



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

VAYIKRA > Metzora

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April 16, 2016

Metzora

**Shabbat HaGadol: 50 Gates
of Shabbat**



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

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ABSTRACT

Gates come in a variety of literal and metaphorical forms. There are the proverbial gates of perception, the mystical gates of heaven, the sinful gates of hell, then, of course, there is another kind of Gates, the one that founded Microsoft.

Literal gates come in many forms as well. There are gates to cities, like the eight gates to the Old City of Jerusalem (Jaffa Gate and Zion Gates being the most famous among them). There are gates to gated communities. And there is the great gate to San Francisco, better known as the Golden Gate Bridge.

This week is *Shabbat HaGadol*, the Great Shabbat. What can gates teach us about greatness? What can gates teach us about God?

Is there a G-force (gravitational force) connection between the Three G's - God, Greatness and Gates?

This sermon answers these questions and more. It teaches us how our lives are a journey through 50 gates, with *Shabbat HaGadol* opening up for us the ultimate 50th gate. Plus it features a wonderful tale from the Baal Shem Tov which will truly open the gates of your understanding.

50 GATES OF SHABBAT

1. Gates of Brown (Anecdote)

Brown University, an Ivy League school founded in 1764, has a few idiosyncratic “traditions.” For example, it opens its Van Wickle Gates – a pair of wrought iron gates off the Quiet Green – only twice a year. Once when the first-year students walk in and the second time when the graduating seniors walk out. According to superstition, any Brown student who passes through the gates more than these two times will be cursed with bad luck.¹

For those who care to know more about these Van Wickle Gates, here is what we can learn from Martha Mitchell’s *Encyclopedia Brunoniana*:

The Van Wickle Gates were dedicated on June 18, 1901. The gates were built of iron with brick and stone piers. The Brown University seal is over the center gate, which is adorned by the entwined letters B and U and circular handles in the mouths of two lions. The seals of the State of Rhode Island and the City of Providence are reproduced in stone on the brick piers at either side of the center gate, and above them are stone ornaments depicting an hour-glass, a lamp upon a book, an owl, and a globe.

In 1905 it was decided to inscribe the stone tablet at the right entrance, which had been left blank for a bulletin board, with an inscription from Cicero ... “*Haec studia adolescentium alunt, senectutem oblectant, secundas res ornant, adversis perfugium ac solacium praebent* – These studies fortify one’s youth, delight one’s old age, amid success they are an ornament, in failure they are a refuge and a comfort.”

The gates were built with the bequest of Augustus Stout Van Wickle 1876, president of a bank and several coal corporations, who was killed in a skeet shooting accident in 1898.²

¹ <https://www.brown.edu/about/traditions>.

² https://www.brown.edu/Administration/News_Bureau/Databases/Encyclopedia/search.php?serial=V0020.

2. Speaking of Gates

Speaking of gates...

Gates come in a variety of literal and metaphorical forms. There are the proverbial gates of perception, the mystical gates of heaven, the sinful gates of hell, then, of course, there is another kind of Gates, the one that founded Microsoft.

Literal gates come in many forms as well. There are gates to cities, like the eight gates to the Old City of Jerusalem (Jaffa Gate and Zion Gate being the most famous among them). And remember the ancient gates to the Persian city of Shushan, where Mordechai heard about the plot to kill King Ahasuerus (about which we read on Purim)? And how about the gates to the city of Rome (the Arch of Titus among them), where those mystically inclined can find the Messiah sitting dressed in the garb of a leper and waiting to be called?

In addition to these historic gates, there are gates to modern gated communities. For example, there is the great gate to San Francisco, better known as the Golden Gate Bridge.

3. Gates of Ski (Joke)

Gates even figure in skiing competitions, particularly in slalom races. Which reminds me of this humorous yarn:

As you probably know, in slalom races, the skier must pass through a number of “gates” in as little time as possible. Well, it happened that Israel had the fastest slalom-skier in the world (where he learned to ski God only knows, there being hardly any place to practice in Israel). Being that as it may, the country had great expectations for an Olympic gold medal. The day of the final came, and the crowd waited in anticipation.

The French champion sped down the course in 38 seconds. The Swiss was clocked at 38.7 seconds, the German at 37.8 seconds, and the Italian at 38.1 seconds.

Then came the turn of the Israeli. The crowd waited, and waited ...
SIX MINUTES!

“What happened to you?” screamed his trainer when the Israeli finally arrived.

Replied the exhausted skier: “Who affixed a mezuzah to each gate?”

4. Shabbat HaGadol

Why are we speaking about gates today?

Because gates help us explain the Great Shabbat, *Shabbat HaGadol*. Today we will examine the intrinsic connection between the three G's: Gates, Greatness and God.

As we all know the Shabbat immediately preceding Passover is called the Great Shabbat. Why is this Shabbat called great? There are many reasons given for this, which we have discussed in previous years. Today we will discuss it from the perspective of gates.

