



VAYIKRA

Tzav/HaGadol / 12 Nissan

What Defines Greatness?

April 8, 2017

**MAKE SHABBAT GREAT AGAIN!
WHAT DEFINES GREATNESS?**

ABSTRACT

The word “greatness” is thrown around a lot. Five-star hotels are called ‘great.’ As are championship sports teams, top restaurants, popular TV shows and blockbuster movies. In the political arena, President Trump wants to ‘make America great again,’ while his detractors claim the president is anything but ‘great.’

There are ‘great’ businessmen, ‘great’ actors, and ‘great’ communicators. There are even ‘great’ rabbis who give ‘great’ sermons at ‘great’ length to ‘great’ congregations.

But what does greatness really mean? What really defines greatness?

This is not merely an academic question. How we define greatness can have a profound impact on the type of children we bring up. What do we mean when we tell our children to be great? What are our standards of greatness?

Is being great defined by how much money we have? By our looks and popularity? By our athleticism and charisma?

Can true greatness be measured?

We find the answer in the name of this Shabbos – Shabbos HaGadol, the Great Shabbos.

A beautiful story with the Tzemech Tzedek, a unique custom to bake a kugel on Shabbat HaGadol using some of the Passover flour set aside for baking Matzoth, peppered with wit and humor – offers us a fresh definition of greatness, infused with humility.

3329 years ago, the secret to greatness was imparted to us. And on this Great Shabbat, Shabbat HaGadol, we are reminded of what it means to be truly great.

1. Opening Anecdote: Honestly, I Am The Best

Henry Augustus Rowland, professor of physics at Johns Hopkins University, was once called as an expert witness at a trial. During cross-examination a lawyer demanded, “What are your qualifications as an expert witness in this case?”

The normally modest and retiring professor replied quietly, “I am the greatest living expert on the subject under discussion.” Later a friend well acquainted with Rowland’s disposition expressed surprise at the professor’s uncharacteristic pompous answer. Rowland answered, “Well, what did you expect me to say? I was under oath.”

2. Opening Joke: Look Who Thinks He's Great

During morning services on the first day of Passover, the ark is opened and the Torah scrolls are removed. Right before the ark is closed and they begin reading the Torah portion from Exodus 12, the great Rabbi of the congregation, whose scholarship and leadership – as he won't fail to mention – are the greatest in the world, stands before the open ark and proclaims for all the congregants to hear: "Hashem, Master of the universe, before You I am nothing!"

Not to be outdone, the great cantor, with – as he himself will tell you – the greatest voice this side of the equator, walks over from his lectern, stands next to the rabbi, raises his arms heavenward, and in a melodious singsong incants: says, "Hashem, Master of the universe, before You I am nothing!"

Near the back of the synagogue, Yankel Shlimazalwitz, watches this procession of humility and thinks it's a pretty holy thing to do on Passover, the day of poor man's bread. Yankel walks up to the open ark, stands next to the great rabbi and great cantor, bends his head, and in a trembling voice proclaims: "Hashem, Master of the universe, before You I am nothing!"

The rabbi nudges the cantor, clears his throat – "ahem" – and whispers loud enough for all to hear: "Look who thinks he's nothing."

3. Make Greatness Great Again!

This, of course, would never happen in this synagogue. Your rabbi and cantor are so humble that we would never resort to such false humility.

But in all seriousness, what is greatness? And, on the flipside, what is humility?

What makes something, or someone, great? What makes something, or someone, humble?

The word "greatness" is thrown around a lot.

Five-star hotels are called 'great.' As are championship sports teams, top restaurants, popular TV shows and blockbuster movies. In the political arena, President Trump wants to 'make America great again,' while his detractors claim the president – and his jingles – are anything but 'great.'

There are 'great' businessmen, 'great' actors, and 'great' communicators. There are even 'great' rabbis who give 'great' sermons at 'great' length to 'great' congregations.

But what truly defines this five-letter word, 'great,' and how can we achieve true greatness?

