



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

VAYIKRA > Tzav

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March 28, 2015

Tzav

**The Great Shabbat:
Now and Then**



Meaningful Sermons

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ABSTRACT

The final week of slavery in the Jew-hating land of Egypt must have been something for the Jews. After 210 years of unspeakable suffering, what was this final week of slavery like? What was the mood of the Children of Israel? What, for that matter, was the mood of the Egyptians?

While pondering that question, transpose the situation to the modern day and ask yourself: How would Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran, ISIS, Boko Haram, and Al Qaeda feel if they knew that, in exactly one week, the light that they have been trying to snuff out will completely and unequivocally shine free and forever?

How would darkness react?

This is the question we ponder today, as we consider the nature of the great miracle that took place on *Shabbat HaGadol*, some 3,300 years ago in Egypt.

In that great miracle, when the candle did not just dispel darkness, but darkness itself dispelled darkness, lies the secret of this great day.

Two elements of the great miracle, one cited by the Baal HaTurim and one by the Alter Rebbe, teach us what the greatness of *Shabbat HaGadol* is all about – for all generations and especially for us today.

THE GREAT SHABBAT: NOW AND THEN WHEN DISEASE HEALS DISEASE

1. Birth Pangs (Joke)

A group of expectant fathers, including Moshe, are waiting nervously in the waiting room of the hospital's maternity ward.

After a long wait, a nurse beckons to one of them, saying, "Congratulations, Mr. Smith, you now have a lovely son!"

Moshe immediately drops his magazine, jumps up and cries, "Hey, what's the big idea – I got here two hours before he did!"

2. Expecting Greatness

In exactly one week, with the holiday of Passover we will celebrate a joyous birth – the birth of the Jewish nation. Using some highly poetic license, this week leading up to our national birth is akin to an expectant and nervous father pacing in the waiting room, awaiting the birth of his child.¹

Picture it:

After 210 years of unspeakable suffering, that final week of slavery in the Jew-hating land of Egypt must have been something. What was this final week of slavery like? What was the mood of the Children of Israel? What, for that matter, was the mood of the Egyptians?

In order to better relate to this final week in Egyptian bondage, let us transpose it to a more recent version of Egypt – say, Europe in 1945. After years of persecution and genocide, the day of liberation of the Jews finally came, freeing from the darkness of the gas chambers. What were they feeling? And what about the Germans? The Austrians? The Poles, Russians, Ukrainians? What were these anti-Semites feeling?

¹ See Ezekiel ch. 16. Sefer Hasichot 5749, vol. 1, p. 386.

Or, to transpose this to modern day: How would Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran, ISIS, Boko Haram and Al Qaeda feel if they knew that in exactly one week the light that they have been trying to snuff out will completely and unequivocally shine free, shine bright, shine forever?

How would darkness react?

Well, the Torah tells us.

3. Shabbat HaGadol – The Great Shabbat

This Shabbat, directly preceding the holiday of Passover, is called *Shabbat HaGadol*, the Great Shabbat. Many reasons are given² for why it's called the Great Shabbat but the simplest reason is that a great miracle occurred on this Shabbat.

The medieval expert in Jewish law known as the Baal HaTurim³ writes that on the Shabbat preceding Passover, the Jews in Egypt gathered lambs and tied them to their bedposts. Seeing this, the Egyptians asked the Jews what they were doing. The Jews responded that the lambs were meant for the Passover offering as commanded by God.

The Egyptians worshipped sheep as deities. When they heard that the Jews were commanded by God to slaughter the objects of their worship, they were so terribly frightened that their teeth began to chatter and they were unable to say anything to the Jews. Because of this *great* miracle, this Shabbat is called the *Great Shabbat*.⁴

Another medieval scholar known as the Bach⁵ explains why the Egyptians were reduced to chattering teeth. After all, didn't the Egyptians know that Jews slaughtered lambs and rams and sheep for food throughout their 210 years in Egypt? Why suddenly now were the Egyptians petrified?

² See Shabbat HaGadol Sermon 5774 and sources there.

³ Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher (c. 1270-1340), a famed Spanish halakhist, author of the *Arba Turim*, precursor to and basis of the Shulchan Aruch.

⁴ Orach Chaim #430.

⁵ Rabbi Yoel Sirkis (1561-1640), author of Bayit Chadash, classic halachic commentary.

When the Egyptians heard that God commanded the Jews to slaughter the lambs as a Pascal offering, they realized that this symbolized that God on high was simultaneously slaughtering their false deities. They realized that their distorted beliefs were being destroyed, and this petrified them into silence. Everything they believed in, their way of life, was being torn asunder.

The Bach goes on: Many of the enslaved Jews in Egypt also worshipped the Egyptians gods. When the Egyptians saw that all the Jews – every single man, woman and child – were slaughtering these false gods and returning to the One True God, the Egyptians realized it was the end of their toxic and venomous darkness, and they were scared witless.