A very effective stratagem and a very Jewish maneuver is to answer one question by asking another, which is what I am about to do:

Why on Friday Night, when we recite *Kiddush* – the opening blessing over the wine – do we mention the Exodus from Egypt?

The text of Friday night *Kiddush* goes like this:

Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has sanctified us through His commandments, has desired us, and has given us, in love and goodwill, His holy Shabbat as a heritage, in remembrance of the works of creation; the first of the holy convocations, commemorating the Exodus from Egypt.

For You have chosen us and sanctified us from among all the nations, and with love and goodwill given us Your holy Shabbat as a heritage. Blessed are You Lord, who sanctifies the Shabbat.

Why, on a tranquil, peaceful and liberating eve such as Shabbat, when we transcend the six workdays, would we mention slavery? It makes total sense to mention it on Passover, a festival dedicated to celebrating and commemorating the Exodus. And we will do so one week hence. But what is the possible connection between the Exodus and a regular Shabbat? Why do we mention the Exodus *every* Shabbat when we recite the *Kiddush*?

It is true that there is a mitzvah to remember the Exodus every single day of the year, weekday and Shabbat, but the fact that we specifically mention the Exodus when we recite the *Kiddush* seems to suggest that there is an intrinsic connection between Shabbat and the Exodus.

What is that connection?

And how does this shed light on *Shabbat HaGadol*?

5. 50 Gates of Understanding

Yetziat Mitzrayim, the story of the Exodus, is mentioned exactly 50 times in the Torah.³ This is not a random number. Furthermore, the Talmud teaches⁴ that *Nun Shaarei Binah*, 50 Gates of Understanding, were created in the world and all of them were gifted to Moses save for one.

The mystics teach⁵ that there are 50 Gates of Impurity corresponding to these 50 Gates of Understanding (because everything in the world of holiness is paralleled in the opposite world), and in order to free the Jews from Egyptian slavery, God had to take them out of the 49 Gates of Impurity, ultimately achieving the 50th gate of understanding with the receiving of the Torah at Sinai, 50 days exactly after the exodus.

³ Pardes Rimonim, Shaar 13 (Shaar HaShaarim), Ch. 1.

⁴ Nedarim 38a.

⁵ See Zohar Chadash, beginning Yitro, and gloss of Nitzutzei Zohar (Miluim p. 124 ff.). Tikkunei Zohar, Tikkun 32; Pardes ibid.; Ohr Hatorah, Nach, Kimei Tzeitcha M'erez Mitzrayim, sec. 3, 7.

For this reason we count the 49 days of the Omer between Passover and Shavuot, to transform these 49 gates reminiscent of slavery and ultimately reach the 50th gate of freedom on the 50th day of Shavuot.

Egypt (*Mitzrayim*, from the Hebrew word meaning constraints) represents slavery, imprisonment, confinement, asphyxiation. Egypt represents the ultimate Limited Liability Company – your liabilities, inhibitions and fears, where your abilities are completely limited in the confines of Egypt. As human beings, as Jews, it is our job to set ourselves free and transcend the dire straits of existence, to go from slavery to liberation.

However, it's not easy to simply jump from a state of confinement and fear to a state of freedom. We need to do this step by step, to acclimate ourselves emotionally and psychologically. The 50 Gates of Understanding⁶ represent the 50-step process by which we get from where we are (slavery) to where we want to be (freedom), with each step getting us further away from the impure and unhealthy and bringing us closer to purity and health.

Just as the journey that begins on the holiday of Passover and ends on the holiday of Shavuot is a 50-step process so, too, is every journey from the slavery that is Egypt to redemption that is the Promised Land. Each journey from confinement to liberation requires traversing the 50 gates that lead to redemption, the ultimate understanding, called *binah*.⁷

And this is a journey that we traverse every week.

⁶ See the chassidic sources cited in this sermon for the connection with “binah.”

⁷ See *Kimei Tzeischa MeiEretz Mitzrayim Avenu Niflaos 5747* (Sefer HaMaamarim Meluket, Vol. II, p. 37ff).

6. The 50 Gates of Shabbat

The 19th century Chassidic master, the Sfat Emet, teaches⁸ that each of the 50 Shabbats of the year opens one of the 50 gates, and that on *Shabbat HaGadol*, the Great Shabbat prior to the liberation of Passover, the 50th and final gate is finally opened in order to prepare us for freedom.

With that thought in mind, let's picture the year as a journey. On this journey there are different gates we have to open and walk through. Some gates are easier to open than others. Some are locked, some merely closed. Our job throughout the year and throughout our lives is to open and travel through all these gates.

Every day (365 days a year) a little gate opens. That is why it is a mitzvah to mention the Exodus daily. Because each day we overcome another *Mitzrayim*/block, every day we open and enter another gate.

But on every Shabbat, a much larger gate is opened, 50 of them throughout the year. And this is why every single Shabbat we mention the Exodus when we recite the *Kiddush*.

