of times and the best of times for the Jewish people in the Land of Israel.

It was a time when no one knew that Passover existed. It was a time when no one knew that Torah existed. Then, the Torah was suddenly found, and the festival of freedom, Passover, was suddenly rediscovered. And that led to the greatest Pesach in all of Jewish history!

This happened during the reign of King Josiah. And this is what we read about in the Haftorah for the second day of Pesach.

That story poses a challenge for us – to rediscover the eternal Torah within our personal holy temples so that the freedom of Passover will reign anew in our time.

This sermon also includes a heart-wrenching story from more recent history – a story of a young girl on a Nazi death march and how she honored Pesach. From it we learn that, as descendants of such pure and holy people, we have an enormous responsibility. To share the Torah with those who don't know, and make sure that no one feels like a guest at a Pesach Seder – for we are all family.

THE GREATEST PASSOVER IN HISTORY!

1. Would A Religious Man Lie? (Joke)

Nathan is talking to his friend David. "Did you know," says Nathan, "that my Rabbi is so *frum*, so righteous and religious and holy, that he regularly talks to God?"

"Really?" says David. "How do you know this?"

"I know this," replies Nathan, "because my Rabbi told me so himself."

"But maybe – how can I put this without offending you – maybe your Rabbi isn't exactly telling you the truth," suggests David.

"Don't be a jealous nitwit," Nathan retorts. "Why would a religious man who talks to God lie to me?"

2. Who Knows One?

The truth is that today we have *absolutely* no idea who is religious and who is not, who does talk to God and who does not.

An individual could be sporting ripped jeans, pierced lips and wearing a mean scowl, and yet, he could be completely devout, holy and God-fearing, while another person could look like a rabbi with a long beard and yarmulke on his head bigger than a ten-gallon sombrero and be an utterly despicable, godless human being.

Just because somebody claims to regularly talk with God doesn't mean God regularly talks with that person.

As a matter of fact, the people who usually proclaim the loudest how "godly" and "holy" and "religious" they are, are usually the ones with the blackest hearts and the most to prove.

Did Moses ever yell: "Listen up, Israelites, I am the holiest man alive?"

Indeed, it is a fundamental and bankable principle of Godliness, holiness, and righteousness that: It. Does. Not. Advertise.

3. Life Without Torah

But now let me ask you: What about someone who did not have the opportunity to study Torah?

What happens when individuals (or entire communities) grow up without the book of divine wisdom to guide their lives?

Imagine growing up without Passover, without *matzah*, without the Four Questions, without your Bubby's brisket. The whole point of Passover is to tell your children the story – but imagine if a child grows up and never hears that story. How is such a child supposed to observe Passover?

And imagine the joy that child will experience when it is told of its people, its purpose, its history and its destiny.

There are people who want to do the right thing but, without the direction provided by Torah, they don't know what or how.

Imagine that! What if we, God forbid, had no Torah? What if we had no Passover?

Was there ever a time – since the Torah was given at Mount Sinai – that Jews existed who didn't know anything about Passover and Torah?

Yes, and not just today. It also happened way back in Jewish history, and we just read about it in our Haftorah,¹ the portion from the prophets that follows the conclusion of the Torah reading.

4. History Lesson

By way of introduction, let me offer up a short history lesson.

¹ *II Kings 23:1-9, 21-25.*

As we know, 3,327 years ago the Jews left Egypt and, seven weeks later, received the Torah at Sinai. Forty years after that the Jewish people entered the Land of Israel. Over four centuries later, during the rule of King Solomon, they built the Temple in Jerusalem. All of this time they were one nation, under one king, under one God.

This unity did not last however. Less than 30 years after the completion of the Temple, and 516 years after the Exodus, the nation split into two – the Kingdom of Judah (in the south) and the Kingdom of Israel (in the north).

That was the beginning of the end.

Our Haftorah contains a very fascinating excerpt from the Second Book of Kings, which is somewhat less well known than the First Book of Kings. The First Book of Kings covers the time of King Saul, King David and King Solomon. During their time, the Nation of Israel was united.