This miracle is truly a great thing. Imagine the so-called masters shaking in their boots at the sight of their slaves? Imagine a Nazi officer being told by a Jew in Auschwitz that “we are slaughtering your falsehood” – and hearing this, the Nazi becoming petrified into submission!

This was the *great* miracle of the *Great Shabbat*.

4. The Alter Rebbe's Take

Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the 18th century founder of Chabad Chassidus, is the author of the *Shulchan Aruch Harav*, a Code of Jewish Law based on the work of Baal HaTurim and later, the Beis Yosef. In *Shulchan Aruch Harav*, the Alter Rebbe focuses on another aspect of this great miracle. And in so doing, he teaches us a profound lesson for our modern-day lives.

This is how the Alter Rebbe describes the great miracle:

When the Israelites were taking their Pascal offerings on that Shabbat, the firstborn of Egypt gathered and asked the Israelites why they were doing this. The people replied that this was for a Pascal offering to God, who will soon kill all of the Egyptian firstborn. The firstborn ran to their fathers and to Pharaoh, and asked that they send the Jews out of Egypt immediately.

But the establishment did not want to. The firstborn then arose in rebellion and attacked their fellow Egyptians, killing many of them. This is what's written in the Book of Psalms, *To Him Who smote the Egyptians with their firstborn*.⁶ This miracle was established as a memorial for generations on Shabbat, and they called it the Great Shabbat.⁷

The Baal HaTurim focuses on the fact that the Egyptians were paralyzed in front of the Jews at the thought of what was about to happen. But the Alter Rebbe takes a different approach, focusing on the uprising of the Egyptian firstborn against the Egyptian establishment.

Further, the Baal HaTurim sees the miracle as occurring between Jews and Egyptians (that the Egyptians did not hurt or attack them, but were awestricken and afraid of the Jews), whereas the Alter Rebbe sees the miracle as occurring between the Egyptians (with no Jewish involvement).

Even more perplexing: Shabbat, as we all know, is a mitzvah for Jews exclusively.⁸ It thus seems rather illogical to name it *Shabbat HaGadol*, the Great Shabbat, after a miracle that occurred between Egyptians and seemingly had nothing whatsoever to do with Jews.⁹

It must be that there is a unique greatness to the miracle that led Egyptian to battle Egyptian.

5. A Comparison

Let us compare evil to an illness. If a person falls gravely ill, that person goes to a doctor, who will treat the illness with an appropriate medication. If the illness heals, the medicine has worked a miracle.

⁶ Tehillim 136:10.

⁷ Orach Chaim *ibid*.

⁸ Indeed, Shabbat is diametrically antithetical to the non-Jew's purpose. Sanhedrin 58b. Rambam, Laws of Kings 10:9.

⁹ See Sefer Hasichot 5749, vol. 1, p. 384ff.

But there is an even greater sort of cure. Imagine if the illness would battle itself. Imagine if the illness would realize that it is unhealthy and turn on its own nature to cure the patient. This would be a *great* miracle indeed!

But how could an illness ever go against its own sick nature? Only if it experiences something that is truly healthy, only if it comes in contact with an entity that is the epitome of health. In the glaring light of perfect health – a strong body and soul – disease will defy disease.

This latter form of cure is exactly what happened in Egypt: The Egyptians were smitten by their own firstborn. And it has everything to do with the Jews.

In addition to the Jews leaving Egypt, the *great* miracle leading up to the Exodus was that Egypt itself began a transformation.¹⁰

An example for this (the Egyptians being smitten by their own firstborn) may be homeopathy, which is based on his doctrine of like cures like (*similia similibus curentur*), whereby a substance that causes the symptoms of a disease in healthy people will cure similar symptoms in sick people. Or a vaccine, which is a biological preparation that provides active acquired immunity to a particular disease. A vaccine typically contains an agent that resembles a disease-causing microorganism and is often made from weakened or killed forms of the microbe, its toxins or one of its surface proteins. The agent stimulates the body's immune system to recognize the agent as a threat, destroy it, and keep a record of it, so that the immune system can more easily recognize and destroy any of these microorganisms that it later encounters.

In the words of the Talmud:¹¹ From the very forest itself comes the [handle of the] axe [that fells it]. When R. Dimi came [from Palestine] he said [similarly]: A thigh rots from within (the thickest part of the thigh begins to rot first – Rashi).

¹⁰ See Sefer Hasichot ibid, p. 386.

¹¹ Sanhedrin 39b.

6. What is Greater?

Now let me ask you:

What is a greater miracle? When a patient fights an illness or when an illness fights an illness? When a candle dispels darkness or when darkness itself dispels darkness?

The Baal HaTurim is describing how the candle (the Jews) dispelled darkness. The Alter Rebbe is focusing on how the darkness itself rose up against itself.

The *greatness* of the *great* miracle (and the *Great* Shabbat) lies in the darkness itself rebelling against the darkness.

The Jew as a Jew is one thing. But the Jew as someone who influences the world is something revolutionary. In addition to lighting up the dark world, the Jew has the power to inspire the dark world to light up itself. That darkness should transform itself.

