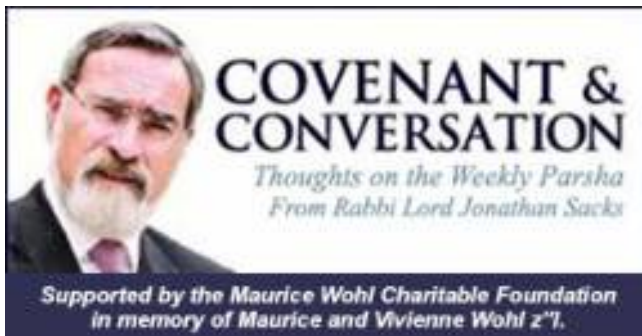


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The Courage of Identity Crises

Good leaders know their own limits. They do not try to do it all themselves. They build teams. They create space for people who are strong where they are weak. They understand the importance of checks and balances and the separation of powers. They surround themselves with people who are different from them. They understand the danger of concentrating all power in a single individual. But learning your limits, knowing there are things you cannot do – even things you cannot *be* – can

be a painful experience. Sometimes it involves an emotional crisis.

The Torah contains four fascinating accounts of such moments. What links them is not words but music. From quite early on in Jewish history, the Torah was sung, not just read. Moses at the end of his life calls the Torah a song.¹ Different traditions grew up in Israel and Babylon, and from around the tenth century onward the chant began to be systematised in the form of the musical notations known as *ta'amei ha-mikra*, cantillation signs, devised by the Tiberian Masoretes (guardians of Judaism's sacred texts). One very rare note, known as a *shalshelet* (chain), appears in the Torah four times only. Each time it is a sign of existential crisis. Three instances are in the book of Genesis. The fourth is in our parsha. As we will see, the fourth is about leadership. In a broad sense, the other three are as well.

The first instance occurs in the story of Lot. After Lot separated from his uncle Abraham he settled in Sodom. There he assimilated into the local population. His daughters married local men. He himself sat in the city gate, a sign that he had been made a Judge. Then two visitors come to tell him to leave, for God is about to destroy the city. Yet Lot hesitates, and above the word for “hesitates” – *vayitmamah* – is a *shalshelet*. (Gen. 19:16). Lot is torn, conflicted. He senses that the visitors are right. The city is indeed about to be destroyed. But he has invested his whole future in the new identity he has been carving out for himself and his daughters. The angels then forcibly take him

out of the city to safety – had they not done so, he would have delayed until it was too late.

The second *shalsholet* occurs when Abraham asks his servant – traditionally identified as Eliezer – to find a wife for Isaac his son. The commentators suggest that Eliezer felt a profound ambivalence about his mission. Were Isaac not to marry and have children, Abraham's estate would eventually pass to Eliezer or his descendants. Abraham had already said so before Isaac was born: “Sovereign Lord, what can You give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?” (Gen. 15:2). If Eliezer succeeded in his mission, bringing back a wife for Isaac, and if the couple had children, then his chances of one day acquiring Abraham’s wealth would disappear completely. Two instincts warred within him: loyalty to Abraham and personal ambition. The verse states: “And he said: Lord, the God of my master Abraham, send me...good speed this day, and show kindness to my master Abraham” (Gen. 24:12). Eliezer’s loyalty to Abraham won, but not without a deep struggle. Hence the *shalsholet* (Gen. 24:12).

The third *shalshalet* brings us to Egypt and the life of Joseph. Sold by his brothers as a slave, he is now working in the house of an eminent Egyptian, Potiphar. Left alone in the house with his master’s wife, he finds himself the object of her desire. He is handsome. She wants him to sleep with her. He refuses. To do such a thing, he says, would be to betray his master, her husband. It would be a sin against God. Yet over “he refused” is a *shalsholet*, (Genesis 39:8) indicating – as some rabbinic sources and mediaeval commentaries suggest – that he did so at the cost

of considerable effort.² He nearly succumbed. This was more than the usual conflict between sin and temptation. It was a conflict of identity. Recall that Joseph was living in a new and strange land. His brothers had rejected him. They had made it clear that they did not want him as part of their family. Why then should he not, in Egypt, do as the Egyptians do? Why not yield to his master's wife if that is what she wanted? The question for Joseph was not just, “Is this right?” but also, “Am I an Egyptian or a Jew?”

