



VAYIKRA

Shabbat HaGadol: Yud Alef Nissan
The Secret of a Successful Sermon
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THE SECRET OF A SUCCESSFUL SERMON

ABSTRACT

Shabbat HaGadol is known for its sermons. Based on the halacha that Rabbis should speak for their communities on the Shabbos before Pesach, some Rabbis wait all year to deliver their best sermon on this day.

But there are sermons and there are sermons. We have of course long, protracted sermons. Rabbis that don't know when to finish. On the other hand, we have sermons that leave us with no message. And then we have the meaningful sermon, that may be long but feels short.

As we honor the Rebbe's 116th birthday this week, let us recall Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explanation on the difference between a Rabbi and a Rebbe: "When a Rabbi speaks, there may be 500 people in the audience, but every person thinks that the Rabbi is speaking to his neighbor. When a Rebbe speaks, he may be addressing 5000 people, but each person thinks that he is speaking to me."

What was the Rebbe's communication secret that so deeply touched and transformed his listeners -- including the man standing before you today, who would not be here were it not for the Rebbe's inspiration?

This Shabbos is a good time to explore this question. As well as its contrast: When was the first drawn-out sermon ever delivered? Was it in the time of the Talmud, or even back in the time of Moses? We don't really know, but would you believe that this day -- Shabbat HaGadol, the "Great Shabbat" -- got its name because of the great sermons delivered on this day, great in length, that is?

Although the Talmud makes no mention of this custom, as long ago as the 11th century, we find references - or should I say, complaints - about the long, drawn-out sermons delivered on this day. None other than the famed biblical commentator, Rashi, writes that the customary lengthy Shabbat HaGadol sermon makes this Shabbat drag. And, he says, this is why it is called Shabbat HaGadol - gadol in the sense of "long/protracted."

So, why would a sage of the caliber of Rashi (and others on his level) suggest there is another, less lofty reason for the name and jokingly gripe about the lengthy sermons on that day? Why even mention it - especially considering that there are many other very

positive reasons for calling this day Shabbat HaGadol ?

This sermon offers a light-hearted look at Shabbat HaGadol, with a profound thought or two and some concluding advice for an inspirational Passover Seder.

And above all, we learn from the Rebbe the secret of true communication.

1. Sermon Snooze (Joke)

Every week, the rabbi would spend hours preparing his weekly sermons - some of which were better than others. But, nevertheless, the congregation would respectfully listen to him each week - except for one man - the synagogue president, Mr. Schwartz.

Mr. Schwartz, as befitting the president, sat right by the ark, next to the rabbi's lectern, and - without fail and in full view of the entire congregation - he would snooze through the whole sermon. No matter how enthusiastic the rabbi's oration, he slept every time. Often, he would even snore - and sometimes, very loudly.

The rabbi didn't know how to remedy the situation without offending the fellow, and he even sent a delegation to diplomatically implore him to drink a few cups of coffee before services. But this didn't help. Each week, right on cue, Mr. Schwartz nodded off as soon as the rabbi started his sermon.

Week after embarrassing week passed, until Shabbat HaGadol arrived, when the rabbi - as every rabbi around the world - would be delivering his longest and most important sermon of the year. The rabbi knew he had to do something drastic.

He summoned his assistant and instructed him: "Listen. After I begin my sermon keep your eyes on Mr. Schwartz. If he falls asleep - which he surely will - I want you to tap him lightly on the head and wake him up. If he falls asleep again, tap him a harder. If he falls asleep yet again, smack him with a stick."

The assistant, who didn't much like the president, was delighted to comply.

Shabbat HaGadol arrived. Shortly after the rabbi began his sermon, Mr. Schwartz was nodding off as usual. As pre-arranged, the assistant tapped him lightly, waking him up. Of course, a few minutes later, he was at it again, and the assistant tapped him harder and roused him for the second time. It didn't take long, before he was nodding off for the third time, and snoring as well. Delighted to give him a good whack, the assistant picked up a wooden stick - which he had readied in advance - and hit him hard on the head. In his enthusiasm, he overdid it, and the startled Mr. Schwartz fell out of his chair.

The assistant rushed over to see if the president was injured, or G-d- forbid, unconscious. "Are you all right?!" he pleaded. "Please say something!"

With a dazed look on his face, Mr. Schwartz looked at him and said,

"Hit me again. I can still hear him!"

2. Shabbat HaGadol

So here we are, gathered together on Shabbat HaGadol - the “Great Shabbat” as the Shabbat preceding Pass-over is called - and you are doubtless expecting a great sermon, great in length, that is.