The Egyptians were so shocked that their teeth chattered, and they were mute in their response. Picture it, hundreds of thousands of slaves, prisoners, broken by 210 years of oppression, telling their jailers and enslavers that they are about to be set free.

This inspired the Egyptian firstborn to rebel against the evil Egyptian establishment. When touched by the epitome of health, illness itself miraculously turned against illness.

The Egyptians themselves rebelled against Egypt, evil itself attacked evil. Usually we think the good guys should vanquish the bad guys; a great miracle is when the bad guys themselves vanquish the bad guys.

7. The Message for Today

The message for us today is profound: How did God intend for us Jews to be perceived by the rest of the world? Are we meant to flee evil, as some may suggest, or are we meant to banish evil from the face of the earth? Are we meant to turn darkness itself into a candle?

Often we Jews think it's about survival. And, really, who can blame us? But it's not. It's not merely about playing defense, but recognizing that the best defense is offense. It's about changing the world, being an example of the divine ideal.

And when we are – when we finally fulfill our mission – the nations themselves will rebel against the darkness.

Think of it this way: In face of falsehood the best solution is unbridled truth. Truth naturally exposes the distortions of falsity, and compels it to turn on itself. When you are weak then you empower the enemy. But when you live up to your highest standard and stand strong, your shining example influences the negative forces to defy their own tendencies.

The best way to do so – while we live among the nations of the world, while we interact with our non-Jewish neighbors, co-workers, employees and employers – is to be examples of what it means to be created in the Divine Image.

The best way to inspire the world to battle slavery and evil is by living and embracing the Divine forces of freedom and goodness.

Today, *Shabbat HaGadol* teaches us, there are two stages to becoming a nation: the birth of a singular, exalted nation, which happens on Passover; and the days preceding and leading up to that birth, when we are still living among other nations.

Today, while we live among the nations of the world, the most powerful tool at our disposal is our connection with the One True God. Our trust in Him, or commitment to truth, will help make any falsehood chatter its false teeth.

¹² <http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2015/03/is-it-time-for-the-jews-to-leave-europe/386279/>

We often ask, “How come the nations aren’t standing up against evil?” When we live up to our Divine Image, they will. When an illness is faced by pure health, it cannot help but emulate pure health. When darkness is faced by a bright candle, it cannot help but question its own dark nature.

8. The Jewish Complex

Jews have a complex, sure. We want to blend into the world even as we stand out. We want to fit in. But we were chosen for a task. So we can’t blend in. Outstanding people never can.

During the holiday of Passover, which begins in exactly a week, we celebrate the formation and realization of the Jewish nation. A family, the Children of Israel, left Egypt and became a people; a bunch of tribes became one nation.

And today we celebrate and emulate what it means to be a lighthouse in the storms of the modern-day equivalent of Egypt.

In addition to leaving Egyptian slavery, the role of the Jew is to inspire Egypt to be free of itself. In addition to leaving the darkness behind, the Jew’s mission is to show the darkness what it means to be light.

This is what *Shabbat HaGadol* teaches us.

9. Forgive or Outlive? (Joke)

At the conclusion of the Shabbat HaGadol sermon, a progressive and peace-loving rabbi asks his congregation, “How many of you have forgiven your enemies?”

Eighty percent of the congregation hold up their hands.

The rabbi then repeats his question.

This time, all the people in the synagogue raise their hands, except one man, an avid golfer named Solomon Kopmensch, who typically shows up for services only when the weather was bad.

“Mr. Kopmensch,” says the rabbi. “It’s obviously not a good morning for golf. It’s good to see you here today. Are you not willing to forgive your enemies?”

“I don’t have any,” he replies gruffly.

“Mr. Kopmensch, that is very unusual. How old are you?”

“I’m ninety-eight years old.”

“Okay, Mr. Kopmensch, would you please come down to the front and tell us all how a person can live ninety-eight years and not have a single enemy in the world?”

The old golfer totters down the aisle, stops in front of the pulpit, turns around, faces the congregation, and says, “It’s really very simple. I’ve outlived all the slimy miscreants.”

10. Now and Forever (Conclusion)

This is the secret to Jewish forgiveness. We have outlived the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Romans, the Nazis, the Terrorists, all the slimy miscreants of history.

This is a secret to light – it outlives, outperforms and outshines darkness.

The *great* miracle of the *Great* Shabbat teaches us this.

We cannot control the world – all we can do is set the highest standard for the world to control itself. When a Jew walks down the street as an ambassador for his or her Creator – the equivalent of tying the Pascal lamb to the bedpost – the world itself must be awestruck.

Then, not only won't it attack the Jew (the miracle as described by the Baal HaTurim), it will question its very own identity and purpose, rebelling against any darkness and falsehood (the miracle as described by the Alter Rebbe).

This is the message of *Shabbat HaGadol*. May it segue smoothly into the ultimate redemption, one where all evil and darkness will be transformed into light forever.

Shabbat Shalom! Have a peaceful and GREAT Shabbat! And a kosher and happy Pesach [Passover].