The answer my friends is contained in the name of this Shabbos – called Shabbos HaGadol, the Great Shabbos.

4. Make Greatness Great Again!

Various reasons are given for the name Shabbos HaGadol, the Great Shabbos, due to the great miracles that happened on this day, as the Jewish people prepared to leave Egypt 3329 years ago.¹

Yet the very name of this Shabbos – the Great Shabbos – teaches us the secret to greatness in general.

But in order to discover and appreciate this secret let us look a little closer at Passover (Pesach), where we actually find a paradox around the idea of greatness.

On one hand, the Egyptian exile and exodus shaped the Jewish people into becoming a great nation. As G-d told Jacob: Do not be afraid of going down to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation.² And as we read in the Passover Haggadah: An Aramean [sought to] destroy my forefather, and he went down to Egypt and sojourned there with a small number of people, and there, he became a great, mighty, and numerous nation.³

On the other hand, we know that Passover personifies humility, lack of ego and self-centricity. The central symbol of Passover, and the underpinning of the Seder and Seder Plate, is Matzah, unleavened flat bread, called “poor man’s bread,” or “bread of affliction.”

Matzah, as our sages teach, represents humility. Leavened products, allowed to rise and inflate, reflect egotistical arrogance, which is full of itself. Unleavened products, without the opportunity to rise or become inflated, signify humility and modesty.

Humility seems to be antithetical to greatness. Humility is a sense of lowliness, walking modestly and unassumingly, while greatness walks tall and proud.

How do we reconcile these two seemingly contrary elements in Passover – greatness and humility? Is Passover about the humility in the poor man’s bread or in the immeasurable greatness?

The same question carries over the Great Shabbos that precedes Passover: Passover is about humility and self-effacement. Matzah is simple and flat; greatness is high and lofty. Passover seems to be about making ourselves smaller and humbler, but the Great Shabbat, as its name suggests, seems to be about making ourselves greater and bigger.

So which one is it – is this season about humility and modesty, or is it about greatness and expansiveness? This is after all the time of freedom – does freedom require humility or greatness? Are we more likely to set ourselves free if we simplify everything, remove all ego, or if we infuse everything with greatness?

¹ See: Tur Shulchan Aruch Orech Chaim sec. 430 (the Egyptians were miraculously unable to prevent the Jews from bringing the lamb, an Egyptian deity, as a Pesach offering). The Alter Rebbe in his Shulchan Aruch HaRav (ibid); see also Tosafot Shabbat 87b (a great civil war broke out in Egypt).

² Genesis 46:3.

³ Deuteronomy 26:5.

5. Measuring Greatness

This question compels us to take a deeper look at the meaning of greatness. Is greatness quantitative or qualitative? Is greatness measured by size and numbers, or is it defined by refined qualities and eminent virtues?

If greatness is indeed an expression of physical strength, brute power, and is measured by numbers, then it is certainly not compatible with humility. Because what makes something great is not its quality, but its size: The bigger it is the greater it is.

Winston Churchill was once asked, “Doesn’t it thrill you to know that every time you make a speech, the hall is packed to overflowing?”

“It’s quite flattering,” replied Sir Winston. “But whenever I feel that way, I always remember that if instead of making a political speech I was being hanged, the crowd would be twice as big.”⁴

However, if greatness is defined by its high quality and elegance, something you can’t count or measure, then it is not merely compatible with humility; it is actually an outgrowth of humility. The humbler the individual the greater he is.

6. Story: Can You Measure Greatness?

A poignant Pesach Seder story captures this beautifully:

Once, during the fourth step of the Seder, Yachatz, when we break the middle Matzah into two parts, one bigger, one smaller, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch, the Tzemach Tzedek (whose 151st yahrzeit is on Erev Pesach), observed someone measuring which piece of the middle matzah is bigger.

The Tzemach Tzedek remarked, “A gadol vas men darf em mestin, iz kein gadol nit” — “One whose greatness has to be measured is not really great.”

Commonly, greatness is a measured quality, relative to others in its category: a great actor or athlete or drink or sermon is great when measured against other actors, athletes, drinks, or sermons.