Traditionally, this has been so - and for many hundreds of years. Based on the halacha that Rabbis should speak for their communities on the Shabbos before Pesach, some Rabbis wait all year to deliver their best sermon on this day. And some Rabbis don't know when to finish...

When was the first drawn-out sermon ever delivered? Was it in the time of the Talmud, or even back in the time of Moses? We don't really know.

Although the Talmud makes no mention of this custom, as long ago as the 11th century we find references - or should I say, complaints - about the long, drawn-out sermons delivered on this day. None other than the famed biblical commentator, Rashi, writes that the customary lengthy Shabbat HaGadol sermon makes this Shabbat drag.¹ And, he says, this is why it is called Shabbat HaGadol - gadol in the sense of “long/protracted.”

Other sages make similar comments, even comparing a good sermon to matzah. Why? Because they are both done in under 18 minutes.

3. The Long speech (Joke)

And speaking of long and protracted...

A speaker who didn't know when to end his talk, kept droning on and on, and went long beyond his allotted hour. After two hours, with no sign of ending, half of the respectful crowd began tip-toeing out of the lecture hall. But the speaker, in his conceited mind, drew the conclusion that the remaining half of the audience was very intrigued with what he had to say, so he launched into another lengthy digression which practically emptied out the place. Instead of getting the message, the speaker concluded yet again that anyone remaining wanted him to go on - these were the truly interested, those who were hungry for his ideas. Finally, it was 1 a.m. and everyone had left except one person.

The speaker said to himself: “Ahh, I have finally found my kindred spirit. A person who has remained sitting and listening to me for all this time. He must really identify with me. Now I can pour out my heart and soul to a person who understands and appreciates me.”

¹ Rashi, Sefer ha'Pardes, p. 343, citing Rabbi Yitzchak Yuskuntu: “When people do not move around, but stay in one place for an extended time and don't have what to do, they customarily will say: ‘what a long day’” A similar sentiment is expressed by the 13th century scholar, Rabbi Tzidkiyahu ben Avraham in his *Shibolei Haleket*, R' Yechiel in *Tanya Rabsi* and others.

When he was finally finished, he enthusiastically approached the sole man sitting in the big empty hall, expecting whole-hearted congratulations on his speech. “So tell me, what did you think of my talk?” he asked invitingly.

“Well,” the man answered, “I really wasn’t paying that much attention.”

“So why are you sitting here?”

“Because I’m the next speaker...”

4. The Big Miracle

Before you draw the erroneous conclusion from all this that the Shabbat before Passover is so named solely due to people’s feelings about the lengthy speeches/sermons, I must point out that our sages - including Rashi himself - offer other reasons for this Shabbat being called Shabbat HaGadol.

Primary among these² is that a great miracle - nes gadol - happened on this Shabbat preceding the Exodus from Egypt, some 3,300 years ago. There are various opinions as to the nature of this great miracle which involved the Paschal lamb.

As we might recall, the Jews were commanded to take a yearling lamb - which was considered a deity in Egypt - and tie it to their bedposts on Shabbat, which fell on the 10th day of Nissan, a few days before they were to leave Egypt. They were to live with this lamb until the 14th day of Nissan when they were to slaughter it and smear its blood on the doorposts of their home.³ During the night, they were to roast it and eat it with matzah and bitter herbs, while ready to leave Egypt, as G-d commanded:

“You must eat it with your waist belted, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand, and you must eat it in haste. On that night, I will pass through Egypt and I will kill every first born of Egypt. The [lamb’s] blood will be a sign on your houses where you are staying. I will see the blood and pass over. You will not be affected by the plague.”⁴

That is an amazing miracle all on its own, but there are commentaries that suggest that the extent of the miracle was even greater.

One opinion states that when the Egyptians inquired of the Jews why they were buying lambs en masse, they were told that these lambs were intended for the Passover offering, which would be sacrificed in preparation of the previously announced plague of the firstborn. This information rattled the Egyptian firstborn, who

² See the Tur in the Shulchan Aruch and the Alter Rebbe in his Shulchan Aruch HaRav (Orech Chaim sec. 430).

³ Exodus chapter 12.

⁴ Exodus 12:11-12.

immediately insisted that the Pharaoh allow the Jews to leave Egypt. When the Pharaoh refused their request, the Egyptian firstborn attacked the Pharaoh's army, and killed many of those who were guilty of atrocities against the Jews.⁵

Another opinion states that on this day it was demonstrated that the Egyptians were powerless against the Jews. Though they were very disturbed by the fact that the Jews were planning to slaughter lambs, their deity, they were incapable of doing anything to hamper their plans.⁶ For even though they tried to kill the Jews for this reason, G-d intervened and miraculously spared them.