But when King Solomon died, all of that changed.²

His son Rehoboam antagonized the tribes living in the north and they seceded from the nation forming their own kingdom under Jeroboam. The northern kingdom (the Kingdom of Israel) consisted of ten tribes – today better known as the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel (due to them being dispersed by Assyrian King Sancheriv). The southern kingdom (the Kingdom of Judah) consisted of the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin and the Kohanim and Levites who served in the Temple.

This part of Jewish history, where the family of Israel is torn asunder, is covered in the latter half of the First Book of Kings.

In the Second Book of Kings the story continues and it gets worse. For one thing the Ten Tribes and their northern Kingdom of Israel were conquered by the Assyrians and sent into exile. But the southern Kingdom of Judah hardly fared much better.

² I Kings chapters 11-12.

5. King Manasseh

The key problem of the Kingdom of Judah was its kings. One of the worst ones was King Manasseh, who was an unfathomable tyrant. He ordered that every single Torah scroll be burned³ and the divine commandments be forever erased.

King Manasseh reigned for fifty-five years. He was evil in the eyes of the Lord.⁴ He was followed by his son, Amon, who too was evil in the eyes of the Lord – Amon ruled only two years before being assassinated by his own servants.⁵

But, during that lengthy period of evil kings, the hallowed streets of Jerusalem were overrun with idolatry and the sacred ground of the Temple Mount was desecrated by foreign deities and spilled blood.

For the first time since the giving of the Torah at Sinai, an entire generation had been raised without Torah. They did not know that the Torah existed, what it said, or that there was even this festival called Passover. Yup, it is hard to fathom but this is how it was.

After Amon's death, his son, Josiah, who was only eight-years-old, took the throne.⁶ It is this king who is the central figure of our Haftorah. And it is this king who teaches us a penetrating lesson for our lives today.

6. Growing Up Without Torah, Without Passover

Josiah did not know that the Torah existed. Josiah had never heard of Passover. Imagine it, the King of Judah, the great-grandson of King David himself, did not know what it means to be a Jew. Josiah did not grow up with Seders, never ate *matzah*, never hid the *Afikoman*, and never asked the Four Questions.

³ See Malbim (R. Moshe Libush) to II Kings 22:8.

⁴ II Kings 21.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid 22.

The Haggadah tells us of the four children, the four sons at the Seder – the wise child, the cynical child, the simple child, and the illiterate child. Josiah was the fifth child, the no-show child, who doesn't even appear at the Seder.

Though Josiah was completely unaware of Torah, he was, unlike his father or grandfather, a righteous person. At an early age, he turned to God and, says the Haftorah:

He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, and he walked in all the ways of David his forefather, and he turned away neither right nor left.⁷

In the 18th year of his reign, when he was 26 years old, King Josiah ordered that all available silver be collected from the people to repair, reclaim and reconstruct the Temple, which had been desecrated and infiltrated by idolatry during the reign of the two previous kings.

During the repairs of the Temple, the High Priest discovered a scroll, which had been hidden years before.⁸ It was the only surviving Torah scroll and, according to some commentaries, it was the very scroll that Moses himself had written.⁹

When King Josiah heard the scroll being read for the first time, he rent his clothing. He realized that his – and all the Jews' soul and essence – had been concealed from them all this time.¹⁰

And he instructed that every single idol be obliterated, uprooted and forever destroyed.

7. The Greatest Passover In History

Once the city and the Temple was purged of all impurity and idolatry, this is what happened, as our Haftorah relates:

⁷ Ibid 22:2.

⁸ See Rashi to ibid 22:8.

⁹ Malbim ibid.

¹⁰ See II Chronicles, chapters 35-36.

And the king commanded all the people, saying, "Offer a Passover sacrifice to the Lord, your God, as it is written in this scroll of the covenant." For such a Passover sacrifice had not been offered up since the time of the judges who judged Israel, and all the days of the kings of Israel and the kings of Judah. Except in the eighteenth year of King Josiah, this Passover sacrifice was offered to the Lord, in Jerusalem... Now, before him there was no king like him, who returned to the Lord with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his possessions, according to the entire Torah of Moses, and after him no one arose.¹¹

At age 26, King Josiah heard about Passover for the first time in his life. And he instructed all of the people of Israel to offer up the Paschal sacrifice and conduct the Passover Seder. And it was the greatest Seder ever!