All three episodes are about inner conflict, and all three are about identity. There are times when each of us has to decide, not just “What shall I do?” but “What kind of person shall I be?” That is particularly fateful in the case of a leader, which brings us to episode four, this time with Moses in the central role.

After the sin of the Golden Calf, Moses had, at God’s command instructed the Israelites to build a Sanctuary which would be, in effect, a permanent symbolic home for God in the midst of the people. By now the work is complete and all that remains is for Moses to induct his brother Aaron and Aaron’s sons into office. He robes Aaron with the special garments of the High Priest, anoints him with oil, and performs the various sacrifices appropriate to the occasion. Over the word *vayishchat*, “and he slaughtered [the sacrificial ram]” (Lev. 8:23) there is a *shalsholet*. By now we know that this means there was an internal struggle in Moses’ mind. But what was it? There is not the slightest sign in the text that suggests that he was undergoing a crisis.

Yet a moment's thought makes it clear what Moses' inner turmoil was about. Until now he had led the Jewish people. Aaron had assisted him, accompanying him on his missions to Pharaoh, acting as his spokesman, aide and second-in-command. Now, however, Aaron was about to undertake a new leadership role in his own right. No longer would he be one step behind Moses. He would do what Moses himself could not. He would preside over the daily offerings in the Tabernacle. He would mediate the *avodah*, the Israelites' sacred service to God. Once a year on Yom Kippur he would perform the service that would secure atonement for the people from its sins. No longer in Moses' shadow, Aaron was about to become the one kind of leader Moses was not destined to be: a High Priest.

The Talmud adds a further dimension to the poignancy of the moment. At the Burning Bush, Moses had repeatedly resisted God's call to lead the people. Eventually God told him that Aaron would go with him, helping him speak (Ex. 4:14-16). The Talmud says that at that moment Moses lost the chance to be a Priest: "Originally [said God] I had intended that you would be the Priest and Aaron your brother would be a Levite. Now he will be the Priest and you will be a Levite."³

That is Moses' inner struggle, conveyed by the *shalshelet*. He is about to induct his brother into an office he himself will never hold. Things might have been otherwise – but life is not lived in the world of "might have been." He surely feels joy for his brother, but he cannot altogether avoid a sense of loss. Perhaps he already senses what he will later discover, that though he was the prophet and liberator, Aaron will have a privilege Moses

will be denied, namely, seeing his children and their descendants inherit his role. The son of a Priest is a Priest. The son of a Prophet is rarely a Prophet.

What all four stories tell us is that there comes a time for each of us when we must make an ultimate decision as to who we are. It is a moment of existential truth. Lot is a Hebrew, not a citizen of Sodom. Eliezer is Abraham's servant, not his heir. Joseph is Jacob's son, not an Egyptian of loose morals. Moses is a Prophet, not a Priest. To say 'Yes' to who we are, we have to have the courage to say 'No' to who we are not. Pain and struggle is always involved in this type of conflict. That is the meaning of the *shalshelet*. But we emerge less conflicted than we were before.

This applies especially to leaders, which is why the case of Moses in our parsha is so important. There were things Moses was not destined to do. He would never become a Priest. That task fell to Aaron. He would never lead the people across the Jordan. That was Joshua's role. Moses had to accept both facts with good grace if he was to be honest with himself. And great leaders must be honest with themselves if they are to be honest with those they lead.

A leader should never try to be all things to all people. A leader should be content to be who they are. **Leaders must have the strength to know what they cannot be if they are to have the courage to be truly their best selves.**

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Are there other instances in Tanach when we might have expected to find a *shalsholet*?
2. How was Lot's story of hesitation different from the other three?
3. Do you think struggles with identity create better leaders?