5. Why Gripe?

So now let me ask you this question:

If we accept that Shabbat HaGadol is so called after the nes gadol, the great miracle that took place on that Shabbat just before the Exodus, why would a sage of the caliber of Rashi (and others on his level) suggest there is another reason for the name and jokingly gripe about the lengthy sermons on that day? Why even mention it - especially considering that there are many other very positive reasons for calling this day Shabbat HaGadol?

Perhaps we have here a full-blown manifestation of the paradoxes and absurdities of existence, which are acutely reflected in Jewish life. How shall I put it? Awe and trembling - and a bit of self-deprecating humor?

On the one hand, Shabbat HaGadol celebrates the great miracles that preceded the Exodus. After years of oppression at the hands of the Egyptians, the oppressors finally got their due, as they witnessed their G-ds being destroyed, helpless to do anything about it. Year after year on this Shabbat throughout the millennia, sermons upon sermons were delivered, educating, inspiring, motivating, cajoling the people to honor these miracles, improve their lives and heighten their consciousness.

On the other hand, the Jewish people, though free at last, are never allowed to gloat over the deaths of their enemies, nor succumb to pride and self-importance. And so, in an almost tongue-in-cheek way - quite refreshing if you ask me - we are reminded that some of these sermons (even back then) may have gone too long... or, if that sounds too harsh, that the long sermons made the people feel that the day was very, very long.

And yet, some sermons are never too long, as we shall discuss in a moment regarding the Rebbe.

⁵ This opinion is drawn from the verse in the Book of Psalms (136:10) "Who struck Egypt through its first born; for His kindness is eternal" (Alter Rebbe's Shulchan Aruch HaRav from Tosafot Shabbat 87b).

⁶ Tur, Levush.

6. A Thin Line

They say that there is a very thin line between comedy and tragedy, as well as between intensity and lightness of being. Sometimes the only way to survive and not be trampled by existential loneliness and the contradictions of life is with a bit of humor and self-deprecation... not to take yourself too seriously... not to become smug in the face of success... not to be depressed in the face of apparent failure.

Balancing the two - seriousness and cheerfulness, intensity and buoyancy, realism and optimism, sadness and laughter, pain and joy, success and humility - is the secret to resilience and success. And it gives us the power to withstand all challenges and endure.

That is, I believe, the secret of Jewish immortality. And a secret taught to us by the Rebbe, whose 116th birthday we celebrate this week on Yud Alef Nissan (coming Tuesday).

Many have tried to find the key to that secret. Are you, by any chance, familiar with Mark Twain's essay "Concerning the Jews" in which he ponders this very puzzle:

If the statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one percent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous dim puff of star dust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. Properly the Jew ought hardly to be heard of; but he is heard of, has always been heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people, and his commercial importance is extravagantly out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk. His contributions to the world's list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine and abstruse learning, are also way out of proportion to the weakness of his numbers. He has made a marvelous fight in this world, in all ages: and has done it with his hands tied behind him. The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished ... All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?⁷

So I propose that this is it - awe and trembling and a bit of self-deprecating humor.

And in some strange way, this is also the secret of our greatness. And the secret of this Great Shabbat - Shabbat HaGadol.

⁷ "Concerning the Jews," an essay by Mark Twain in Harper's Magazine, September 1897. Also see: Twain, Mark, The Complete Essay of Mark Twain, New York: Doubleday, 1963, p. 249.

7. The Rebbe's Communication Secret

Despite the length of the traditional Shabbat HaGadol sermons, there are talks that are never too long. And therein lies another secret our greatness amplified on Shabbat HaGadol.

There is one man that spoke this way -- a man that I (and many) listened to for hours, and could continue listening to him forever. A man who would captivate anyone listening to him.

Do you know why? Because he spoke with love and touched the heart of his listeners. When someone tells you "I love you" they can speak forever and you will never tire from their words...

This man was the Rebbe. My Rebbe, your Rebbe, our Rebbe.

As we honor the Rebbe's 116th birthday this week, let us recall Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explanation on the difference between a Rabbi and a Rebbe: "When a Rabbi speaks, there may be 500 people in the audience, but every person thinks that the Rabbi is speaking to his neighbor. When a Rebbe speaks, he may be addressing 5000 people, but each person thinks that he is speaking to me."

What was the Rebbe's communication secret -- his greatness - that so deeply touched and transformed his listeners -- including the man standing before you today, who would not be here were it not for the Rebbe's inspiration?