This type of greatness is greatness as metric, a greatness whose entire existence is based on how it is measured. Such greatness, as the Tzemach Tzedek emphasized, is not really all that great.

True greatness, however, is not relative but an absolute. Not a quantitative measure but a qualitative quality that is immeasurable. A greatness that has to be measured is not real, inherent greatness. A half of a Matzah that is great only relative to a smaller half is not inherently great at all.

⁴ Norman McGowan, *My Years With Winston Churchill*, Souvenir Press, London.

7. Shabbat HaGadol and Flour

We now can understand the significance and power of this Great Shabbat preceding Passover:

The greatness of this Shabbos, like the greatness of Passover, comes hand in and with humility.

Just as Passover fuses humility with greatness; just as the “great nation” of the Jewish people was forged by their humility, so too Shabbos HaGadol is an immeasurable greatness borne from humility.

Perhaps this can also help us understand an interesting custom to make a kugel on Shabbat HaGadol using some of the Passover flour set aside for baking Matzoth.⁵

The Shaloh quotes Rabbeinu Asher, who says that on Erev Shabbat HaGadol it is customary to bake bread, each according to his ability, to be distributed to the poor people. These breads were called “challah of the poor,” or more commonly “synagogue challah.” When people neglected this custom, the grain lost its luster. The Shaloh continues and says that he heard in the name of the Maharshah that one should bake something with the flour set aside for baking Passover Matzah, to preempt the risk of Chametz.⁶ The Shaloh suggests that perhaps the “challah of the poor/synagogue challah” was also baked with flour set aside for baking Matzah. And, the Shaloh concludes, that it’s appropriate that one should sanctify themselves through this sacred act to give of his flour to the poor to eat prior to Passover, and this will result in the person’s flour on Passover (in his Matzoth) to be increasingly sanctified.⁷

True greatness is humility; and true humility give way to greatness. Shabbat HaGadol is great precisely because it is a time to give more than it is to hoard, to feed the needy and poor more than hoarding your flour, or dough, or cash. Matzah is humble bread, and when the flour we set aside to achieve freedom is shared with others, our inherent greatness is revealed.

8. Break Even? Break Greatly!

When we break the middle Matzah, bread of the poor, made of pure Passover flour, we are reaching a level of humility within humility, which opens us up to true greatness. To measure which side is greater is to be ignorant to what greatness means.

Perhaps we may say, in accordance with the above custom, that by baking challahs (or kugels) with the Passover flour (used for matzoth), and distributing them to the poor for Shabbat HaGadol, we are touching the essence of greatness, humility, opening, turning even the leavened Challah into a humble and humbling experience.

⁵ Aruch HaShulchan Orach Chaim, 429:8. See also Magen Avraham 430:1.

⁶ This is a complex Halachic point. See Magen Avraham ibid.

⁷ Shaloh Mesechta Pesach 140b.

Greatness happens when it is not about us. Rather, greatness happens when we remove our egos and become one with the Creator of all greatness.

As with the flour of Matzah, so is it with G-d Al-mighty:

Rabbi Yochanan said: Wherever you find the greatness of the Holy One, blessed be He, there you find His humility. This is written in the Torah, repeated in the Prophets, and stated a third time in the Writings. It is written in the Torah: “For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, mighty and awe-inspiring God, who shows no favoritism and accepts no bribe.” Immediately afterwards it is written, “He upholds the cause of the orphan and widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing”...⁸

And this is surely true with us as well, created in the Divine image: our greatness is found in our humility. When it is not about our selves, we become the greatest people we can become.

9. The Greatness of Being Small

With that in mind we can appreciate how humility and greatness forge into one force that defines Passover:

The Egyptian oppression that humbled the Jews was actually the force that turned them into a “great nation.” As the verse states: “As much as they would afflict them, so did they multiply and so did they gain strength.”⁹

Though “an Aramean [sought to] destroy my forefather, and he went down to Egypt and sojourned there with a small number of people” – it is specifically there that “he became a great, mighty, and numerous nation.”