NOTES

1. Deuteronomy 31:19.
2. Tanhuma, *Vayeshev* 8; cited by Rashi in his commentary to Genesis 39:8.
3. Zevachim 102a.



Holy Vessels

Parashat Tzav includes very detailed instructions for the sacrificial rites of various types of offerings (*korbanot*). At a certain point in the text, as the intricacies of the sin offering are enumerated, the text veers slightly off center, and makes some comments regarding "housekeeping:"

Any clay pot in which [the sin offering] is cooked must be broken. However, if [the offering] is cooked in a copper pot, [the pot] may be purged

and then rinsed with water. (Vayikra 6:21)

The sages explain that this law is concerned with the transfer of holiness from the offering itself to the vessel in which it is prepared. Like almost all offerings (with the exception of the *olah*, the burnt offering), the sin offering is eaten; unlike other offerings, the sin offering is enjoyed by the priests who serve in the Temple (the *kohanim*), but not by the person who offers the sacrifice as a means of atoning for a sin. There are other important limitations on the consumption of this sin offering, most notably its "expiration date:" Sin offerings may be consumed only within a limited period of time. Clearly, then, the taste of the offering is part and parcel of its holiness, and any residue must be expelled from the utensil before the time limit expires. Earthenware, which is a porous material, absorbs tastes and can never be completely purged of residue; therefore, earthenware utensils used for preparation of the sin offering must be destroyed after use. Metal vessels, on the other hand, are not absorbent and may be completely purged of residual flavor - and holiness.

In his commentary *Kli Yakar*, Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz (1550-1619) offers a homiletic reading of this passage, drawing spiritual instruction for our own experience of sin and atonement. The residual taste in the utensil is analogous to the residual stain that sin leaves on our hearts. Sometimes, to remove the stain, a thorough wash is sufficient; other times, complete immersion is required. In some instances, when the stain of sin is so profound that it has been absorbed into our very being, becoming a part of

who we are, we must break our hearts in order to purge the sin.

Rabbi Yosef Soloveitchik made a similar observation in a *shiur* I attended: The Talmud recounts the execution of Rabbi Chanina ben Teradion, and the precise method of torture to which he was subjected. The Romans wrapped him in a Torah scroll and set it aflame - but that was not sufficiently cruel for them. To prolong the agony, his chest was swathed in damp wool to make his death slower and more painful:

... they found Rabbi Chanina ben Teradion sitting and occupying himself with the Torah, publicly gathering assemblies [of students], with a Torah scroll in his lap. [The Romans] took hold of him, wrapped him in a Torah scroll, placed bundles of branches round him and set them on fire. They then brought tufts of wool, which they had soaked in water, and placed them over his heart, so that he should not expire quickly. His daughter exclaimed, 'Father, must I see you like this!' He replied, 'If it were I alone being burned, then it would have been difficult for me; but now that I am burning together with a Torah scroll, He who will take vengeance for the insult of the Torah will also take retribution for what they have done to me.' His disciples called out, 'Rabbi, what do you see?' He answered them, 'The parchment is being burnt but the letters are soaring up [to Heaven].' 'Open your mouth so that the fire will enter [and your suffering will be shortened].' He replied, 'Let Him who gave me my

