



## VAYIKRA

Shabbat HaGadol:  
Are You Afraid Of Public Speaking?  
April 13, 2019

## ARE YOU AFRAID OF PUBLIC SPEAKING

### ABSTRACT

Are you afraid of speaking in public? Does even the notion of public speaking give you the shakes? Does anxiety overtake you as you prepare for a Shabbat sermon? Do you find yourself short of breath as you approach the lectern to deliver an important lecture?

Well, then this sermon is for you!

Jewish tradition asserts that Shabbat Hagadol is a time for speeches. Why, more than any Shabbat in the year, is the Shabbat before Pesach singled out to give a public lecture?

This sermon will answer this question by delving into the pathology and psychology of the fear of public speaking.

We will provide Torah-sourced tools to overcome this fear, ultimately turning the fear of public speaking into the fair of public speaking.

More than overcome: transform that fear into fuel for becoming the greatest -- a true *gadol* -- public speaker ever!

Spoiler alert: it has to do with onions (no, not the ones we dip in salt water).

### 1. Preamble: The Shabbat Hagadol Sermon

Rabbis seem to always be speaking. We speak on Shabbat and Yom Tov. We speak at Bar/Bat Mitzvahs. We speak at weddings. We speak, a thousand separations, at funerals. We speak at both joyous occasions and, may it never be, the opposite. Rabbis never stop speaking.

All year round, speaking, lecturing, sermonizing is a choice we make, not a commandment from on high. Teaching, one of the primary responsibilities of a rabbi, is indeed a Mitzvah. Droning on for hours, however, is not.

One Shabbos, in a small village, a farmer came to synagogue. When he entered, he saw that he and the rabbi were the only ones present. The rabbi asked the farmer if he wanted him to go ahead and deliver his planned sermon.

The farmer said, "I'm not too smart, but if I went to feed my cattle

and only one showed up, I'd feed him.”

So the rabbi began his sermon.

One hour passed, then two hours, then two-and-a-half hours. The rabbi finally finished and came down to ask the farmer how he had liked the sermon.

The farmer answered slowly, “Well, I'm not very smart, but if I went to feed my cattle and only one showed up, I sure wouldn't feed him ALL the hay.”

Except on Shabbat Hagadol. Today, on the Shabbat preceding Pesach, the Shulchan Aruch, the Code of Jewish Law, actually instructs us to give an informative sermon to our congregations.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, one reason given -- by none other than the famed biblical commentator, Rashi -- for the name Shabbat “Hagadol”<sup>2</sup> is due to the lengthy sermon delivered on this day,<sup>3</sup> making the day feel “gadol” -- long and protracted<sup>4</sup>.

Why is specifically the Shabbat preceding Passover singled out for public speaking, and a long sermon at that? What's so special about the lead up to Pesach to warrant delivering a sermon and lecturing the public?

One obvious reason for the sermon is to inform the congregation about the different laws of Passover. As the Shulchan Aruch tells us that we are obligated to study the laws before the holiday in order to know what we must do and what we must avoid doing<sup>5</sup>.

But 1) this still does not explain why the Shabbos before Passover stands out as being called the “great” Shabbos due to its long sermon more than the Shabbos before Sukkot. 2) The same Shulchan Aruch points out that today this is not necessary because the laws of Passover are published for all to see and study.

And finally 3) What explicit connection does a sermon have with Passover?

Which, of course, brings up the very real fear of public speaking.

---

### 1 Magen Avraham And Shulchan Aruch Harav Orach Chaim 429:2

2 For more reasons why this day is called Shabbos HaGadol -- see Haggadah Shleimah (R' Menachem Kasher) and Kitzur Shulchan Aruch Yalkut Yosef who cites 22 reasons, a few of which have to do with “great” sermons.

3 Maharil (3a). See Tzideh L'Derech (4:3:3).

4 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 Shibolet Haleket, R' Yechiel in Tanya Rabsi and others.

5 See sources cited in note 1.

## 2. Humor: Don't Speak Of It

The famous Jewish comedian, Jerry Seinfeld, sums up the fear of public speaking in a pith and witty manner:

According to most studies, people's number one fear is public speaking. Number two is death. Death is number two. Does that sound right? This means to the average person, if you go to a funeral, you're better off in the casket than doing the eulogy.