What made this Passover the greatest Seder ever?

The 11th century biblical commentator, Rashi, says it was physically the *largest* Seder in the history of the world. Why? Because all the remaining Jews of the Ten Tribes (the ones who somehow avoided being sent into exile) came down to Jerusalem to observe and celebrate this Passover.

It was the first time since the split of the kingdom that all the Jews celebrated Passover together.

8. Bread and Life (Story)

And now, allow me to jump forward a few thousand years into more recent history and share with you a heart-rending story.

In 1945, as the Allies were closing in, the Germans realized that their days were numbered. In order to accelerate the "Final Solution," while saving their own skins and removing evidence of the concentration camp horrors, they sent the Jews on death marches, forcing them to walk for miles to locations further away from the approaching liberation forces.

¹¹ II Kings 23:21-23, 25.

One such march is recalled and retold by an elderly woman, who was then a young girl. These are her words:

“One day, we were told by the Germans to get up and start marching. We were walking skeletons. It was freezing. We hadn’t eaten more than a morsel in six years. We had no shoes – unless you call ragged cloth, shoes.

“The Germans, with their pristine uniforms and immaculate posture, told us that if anyone marched too fast or too slow they would be shot, if anyone stumbled or jumped, they would be shot, if anyone moved out of line to the right or to the left, they would be shot.

“In their cruelty, the Germans had a bakery truck with freshly baked loaves drive ahead of our march. The smell of fresh baked goods, just out of reach, was almost too much to bear. Here we were, walking skeletons, behind a truck smelling like heaven, if we even knew what heaven was.¹²

“Every once in a while, a plump German would grab a crusty loaf, take a bite, and throw the rest to the ground. If anyone bent down to pick it up, that person was immediately shot.

“As we marched, many people were shot and killed in front of our eyes. Frail men, women, and children cannot march in formation. Someone next to me stumbled, that someone was shot in the head.

“We had no idea of our destination -- to where we were marching. We had no clue that the Allies were closing in fast. We heard planes overhead and bombs booming, but we were immune to these sounds. Compared to the sounds of your mother being tortured, bombs were nothing; compared to the sound of your little brother’s head exploding from a German boot, airplanes did not register.

“After marching for days, or it could have been weeks, or months – or, for that matter, minutes – the Germans suddenly yelled, ‘*Achtung...* attention, everybody halt!’

¹² See also this interesting article http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/16/dining/16sede.html?_r=1&.

“We were told to stop where we were and lie down facedown in the mud and not to move. We were commanded to keep our eyes on the ground, not to turn our head, not to look up, not to think about looking up. Anyone that did not listen would be shot without question.

“We dropped to the ground, burying our faces in the mud and dirt. Winter was coming to a close and spring was upon us. The roads were muddy from the melting snows. We lay there for what seemed like forever.

“After an eternity, I began to tremble. I could not lie there any longer. I began to lift my head. The person next to me whispered to stop, I would get shot. But I had a peek and a peek was enough.

“I jumped up and yelled, ‘They’re gone – look, they’re all gone!’ People were afraid to move at first, but then, one by one, they began to stir. Sure enough, the Germans were nowhere to be found. All we saw were piles of Nazi uniforms, evidently discarded as the evil creatures ran away and deserted in the face of the approaching Allies. The Germans evidently did not want to be caught in uniform.

“We were too stunned to think, to feel, to understand. We had no tears left to shed. It did not register that we were free. We no longer knew the word ‘freedom.’

“Suddenly, I smelled the bakery truck. I smelled fresh loaves, breads, and I ached. Quickly I ran to the truck and everyone ran with me. I reach into the truck bed and grabbed a crusty, steamy loaf of bread. I put it my mouth – and paused.

“The people next to me looked at me as if I was crazy. What’s wrong with you they said, eat!

“I said, ‘No, you go ahead, eat, but I don’t want to. I cannot eat.’ Why not? Why can’t you eat? ‘Please eat,’ I said. ‘I just simply cannot.’ I did not want to tell them why I could not eat, but they insisted. So I told them.

“Ever since I entered into this hell, I have kept a hidden calendar, marking off the days of this darkness. I don’t know why, but I did.