Shabbat HaGadol is the ultimate 50th gate. And it is therefore great, for it is the final passageway to the redemption of Passover – when we pass over the threshold of our limitations and enter the final and 50th gate.

7. Gates of Illusion (Story)

I once heard this story about gates, attributed to the Baal Shem Tov, the 18th century founder of Chassidic Movement:

A king is all alone, sitting on his throne. The king sighs. "All I want is to be close to my people!" he says. "Maybe no one knows I am here! So I will bring my throne right up to the street, right where anyone can find me."

⁸Shabbat Hagadol 5635.

He brings his throne right up to the street, right where anyone can find him. But no one comes.

The king sighs. “All I want is to be close to my people!” he says. “So I will create an optical illusion – I will make the people see something that isn’t really here. I will make them see towers, ramps and moats, and gate after gate between them and me. And next to each of these imaginary gates, I will place a treasure.”

The king creates the illusion, of towers, of ramps and moats, of gate after gate leading up to his throne, that aren’t really there. And he sends out invitations to his people: “Come! Everyone is invited to visit me! But you must go through gate after gate to reach me, and whoever does, will be able to visit with me!” Then he scatters treasures at each gate. It is a test.

What a challenge! The people begin to come, to try to make it through all these gates to see the king. The first one, the cook, comes and makes it to the first gate, but she stops there and looks down. “Oh my! What beautiful kettles made of shiny new copper and what beautiful oiled wood handles!” She picks up a kettle and carries it home, whistling as she walks.

The second one comes, the carpenter. He makes it to the second gate, but he stops there and looks down. “Oh my! What gorgeous solid gold hammers!” He picks one up and carries it home, singing himself a little song.

The third one comes, the seamstress. She makes it to the third gate, but she stops there and looks down. “Oh my! What amazing pairs of scissors, all with diamond encrusted handles!” She picks up a pair of sparkling scissors and carries them home, laughing to herself at her good fortune.

On and on, the people come to visit the king, and each time they stop at one of the imaginary gates, and turn home with their treasure, never making it to the inner chamber.

Finally, the king’s son hears about the invitation. He has been away a long time. He misses his father, the king. He wants to see him very much.

So he comes and walks past the first gate with the copper kettles. He walks past the second gate with the golden hammers. He walks right past the third gate with the diamond-encrusted scissors and doesn't even look. He walks through all the gates – with their many treasures of precious metals, jewels, the most fantastic things anyone has ever seen – and enters the throne room where sits his father, the king.

And when the son turns around to look back at the gates, they disappear. He sees that they were never there to begin with. It was all an optical illusion. In the end, nothing at all came between him and his father, the king.

8. Personal Lesson

We all are the King's sons and daughters, His princesses and princes. The King is God, and we are His children.

The year – and this is true for every single day – is a journey from where we are, what we know, what is predicable, what is comfortable but what is also confining and enslaving (in other words, *Mitzrayim*/Egypt) to where we want to go, to what we can achieve, to the infinite possibilities (in other words, our Promised Land, which represents freedom).

Throughout the year, the Master of the Universe has placed 50 gates to get us from point A, to B, to C, all the way to our final destination, where we may freely commune with Him.

Picture the year as a giant slalom race. You are on a pair of skis (or, if you're more hip, a snowboard). To cross the finish line and win the race you must weave through all of the gates.

Every Shabbat of the year is a gate on your journey. Life is not a straightaway, it is a series of moves, of thresholds crossed and uncrossed, of decisions made or unmade. Every single one of these points is a gate; every Shabbat is a gate that guides you through the windy slaloms of life.

Perhaps Shabbat is like the mezuzah on every gate, meant to be cherished and kissed, as we pass through the gateposts of the year.

This race is not about who gets to the finish line first; this race is about who passes through the gates and embraces each one, kissing it and making the most of it.

And now, today, on *Shabbat HaGadol*, the Great Shabbat, when the race to freedom is about to reach its zenith, taking us into Passover and the celebration of freedom, we can appreciate the greatness of this journey.

Shabbat HaGadol, the 50th Shabbat of the year, the final Shabbat prior to Pesach, is the culmination of all our challenging travels. And that is why it is called *Gadol*, Great! The great and final gate.

9. Great Expectations (Conclusion)

Greatness is realizing why we are here on this earth. Greatness is realizing our potential and purpose – and fulfilling that purpose. Greatness is the culmination of all of our hard work, making it across the finish line which we have spent the past year trying to cross.

In this sense, every single one of us is great – we all travel through our own personal 50 gates from slavery to freedom, to the Promised Land. As life bogs us down, as the six days of the work week distract us, we often forget our greatness. But on *Shabbat HaGadol* we are reminded of that we are the greatest of the great because we have been created in the Divine Image, and we have infinite potential.

And surely, when we live by such great standards, the ultimate and eternal freedom, the coming of the Final Redemption – *Yom HaGadol*, the Great Day – cannot be very far away. May it be today!

Shabbat Shalom!

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