## 3. Challenges Overcome

A fundamental principle of Judaism is that G-d does not give us a challenge we cannot overcome. If and when we are given a challenge, we are also given the tools necessary to rise to the challenge and turn it into an opportunity.

The fact that G-d instructs us to speak in public and share words of Torah and inspiration, means that G-d instills within us the ability to do so in a profound and successful way. We are imbued with the ability to overcome any natural or unnatural fear of speaking in public.

What are the tools to overcoming our inherent fear of public speaking and how can they elevate our Shabbat Hagadol and Passover to the greatest heights?

## 4. Story: Sharing Words of Wisdom

The Mittler Rebbe, the second Rebbe of Chabad and son of the Alter Rebbe, Chabad's founder, lived in the Russian city of Lubavitch. The Mittler Rebbe instructed his Chassidim who traveled to Lubavitch to hear Chassidus from the Rebbe should, on their return home, repeat and share what they learned in all the *shtetls* which they passed through<sup>6</sup>.

In other words: The Mittler Rebbe was encouraging his Chassidim to become public speakers -- teacher and lecturers of Torah -- where they went.

A certain young man, who was an eloquent orator and a highly charismatic speaker, felt that his public speaking was getting to his head and, as a result of sharing Chassidus to eloquently, his ego was growing. The troubled young man requested a *yechidut*, private audience, with the Mittler Rebbe to pour out his heart. After sharing his concerns, the earnest young man wanted the Rebbe's permission to cease speaking in public to keep his arrogance and ego in check.

---

<sup>6</sup> See Likkutei Sichot vol. 11 p. 328ff. Vol. 24, p. 144. Sichos Kodesh 5745-1, first night of Sukkot, p. 6.

The Mittler Rebbe responded straightforwardly, yet with a somewhat cryptic analogy: *a tzibele zol fun dir veren, ubber Chassidus zolstu chazaren* -- [even if] you may become an onion, but Chassidut you must disseminate.

The Mittler Rebbe's straightforward response was that you must teach and disseminate Chassidus no matter what (even if it makes you feel arrogant). But what is the meaning of "becoming an onion"? Is it a positive or a negative? And what lessons does it teach us in our own sermonizing and (fear of) public speaking?

## 5. What Is An Onion?

An onion is not edible. It is bitter. Sharp. An onion makes you tear up. No one would ever take a bite out of an onion.

And yet, an onion can enhance a dish like nothing else. A little tiny bit of onion can transform a multi-faceted, multi-layered, multiple-ingredient recipe. Indeed, even Halachically, a sharp ingredient like an onion can transform a blemish in a dish into a positive enhancement<sup>7</sup>.

Every word the Mittler Rebbe chose was intentional and nuanced. He was teaching a lesson to that young Chassid, and all public speakers to follow: Even if you become bitter and distasteful like an onion -- due to your ego -- do not refrain from depriving others from Torah and Chassidus.

A lesson is being taught to that young Chassid, and all public speakers to follow: be an onion, but

Why? Because teaching others Torah is not about *you*. It's about them. It's about teaching them a higher Divine truth, and you have no right to get in the way with your pride and pomposity. Your job is to share with others the "words of the living G-d," regardless of your state.

Additionally, on a deeper level: An onion, no matter how sharp, bitter, and inedible it is on its own, when it is dropped into a dish, it enhances the entire dish to heights of flavor it could never reach on its own.

Even if you feel that you are an onion, that public speaking is making you arrogant and "bitter", your sharing of divine wisdom is enhancing every single ingredient that is sitting and listening to the words of Torah coming out of your mouth. You, regardless of your own self-perception, are making the dish of life more flavorful.

And lest you say I am but one person and how much of a difference can my public speaking make, learn from the small onion: an onion is comparatively tiny compared to the rest of the dish, yet its presence has an out-sized affect and all of the ingredients and on the entire dish.

Moreover: an onion, a sharp flavor, has the ability to transform a deficiency into a delight, a blemish into a delicacy, a liability into an asset.

---

<sup>7</sup> Rama, Yoreh Deah 95:2; Shach to 107; et al.

And so too do your words. If you had the honor and privilege of traveling to Lubavitch, to the Rebbe, and you heard *Divrei Elokim Chaim*, divine words that are alive, then you must share them wherever you go, flavoring the dish of life of all people you encounter.