According to my calculations, today is either the thirteenth or the fourteenth day of Nisan, either Erev Pesach, the day before Passover, or the first day of Passover. I grew up in a home where we do not eat bread on Passover. What happens if today is the first day of Passover? This is why I cannot eat this bread.”

Do you hear that?

A starving Jewish girl would not touch a morsel of bread because maybe, maybe today was the first day of Passover...

She concluded her story saying that she attributes her survival to Passover. You see, tragically, many of the newly liberated prisoners, who had been starved for years, ate whatever they could get their hands on. After not eating for years, this made them very sick and many perished because their bodies could not take it.

“Passover,” said the woman, “saved my life.”

9. Message And Inspiration For Our Times

There is a debate in the Talmud¹³ regarding whether or not King Josiah ever sinned and was completely without blemish. For the first 18 years of his reign, he did not resurrect the people or guide them along the divine lines of Torah. That is a long time not to follow in the ways of the Creator – especially for a king of Judah, a grandson of King David and the leader of the Jewish people!

The counter-argument, of course, is that King Josiah grew up without ever knowing that there was such a thing called Torah, never mind being familiar with the mitzvot and their nuances.

¹³ Shabbat 56a.

In more recent times, we all have to agree that the Holocaust generation is sacred – how can we argue otherwise when a little girl who was starved for years, who had known the hells of the concentration camps would not eat bread because it may possibly be the first day of Passover?! Such a generation has to be unanimously righteous and beyond blemish.

As the descendants of that generation, we, who are sitting here, bear considerable responsibility. For the message of today's Haftorah is that, if we know the Torah, we must share it with those who don't.

Every single Jew has a *Sefer Torah* within him or her. Sometimes it may be hidden. All that's required is to purify the Temple, repair the breach, and find the holy scroll – and then to cherish it.

If every Jew does that, the natural result will be the greatest Passover in the history of the world, where even the Ten Lost Tribes will resurface and come to Jerusalem to celebrate in the newly re-built Holy Temple.

10. Holiday Stay (Joke)

Simon and his wife Sadie have booked themselves for the Passover holiday at the ultra-famous and ultra-exclusive and ultra-expensive King David Hotel in Jerusalem. After a long and exhausting flight from New York, they arrive at the hotel at 11 PM and, after signing in, go straight to their room – the Presidential Suite – which costs 20,000 shekels a night.

Next morning, after breakfast, Simon stops in the lobby to ask the concierge for some of the hotel's stationary.

Not being on duty the previous evening, the concierge does not recognize him, and thus asks, "Are you a guest at this hotel, sir?"

Simon's cheeks puff up, he turns red, his veins popping under his neck-tied collar and, indignantly, yells:

"A guest? You think I'm a guest? I'm paying 20,000 shekels a night to stay here, and you dare call me a "guest"?"

11. Guestless List (Conclusion)

On Passover, no Jew is a guest. On this holiday we celebrate the fact that Passover is indigenous, innate and essential to every single Jew on this planet.

Yes, there have been times in history when, indeed, some Jews have felt like guests at the table of their own religion. And yes, today, some people feel this way too. Today, many Jews are like the fifth child, unaware that the Seder is even happening.

But the Haftorah and the story of that little girl remind us that the Torah, and Passover, is every Jew's heritage for now and forever. The Torah is engraved in every Jew's soul, only sometimes it may be concealed. But like a pilot flame, it remains burning. I may be asleep, but my heart is awake. And all it needs is a little nudge to bring it to the fore.

There are times when the Torah is so concealed that we do not even know it exists. There are people who are so unaware of their own story that they think "Passover" is just another word for "overpass." [Like those that think that "denial" is "de-nile" (the river Nile)].

But all that's required is for them to be made aware, to be invited not as guests, but as family members – to partake of their own heritage and their own history.

It is our job to clean up our personal holy temples so that we may uncover the Torah concealed therein. And then surely, every Jew, both those who associate themselves with the southern kingdom and the northern kingdom will unite under one king, the King of the Universe, and we will celebrate Passover together, with no guests – only family.

And then we can truly say that this was the greatest Passover in the history of the world! May this come true speedily in our days.

Chag Kosher v'Sameach. A kosherin un a frelichen Pesach!

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