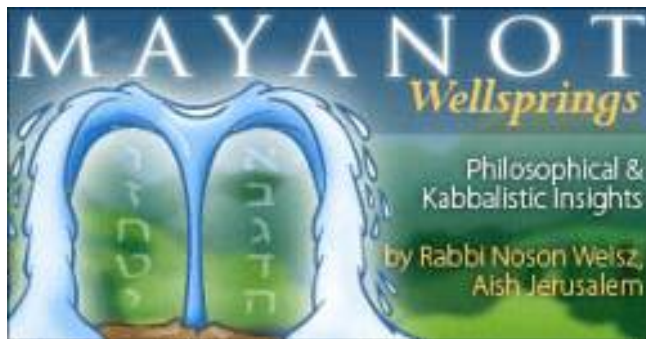
soul take it away; no one is permitted to injure himself.' The Executioner then said to him, 'Rabbi, if I raise the flame and take away the tufts of wool from over your heart, will you see to it that I enter into the World to Come?' 'Yes,' he replied. 'Then swear to me'. He swore to him. He thereupon raised the flame and removed the tufts of wool from over his heart, and his soul departed speedily. The Executioner then leaped and threw himself into the fire, and a bat kol (heavenly voice) exclaimed: Rabbi Chanina ben Teradion and the Executioner have been assigned to the World to Come. When Rabbi (Yehudah Hanasi) heard it, he wept and said: 'One man may acquire eternal life in a single hour, another after many years.' (Talmud Bavli, Avodah Zarah 18a)

The executioner had a sudden epiphany that seems to have been at odds with the entire trajectory of his life up to that point. This man was a seasoned, veteran killer; he should have been impervious to the suffering of one more Jewish martyr - but something dramatic happened. The killer became compassionate. Rather than focusing on his professional skills as a cruel assassin, he became concerned with euthanasia, with easing the suffering of his victim, and his spiritual fate was completely altered as a result.

Under normal circumstances, converts to Judaism must immerse in a mikvah, a ritual bath, symbolizing their spiritual rebirth. In a very real sense, we might say that this executioner underwent a spiritual conversion, but rather than

immersing in cleansing waters, he was immersed in flames. Apparently, his sin was so profound that a thorough wash was insufficient to cleanse his soul; immersion in water was also not enough. The stain of sin had become his entire personality, his entire life, Rabbi Soloveitchik taught. This man had so much Jewish blood on his hands, only fire could expunge the evil. Once the vessel that held his newly-repentant soul was destroyed, the stain of sin purged, he was welcomed into the World to Come.

In the days leading up to Pesach, we go to great lengths to insure that our utensils are washed, purged, and kosher for Pesach. Perhaps we should take some time to consider our souls as well, and to cleanse ourselves in preparation for the holiday that sets us free.



Looking Glasses of the Soul

The Shabbat immediately preceding Passover has a special name. It is called *Shabbat HaGadol*, "the Great Shabbat."

The Tur (Orach Chaim, ch. 430) explains that in the year of the Exodus the 10th day of Nissan fell on Shabbat. Thus, the Passover lamb, which had

to be purchased four days before the holiday -- *On the tenth of this month they shall take for themselves, each man, a lamb or kid...* (Exodus 12:3) -- was purchased on that Shabbat.

The lamb in Egypt had a status similar to the cow in present day India. It was a sacred animal, as Moses stated to Pharaoh:

Behold, if we were to slaughter the deity of Egypt in their sight, will they not stone us (Exodus 8:22).

Nevertheless, the Egyptians, who were perfectly aware of what the Jews were intending to do with the lambs, were constrained to remain silent and were able to raise no protest. This was a great miracle and therefore the Shabbat on which it happened is called the "Great Shabbat."

However, we are not the first to point out that the great day marking the anniversary of this miracle should then be the 10th of Nisan, no matter on which day of the week it may fall, rather than Shabbat. In any case a positive plethora of amazing miracles lead up to the Exodus. Why should this particular one, which seems to be relatively minor in comparison with some of the others, have the power to bequeath the title "great" to its annual anniversary?

To answer this question we have to undertake a mental journey of several stages.

The first begins with the Haggadah. According to tradition we read the Haggadah for the first time on this "Great Shabbat," or specifically the portion of the Haggadah that contains the answer to the famous "Four Questions" of the *Mah Nishtano*.

OLDEST JEWISH TEXT

The Haggadah is possibly the oldest Jewish liturgical text. No part of Torah has had the good fortune of having nearly as many commentaries written on it. Manuscripts of the Haggadah of great antiquity abound, attesting to its widespread use.