## 6. Don't Get Drunk On Yourself

The Talmud<sup>8</sup> states that one should not get intoxicated prior to giving a drasha, a public speech, with halachik (legal) instruction<sup>9</sup>, so that his message not be compromised in any way.

The objective of a proper public speech is to illuminate and instruct the audience in living a better life, according to G-d's laws and directives. And, in order to do so, one must be sober.

In other words: A speech is not about the speaker, and his perceived need to loosen up or entertain his crowd. It is about the message -- and the audience -- to communicate to them divine words.

The Talmud learns this lesson from the episode of Aaron the High Priest's two sons. As we read a few weeks ago in the portion of Shemini<sup>10</sup>, Nadav and Avihu entered the Holy of Holies while intoxicated. And they never came out. They were consumed by a "strange fire." From this we learn:

*Do not drink wine that will lead to intoxication, neither you nor your sons with you, when you go into the Tent of Meeting, so that you shall not die. An eternal statute for your generations, to distinguish between holy and profane and between unclean and clean, and to instruct the children of Israel regarding all the statutes which the Lord has spoken to them through Moses.*

At the end of the day, Nadav and Avihu focused too much on themselves and their deep desire to fuse with the divine. They were consumed with a deep passion and love to get close to G-d. They wanted to get high. They wanted to get holy. They were intoxicated on the experience. So though their intentions were holy and their pleasure was to bond with the divine, since they inserted their personalities into this desire, lacking the utter selflessness to contain the experiences, they were consumed by the "strange fire."

Sober means you aren't intoxicated on yourself. It's not about you. It's not about the onion. It's about the dish. It's not about whether or not you feel arrogant when you speak, or whether you want to or don't want to walk into the holy of holies.

It's about one thing: elevating the dish with the ability given to you.

It's not about taking, but about giving. It's not about serving your needs, but serving the people's needs -- and G-d's wishes.

---

<sup>8</sup> Kritut 13b.

<sup>9</sup> Rashi ad loc s.v. Midrashot.

<sup>10</sup> Leviticus 10:1-11.

And that is the most sobering thing ever.

The fear of public speaking is only born when it's about you. When you insert yourself into the equation -- whether it's wanting to succeed too much, or afraid of failing, whether you want to impress or not disappoint -- that sense of self, that ego, is the root of the fear.

Whether that fear results from feeling like you're doing too good of a job and thus becoming arrogant, or whether that fear results from feeling inadequate for the job. Both fears are about you.

When it's not about you, when it's not about the onion but about the dish, then the fear of public speaking becomes the fear of public speaking.

Simply put -- a simple exercise to help you get over public speaking jitters: Before you speak, ask yourself: What am I speaking now? What right do I have to speak and take up time of my distinguished audience? If your answer is -- because you are smart and think you are important, then perhaps you don't have the right to speak. And then your fear of speaking is justified.

But if your humble answer is that I am speaking because I was instructed to do so by G-d or by my Rebbe -- and the words I am sharing are not my own, but words of Torah of the "living G-d," and that these words are vital for people to hear -- then you are G-d's mouthpiece, and are blessed with the gift and opportunity to share these words with your community. And then there is nothing to fear -- because it's not about YOU.

## 7. Speaking Before Pesach

So why indeed is Shabbat Hagadol, the Shabbat prior to Pesach, a uniquely designated time for speaking? One beautiful reason is because the entire Pesach Seder itself is anchored around speaking:

The very name of the Passover Haggadah read at the Seder means -- "telling," "relating" -- telling the story, the narrative. Based on the verse<sup>11</sup>: *V'higadeto l'vincho*: "And you shall tell your child." And the largest part of the Haggadah and Seder is Maggid -- telling the story, which begins with the children asking the Mah Nishtana and the four questions.

The Arizal teaches that Pesach (פסח) is comprised of two words -- Peh Soch (פה סח), a mouth that speaks.<sup>12</sup>

This is a repair of the Pharaoh, also made up of two words -- Peh Rah (פה רע = פרעה), an "evil mouth." Pharaoh, the evil mouth, conspired with his wicked words against the Jews and against G-d and Moses.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Exodus 13:8.