The unmeasurable humility of Matzah is the key to greatness.

Just look around: The Jewish people are the “fewest among nations.” And yet, they gave survived like no other nation and empire, including those far far greater than the Jewish nation. “Not because you are more numerous than any people did the L-rd delight in you and choose you, for you are the fewest of all peoples.”¹⁰

The Jewish people are compared to the moon, the “small luminary,” as is Jacob, Samuel and David.¹¹ And yet, this “smallness” – this bittul and humility – contains the greatest of all greatness. Because greatness that is measured by size, can always be cut down to size. Greatness that can be measured, is a greatness that can also be diminished and even destroyed. By contrast, bittul ken nisht bottle veren – nothingness cannot be turned into nothing.

⁸ Megillah 31b.

⁹ Exodus 1:12.

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 7:7.

¹¹ Chulin 60b.

True greatness, therefore, is in the domain of the “small” and immeasurable – the humble.

10. Greatly Defined

This definition of greatness is not merely academic. How we define greatness has a profound impact on the type of children we bring up. What do we mean when we tell our children to be great? What are our standards of greatness?

Is being great defined by how much money we have? By our looks and popularity? By our athleticism and charisma?

This definition of greatness as qualitative sheds profound light on life’s most important elements. When we understand greatness not as a metric but as an inherent quality, life and its values begin to fall into place.

Is a rock star rocking a concert any greater than a mother rocking her child?

Is building a skyscraper any greater than building a beautiful family?

Is conquering a country any greater than conquering yourself?

Shabbat HaGadol, the Great Shabbat, teaches us that greatness is not a quantity but a quality, one that is inherent to all of us.

Greatness is found more in the seemingly small things you do, in the kind acts, in the good deeds, less than in the advertised or well-marketed products, more in the basic human qualities that make and beautify life, and less in the rat-race of perceived success and accolades.

Which brings us to humility, Passover, and how to always access this greatness.

11. Personal Lesson: Teach Your Child, You Are Great!

The secret to greatness is the prelude to the freedom of Passover.

As Passover begins, this is the lesson we impart into our children: you aren’t great relatively, quantitatively, because, compared to someone else, you are greater. Rather, you are great absolutely, great inherently, because a piece of greatness, a piece of the divine, has been embedded in you. Thus, as a parent, your job is to nurture that greatness, to teach and remind your child that they are great not because they have built or achieved great things, but because they have a part of and are connected to G-d, the source of all greatness. Then, surely your child will ultimately influence everything he or she does with that greatness.

Put another way: one does not become great when one achieves great things; one achieves great things because one is inherently great. It is not that you are mediocre and only when you do more than others you become greater than them; rather, you are great and when your job is to realize that greatness in everything you do, immeasurable and not on a scale relative to others.

12. Touching Greatness (Conclusion)

On a visit to the Beethoven museum in Bonn, a young American student became fascinated by the piano on which Beethoven had composed some of his greatest works. She asked the museum guard if she could play a few bars on it; she accompanied the request with a lavish tip, and the guard agreed. The girl went to the piano and tinkled out the opening of the Moonlight Sonata. As she was leaving she said to the guard, “I suppose all the great pianists who come here want to play on that piano.”

The guard shook his head. “Paderewski, the famed Polish pianist, was here a few years ago and he said he wasn’t worthy to touch it.”

One who feels worthy of greatness, greatness alludes. Only one who feels unworthy to touch greatness can ever be touched by greatness.

Passover teaches us that we don’t have to touch, or try to touch, greatness. We simply have to remove all the ego, all the *Chametz*, all the leavened arrogance, and allow greatness to touch us.

Shabbat HaGadol, the Great Shabbat, teaches us that greatness is not a quantity but a quality, one that is inherent to all of us.

3329 years ago, the secret to greatness was imparted to us. And on this Great Shabbat, Shabbat HaGadol, we are reminded of what it means to be truly great.

Shabbat Shalom and a Kosher and Freilichen Pesach!