Its name Haggadah, meaning "story/tale" in English, derives from the commandment that it was especially designed to carry out:

And you shall tell your son on that day, saying, "It is because of this that God acted on my behalf when I left Egypt." (Exodus 13:8)

In this verse, the Torah commands us to relate the Exodus story on the first night of Passover to our children (Talmud, Pesachim, 116b). The fulfillment of this mitzvah provides the background of the Seder and the recital of the Haggadah around which the Seder is organized.

This obligation to tell the story of the Exodus is very unique in terms of the many commandments related to the Exodus. Many of the deeds that Judaism enjoins us to perform are to commemorate the Exodus, such as placing *mezuzot* on our doors, or the wearing of *tefilin* and so on.

We also have an obligation to remember the Exodus every day of our lives by day, and by night in our prayers, when we recite the *Shema*, but ordinarily we have no obligation to *relate* the story to anyone. Nor is the telling of the Exodus story related to the commandment to learn Torah, as the Haggadah itself points out. Even great

rabbis and their students, who have no need of the information, are commanded to spend the Seder night in relating the tale.

But the Haggadah is more than an obligation to simply tell over the historic events.

A SECRET TO TELL

According to the Zohar, (Lech Lecha, 86b), the Hebrew word *l'hagid*, meaning "to tell," the origin of the word Haggadah, has the connotation of exposing a secret. Secret in this context means something that is not obvious on the surface. Thus, it is the secret behind the Exodus story, the revelation that lies concealed beneath the plain historical facts, that we are commanded to relate to our children. What is this secret?

The Zohar interprets the Hebrew word for Passover, *Pesach*, as *Peh Sach*, meaning "the mouth opens and says." Putting these two ideas together leads to the conclusion that the true significance of uncovering the "secret" of the Exodus story and relating it to our children, is that it was on Passover that man makes his first appearance as a being with his own message. It was the first time in human history that man had something to say that originated with him.

If we consider this thought for a minute, it should blow our minds away.

For the truth is that without this opportunity of "opening of his mouth" that relating the Passover story provides, man has nothing to say. He doesn't originate, he merely uncovers what is already there. It is the universe that speaks, not man. Man's uniqueness rests in the fact that he possesses the intelligence to listen to, interpret

and communicate the message of the universe. But he is never the speaker.

SCIENTIFIC DISCOVERY

If we regard the world scientifically, it is quite obvious that the laws of the universe were always in place, fully in operation, just waiting to be discovered since the beginning of time.

Theoretically, even if all human knowledge was lost, and would have to be relearned from scratch, we would come up with exactly the same theories and explanations giving rise to the identical technologies. We humans as a species are powerless to initiate. We merely uncover what is already there. We have nothing to say.

In order for us to become speakers, we must have access to a world that is beyond science, to information that cannot be accessed by merely studying the universe, information that originates in human intelligence. This is the significance of the Zohar's statement. It is in relating the Passover story that we become originators, by uncovering the secret that underlies the universe.

Where is this idea expressed in the Haggadah?

The Gaon of Vilna points to an anomaly in the Four Questions. Everyone knows the famous words, *mah nishtano halayla hazeh mikol haleylot*. According to the rules of Hebrew, this sentence is not grammatically correct. The word *halayla* in Hebrew is feminine while the word for this, *hazeh*, is masculine. A masculine adjective is being paired here with a feminine noun. The text ought to read *halayla hazot*.

SUN AND MOON

The Gaon explains: The night is feminine because the light source of the night is the moon. The moon has no light of its own, it receives light from the sun and reflects it. In Jewish tradition, the ability to receive and reflect the light is the feminine power. It is the female who has the capacity to take the seed provided by the male and reflect its light by magnifying and translating its potential into the reality of the child.