<sup>12</sup> Shaar HaKavonot, Inyan HaPesach, Shar 3. Pri Etz Chaim Shaar Chag HaMatzos end of chapter 1. Chapter 7. Siddur HaArizal.

<sup>13</sup> Exodus 1:9-10.

Pesach rectifies and is victorious over Pharaoh -- Peh Soch, the open mouth of goodness, corrects, heals and transforms the evil mouth of Peh Rah.

That's why on Pesach we speak -- we tell the story -- **והגדת בלבנך** - that's why it's called Haggadah, Maggid.

Pesach is all about healthy expression, and developing tools for great communication. On Passover, at the Seder, we teach our children how to speak up in a free and liberating manner, to communicate in a healthy way and with healthy humility.

Even if a child doesn't know how to ask a question (**אינו יודע לשאול**), on Passover we are told to encourage him to "open his mouth," Peh Soch, (**את פתח לו**), to learn how to ask, to inquire, and communicate.

And we learn how to do so from the greatest communicator of all time. A communicator who ironically had difficulty... speaking.

Moses tells G-d, "I am a man of no words" (**לא איש דברים אנכי**)<sup>14</sup>. And yet Moses becomes the man who spoke the most important words ever uttered -- the words of the Torah as he heard them from G-d!

This "man of no words" became the greatest public speaker of all time -- his words lead to the Exodus, Sinai, and the Promised Land!

His words became immortal: **אלה הדברים אשר דבר השם**,<sup>15</sup> eternal words, repeated and pored over more than any other words in history.

Why? Because he was the humblest man on earth.<sup>16</sup> He was a conduit for the divine, G-d's mouthpiece: **אנכי השם** **מי שם פה לאדם הלא**<sup>17</sup> "Who gave man a mouth, or who makes [one] dumb or deaf or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?"

We are given the power to emulate that in our lives: We say each day in prayer **אר-ני שפתי תפתח** -- G-d open my mouth, to speak a higher truth, with words from the heart -- get yourself out of the way -- then we have nothing to fear when taking the stage.

Be an onion, a divine conduit of flavor to make the dish of life taste better. This humility learned from Moses empowers us to emulate his ways -- to communicate effectively and meaningfully, and lead us out of both our own personal and collective Pharaoh's and Mitzrayim's (constraints and fears), toward our personal and global Exodus and redemption.

And this is why Shabbat Hagadol, the Shabbat prior to Pesach -- Peh Sach -- is the opportune time to speak in public, overcome our fears, and begin transforming Peh Rah into Peh Sach!

---

<sup>14</sup> Exodus 4:10.

<sup>15</sup> Deuteronomy 1:1.

<sup>16</sup> Numbers 12:3.

<sup>17</sup> Exodus 4:11.



## 8. Conclusion: The Fair of Public Speaking

Talk about sobering. Here's a rabbi that just spent 20 minutes droning on about public speaking while speaking in public!

Public speaking is a bit of a misnomer. Public speaking implies that there is such a thing as private speaking, or not public speaking. I guess there is: it's called talking to yourself.

Today, it's quite clear that everything we say is public. When we speak to another, it is saying something not privately to yourself, but publicly, to an other. When speaking in front of a large audience, the public part simply becomes more public.

This logic has an obvious conclusion: each and every one of us is, in some capacity or another, a public speaker. We each share with the world around us.

We each have visited the proverbial Lubavitch and heard living, divine words. Indeed, we each have studied the entire Torah in our mothers' wombs!<sup>18</sup> As such, we are entrusted with the mission to share those words with everyone we know, to speak in public and flavor the dish of life and all its diverse ingredients.

Being afraid of this calling is natural -- if you think about yourself, if you think about the onion.

When you think about flavoring the dish, fulfilling your mission, then there is no fear of public speaking at all.

Life becomes very, very fair indeed.

*Shabbat Shalom and Good Shabbos!*

*May you and all the Jewish people have a kosher and freilechen Pesach!*

© Copyright 2019 The Meaningful Life Center. By downloading this PDF file from Meaningful Sermons, you agree to respect the copyright of this written material. You understand that your right to this material is limited to using it to deliver sermons, classes or other oral presentations to your community. You agree not to publish this material or any part thereof, nor to email, fax, copy, scan, mail, etc. or otherwise share this material with others, nor to verbally

---

18 Niddah 30a-b.