The secret was love, care and warmth. No matter what the Rebbe's message was -- whether it was a Pesach directive or addressing the challenges of our times, whether it was deep esoteric subject or a practical lesson in life -- the words were always saturated with profound love -- love to the people he was addressing and love to the people he was speaking about.

The Rebbe's deep and passionate care was undeniable and impossible to ignore. It touched our hearts deeply, and changed our lives. Without exaggeration I can personally attest to the fact that it was the Rebbe's love that inspired me and my wife to embark on the journey that brought me to this city and empowered us to build this beautiful community together with you. Were it not for the Rebbe we would never have even undertaken all the challenges that we have faced, and would never have grown to this point.

So as we celebrate the Rebbe's birthday I feel it very appropriate to acknowledge to Rebbe and all the blessings and strengths he has given us all and continue to give us all -- all of you and your wonderful families.

Indeed, such a Rebbe can speak for a long time and keep us engaged, only leaving us wanting more...

The lesson to us all is very clear, especially on Shabbat HaGadol when sermons can drag on forever...

Shabbat HaGadol teaches us the real power of our greatness: Tell someone "I love you" -- not just in words but in your every gesture -- and you can speak forever and they will never tire from your words...

Tell your children that you love them, make sure they feel your love, and they will connect with you forever.

And what better time to remember this message as we approach the holiday of Pesach.

8. Call to Action

Since, as Jews, we are endowed with this special greatness, we are obliged to share it and not hide our light under a bushel.

More than anything, on this Shabbat HaGadol, I would like to encourage all assembled here to become loving teachers - sermonizers in the most positive sense of the word - and where better to start than at home.

Passover is upon us and it offers us all a wonderful opportunity to teach and inspire each other around the Seder table with love.

The Hebrew word for Passover - Pesach - is made up of two words peh (meaning “mouth”) and sach (meaning “speaking”). So open your Haggadah and open your mouth. Not for nothing is the name Haggadah taken from the phrase v’higadito li’vincho (“and tell your children”). Open your mouth with love and allow words of warmth and affection pour out of your mouth.

Make the telling of our incredible transition - from slavery to freedom - meaningful and relevant to your children and those at your Seder table. (That will require a bit of preparation, a bit of study, but that time and energy will be well worth it.)

- Tell them that every year on Passover night, a new energy enters the world - the energy of freedom and transcendence. The Passover Seder is the best time to tap into that energy, to access the power that allows us to break out of our personal limits and constraints - for the Torah’s word for Egypt, Mitzrayim, means precisely that: constraints/limitations/restrictions.” As we re-live the Exodus, we loosen our personal shackles, and the personal effort we put in ripples across the globe and empowers others who are trying to throw off their chains, who are trying to escape their traps.
- Tell them that the ultimate path to real emancipation from slavery lies in self-respect coupled with humility and with empathy toward others. We acquire these when we recognize that we are not self-made creatures, but a part of a higher reality. For we cannot free ourselves, as we learn from the Haggadah and from the first of the Ten Commandments which states: “I am the Lord your G-d who freed you from the house of bondage in Egypt.”⁸

⁸ Exodus 20:2.

- Tell them that the entire Seder is a journey from slavery to freedom. And the milestones of this journey are marked with the four cups of wine, which correspond to the four levels of redemption identified by G-d Himself, when He promised us: “I will take you out from the suffering of Egypt. I will deliver you from bondage. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. I will take to you Myself as a nation and I will be your G-d.”
- Tell them that true freedom is not just being rid of an external enemy. It is not just an absence of slavery. It is not just being anti something. It is about building a life that stands for something... so that you can never be enslaved, exploited or constricted. Only then are you truly free.

And when you assemble your material and think about what you most want to share with others, don't forget two cardinal rules. First, keep it short. And second, don't forget to throw in a bit of humor. Here is a relevant joke for you:

A university professor was delivering a lecture - yes, another long speech - on the parting of the sea, attempting to demonstrate that it was not a sea at all, but a tidal pool with water about two inches deep. As he expounded his proofs, an old lady from the back row exclaimed: “What a miracle!” This irritated him to no end. “Excuse me, Madam, I just explained that there was NO miracle. The water was two inches deep!” The old lady gasped, “I can't believe the magnitude of this miracle!” He was now really angry, “Lady! Are you deaf?!” he shouted, “No miracle! Two inches of water!” But she would not be denied: “What a miracle! The entire Egyptian army drowned in two inches of water.”

Let me close on that happy note and extend a blessing to all for a very meaningful, transcendent - and disarming - Passover. Amen.

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