But while the woman and the moon are both reflectors of received light there is a vast difference between the two. The woman is more than a perfect reflector of what she receives, possessing the ability to transform a microscopic input into an immense power. The moon is far less than a perfect reflector. In fact, were the moon to perfectly mirror the light of the sun that hits it, there would be no distinguishable difference between day and night. Just as the entire potential contained in the seed is expressed in the child, the moon would shine as brightly as the sun.

In Genesis 1:16, the Torah describes the creation of two great illuminators. But then in the same breath, the Torah calls one great, and the other small. Remarking on this apparent contradiction, the Talmud (Chulin 60b) makes the following comment: Originally the moon was created as a perfect reflector of sunlight, and the light it provided was indistinguishable from the light provided by the sun. (Thus the Torah speaks of two great illuminators.) But then, the moon registered a protest to God, saying, "How can two different monarchs make use of the same crown?"

God's response: "You are perfectly correct, so reduce yourself in size!"

DARKNESS AS IMPERFECTION

Thus, the existence of the darkness that characterizes night is an imperfection. In the world of perfection that God originally intended, there was darkness in the world only in places where darkness can be found in the full light of day in the world of the present.

Moreover, the cause of the diminished size of the moon that is responsible for the darkness, representative of this state of imperfection, stems from the spiritual flaw of the reflector. The moon's failure to accept that as a mere reflector of the sun's light, no matter how perfect, it is unable to register a legitimate claim to the sun's crown, is symbolic of human refusal to realize that as the human soul merely reflects the Divine light of God's intelligence, human intelligence does not entitle us to assume the mantle of royalty in the universe.

This concept has no reference to the differentiation of humans into sexes. The human soul is the greatest repository of the feminine power in the universe. The soul, which is the true reflector of the Divine light, has no sex. This soul can only serve as the perfect mirror of the Divine intelligence if humanity accepts the fact that the crown of royalty belongs to God not to human beings.

The Gaon explains that the grammatical anomaly in the *mah nishtano* question is based on this idea. The ability to glimpse the world of perfection where the light of the night is indistinguishable

from the light of day is provided by the Passover holiday. The Seder night is when we relate the story of the Exodus. The miracles of the Exodus were supplied to provide objective proof that God's intelligence pervades and rules the world.

The Divine light of His presence cannot be restricted by the laws of nature as we know them. Were our world capable of serving as a perfect mirror that reflects the light of creation in full, night would turn into day. In the presence of the clarity of God's intelligence, the universe falls silent. It no longer speaks its message through the language of natural law.

TURNING LIGHT INTO DAY

When we relate the Exodus story, we turn night into day. This story testifies to the fact that the imperfections in our world do not reflect the limitations of its Creator, but are entirely due to the fact that nature is a flawed diminished reflector of the Divine light. The imperfection is in the mirror not in the light source.

Because this message is nowhere to be found in nature, its only possible origin is the human soul. Unlike the message of science, the Exodus message originates in the story itself, not in the world it describes. The human soul is the sole location of this information in the universe. The only way to communicate it is to pass it from one soul to another. It passes from father to son just as life itself. In telling over this story, man emerges as a being who has something to say. His mouth is opened and he can finally speak and originate, rather than simply interpret.

The very first declaration we make in the answer to the Four Questions is that if God had not taken us out of Egypt than we and our children would still be slaves to the Pharaoh until the end of time. This statement certainly cannot be understood according to its surface meaning. After all, as noted above, our approach to the entire Haggadah is that the story comes to uncover the secrets that lie beneath the surface of ordinary existence. By the laws of history empires rise and fall. Cultures die. Surely Egypt and its Pharaoh would have ended in the dustbin of history with or without the Exodus.

The secret meaning: Pharaoh and Egypt are symbolic of the slavery of humanity to an imperfect nature. The universe as we know it is a prison that we cannot escape. All our scientific and technological progress only serves to make our prison more comfortable. No matter how much we learn about it, the surface universe we live in spins on in its predetermined purposeless course, imprisoning us within its endless repetitive cycles. Generations are born, give birth to the following generations, and then die. Just like prisoners who spend their lives behind bars, we accomplish nothing and go nowhere.

To break out of the prison we must be able to catch a glimpse of an attainable destination. We must uncover the purpose of existence. We must make contact with eternity.

THE GREAT SHABBAT

We are finally ready to return to the idea of the "Great Shabbat."

In the prayer we recite on Friday night, we say the following: "You have sanctified the seventh day to Your Name, the destination and conclusion of the creation of the heavens and the earth." Shabbat is not merely a rest day. Shabbat is reminiscent of the World to Come.

This idea is encoded in the description of the creation of man by another grammatical anomaly: *God formed man...*(Genesis 2:7) The Hebrew word for "formed," *vayizer*, is commonly written with only one *yud*. Here it is apparently misspelled and contains two *yuds*. Rashi explains: Other creatures were fashioned for only a single world, whereas Adam was created to be able to live in the world of *Techiyat Hamesit*, of "Resurrection" -- the resurrected world that will initiate the World to Come. Thus he was in a sense doubly fashioned; therefore two *yuds* are used to describe his creation.

This idea of the double creation of man is the source of holiness in the world. In fact, the standard name of God that appears in most Jewish liturgical texts is based directly on it. For example, in ordinary prayer books the name of God is written in the Hebrew text by simply placing two *yuds* next to one another. This name -- which appears nowhere in any of the books of the *Tanach*, the Hebrew Bible -- is derived from the idea explained in Rashi.

God's creation of man as this sort of bi-worldly being has a dual aspect. It is not enough for God to have inserted this potential into man to assure its actualization. In order for this potential to express itself as a part of actual reality, man's soul

must be able to reflect this light fully, without imperfection.

Shabbat represents God's half of the story. The ability to fully reflect God's Shabbat is man's half.

SHABBAT AND PASSOVER

It is significant that the only one of the holy days that is referred to as a Shabbat by the Torah is the first day of Passover:

He shall wave the Omer before God to gain favor for you; on the morrow of the Shabbat the Kohen shall wave it. (Leviticus 23:11)

The Omer was brought on the second day of Passover.

No verse in the Torah has caused so much controversy as this one. The rabbis declared that this Shabbat, unlike the other times the word appears in the Torah, refers not to Shabbat the seventh day of the week, but to the first day of the Passover holiday.

The Saducees, who rejected rabbinic interpretation of the Torah, insisted that it refers to Shabbat, the seventh day, as indeed it does everywhere else in the Torah. The Talmud in Rosh Hashana describes at great length the heroic measures resorted to by the Saducees to rearrange the Jewish calendar so that the first day of the Passover holiday would always fall on Shabbat, the seventh day of the week, so that the Omer might be brought on a mutually agreed upon day.

We can well ask our own *mah nishtano* question: Why did the Torah single out this first day of

Passover from all other holy days by giving it the name Shabbat?

In light of this essay the answer is clear. It is on this day that the human soul acquired the ability to perfectly reflect God's Shabbat, representing His preparation of the world of the Resurrection. The Resurrection was actualized by the appearance of God's Shabbat in the human soul in a state of perfect reflection. This process was brought about by the opening of man's mouth in the recital of the Haggadah.

We recite the Haggadah twice. Once on *Shabbat HaGodal*, and the second time on Seder night. The bridge between these two Shabbats is the secret concealed beneath the surface layer of natural reality.

The revelation of this secret is the key to the full revelation of God's greatness, and to unlocking the potential greatness buried in the human soul. Is it any wonder that the Shabbat before Passover is known as the Great Shabbat?



Clean-up Work

Every morning, the Kohein comes into the *Beis Hamikdash*, puts on the splendid priestly garb and

prepares for a day of sacred service. What is the first task he is assigned? The removal of the ashes accumulated on the top of the Altar from all the sacrifices consumed by the fires on the Altar throughout the long night.

The *Chovos Halevavos* explains that this is deliberate. The Torah did not want the *Kohein's* high station to go to his head. Walking into the *Beis Hamikdash* as a member of the select priestly caste, the *Kohein* could easily turn to arrogance. He could begin to think that he is somehow better than other people are. Therefore, the first duty he is assigned humbles him. Don't think you're so great and so haughty. Take out the ashes!

Just as the Torah is concerned that the *Kohein's* ego should not become too inflated, it is also concerned that the poor man's ego should not become too deflated. The Talmud tells us (*Bava Kama* 92a) that when the people brought the *bikurim*, the first fruits, to the *Beis Hamikdash*, the rich would bring them in baskets of gold and silver, while the poor would bring them in baskets of woven reeds. When the rich stepped forward, the *Kohein* would take the fruits from their baskets and return the baskets to them. When the poor stepped forward, the *Kohein* would take the fruits along with the baskets. "The poor get poorer," the Talmud observes ruefully.

Granted that circumstances somehow construe that the poor get poorer, but why indeed did the *Kohein* differentiate between the rich and the poor donors?

Rav Aharon Bakst explains that it was done for the protection of the poor. The rich had fine orchards that produced bounteous fruits, and their

bikurim offerings were lavish. When the *Kohein* took their succulent and luscious fruits, their skins bursting with juice, out of the baskets and laid them in front of him, they were a sight to behold. But the poor had perhaps a few scraggly trees that produced, just barely, a few meager fruits. Had the *Kohein* taken the poor man's fruits out of the basket, he would have caused him embarrassment. Therefore, he kept the basket along with the fruits, and the poor man retained his dignity.

Some time ago, there was a *hachnasas kallah* campaign in Baltimore. A well-known and respected family was marrying off a child, and they had no money to cover their expenses. A committee was formed to raise the money.

A question arose. Should the identity of the family be revealed to potential donors? This would probably generate much more money, since the people in the community really liked and respected this family. On the other hand, should their identity perhaps be kept secret to avoid embarrassment?

The question reached my *Rosh Yeshivah*, Rav Ruderman, and he immediately said, "The identity of the family should not be revealed. A family's honor is worth a great deal."

Inside a Thank You

Just about every Jewish child knows how to say thank you in Hebrew: *todah*. There is also a sacrifice called the *korban todah*, the thanksgiving offering. The Midrash states that in the future all the sacrifices will be discontinued,

except for the thanksgiving offering. There will always be a need to say thank you to Hashem.

Rav Yitzchak Hutner observes that the Hebrew word for thanksgiving is *hodaah*, and the exact same word also means an admission. This is no coincidence, explains Rav Hutner. In order to give proper thanks, a person has to admit that he needed help, that he is not all powerful and that the one you are thanking did something important for you. Admission is an integral part of thanksgiving, and therefore, the same word is used for both.

How can we tell, concludes Rav Hutner, if the word *hodaah* is being used to indicate thanksgiving or a different kind of admission, such as an admission of guilt? By looking at the part of speech that follows it. If the preposition *al*, for, follows, it means “thanksgiving for.” If the particle *she*, that, follows, it means an “admission that.”

In the seventeenth blessing of the *Shemoneh Esrei*, we say, “*Modim anachnu lach she . . .*” *Modim* is the present plural form of the word *hodaah*. It is generally understood to be the thanksgiving blessing of the *Shemoneh Esrei*, which indeed it is. And yet, it is followed by the particle *she*. Clearly, the thanksgiving blessing is incomplete unless it begins with an admission, acknowledging all the wondrous things Hashem does for us day in and day out.

When the *shaliach tzibbur*, the representative of the congregation who repeats the *Shemoneh Esrei* aloud, gets to the *Modim* blessing, the congregation says its own version called the *Modim d’Rabbanan*. Why is this necessary? Why

can’t the *shaliach tzibbur* represent the congregation in this blessing as he does in all the others?

The Avudraham explains that you can appoint a *shaliach*, a surrogate, for everything: to pray for healing, for a livelihood and so forth. But you cannot appoint a *shaliach* to say thank you. You have to say it yourself.

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