

This special Shabbat before Passover is called Shabbat HaGadol, “the Great Shabbat.” One curious explanation for this appellation is that this Shabbat commemorates the Bat Mitzvah of the Israelites. It marks the Shabbat that the Israelite People came of age and became “gadol,” adult.

The 17th Century Italian Rabbi Chezekiah da Silva noted that the Israelites observed their very first mitzvah on the Shabbat preceding the Exodus – setting aside the paschal lamb to be sacrificed. Fulfilling this mitzvah was a momentous achievement and therefore called “gadol.” According to this idea, perhaps Shabbat HaGadol would be better translated as “Significant Shabbat.”

Observing this inaugural mitzvah, da Silva explains, the Israelites were like children maturing into adulthood. In this light, the name “Shabbat HaGadol” would, perhaps, translate as “Growth Shabbat” – the Shabbat the future Jewish People crossed the threshold into maturity.

The upcoming holiday of Pesach is chock-full of obligations and restrictions, which can make it challenging for us to go beyond the letter of the law to infuse our Passover observance with significance and growth. But this Shabbat preceding Pesach offers us a break from last week’s and next week’s to-do-lists. Shabbat HaGadol affords us a precious opportunity to disengage from the practical details of our traditions and rituals in order to carve out space for reflection and intention-setting. As the Shabbat of Significance and Growth, Shabbat HaGadol has much to teach us as we anticipate the celebration of our freedom.

This morning’s Haftarah quotes the end of the prophetic books in TaNaKh. Malakhi concludes his prophecy thus:

I will send the prophet Elijah to you

לְפָנַי בֹּא יוֹם יְהוָה הַגָּדוֹל וְהַנּוֹרָא:

Before the coming of the great, awesome day of God.

Here, the use of the Hebrew word “gadol,” meaning great, is another explanation for the title, “Shabbat HaGadol.” This is similar to three other significant Shabbatot named after key phrases in their Haftarot: Shabbat Chazon, Shabbat Nachamu, and Shabbat Shuva.

The book of Malakhi then offers us these final words:

God will reconcile parents with children, and children with their parents, so that, when I come, I do not strike the whole land with utter destruction.

Following those two verses, prophecy, as we know it, was terminated. The final message of our prophets is one of pursuing peace in some of our closest and most complex relationships, those with our children and our parents. We are left with a warning; a threat, even: If we don’t work to bring about peace, God will wreak havoc on our land.

While an ominous image, this final directive also serves as a reminder that in the absence of the prophets, it is we who will need to initiate a relationship with the Divine. Furthermore, Malakhi is teaching us that one new way to connect with God in the

post-prophetic era is through striving for peace in our most important interpersonal relationships. This lesson rings true today, as well.

However, there is an apparent redundancy in this verse. Why does the text need to specify that harmony must be sought both between parents and their children, and between children and their parents? This teaches us that both parties – in any relationship – need to commit to doing the ongoing work of repair.

In true form, the great commentator, Rashi, picks up on this seemingly extraneous phrase. Rashi's interpretation is that God will say to the children, affectionately, "Go and speak to your parents to adopt the ways of the Omnipresent."

What I love about this Rashi, especially as it relates to Passover, is that it serves as a reminder of how much children have to offer. Furthermore, on Pesach, we sometimes forget that the Seder is all about asking questions and not necessarily a time for finding answers or offering explanations. Passover affords us all the opportunity to connect with our inner child and to become the question-askers, without the pressure of knowing the answers.

In continuing to reflect on the name of Shabbat HaGadol, it is noteworthy that in contrast to the other special Shabbatot that are titled for their Haftarah, Shabbat HaGadol is different in two regards. First, the other Shabbatot are named for words that appear at the beginning of their Haftarah. But the word "gadol" doesn't appear in this morning's Haftarah until the penultimate verse. Second, in this morning's Haftarah, the Hebrew word "gadol" doesn't even stand on its own. Rather, it is part of the Hebrew phrase, "hagadol vehanora," which means "great and awe-inspiring." If the label, Shabbat HaGadol, does in fact come from today's Haftarah, this Shabbat ought to be called Shabbat HaGadol veHaNorah – The Great and Awe-Inspiring Shabbat.

The phrase, "hagadol vehanora" brings to mind familiar passages from our liturgy. These words are also reminiscent of the High Holidays, our Yamim Noraim, the Days of Awe. Perhaps then, this special Shabbat relates more to Shabbat Shuva, the Shabbat between Rosh HaShannah and Yom Kippur. The High Holidays provide us with an opportunity to work toward reconciliation with God, and in parallel, Passover gives us a chance to do Teshuva, acts of repentance, in our interpersonal relationships.

I want to acknowledge that this can be very hard work. And in some extreme cases, reconciliation is not possible or ideal. But in most of our significant relationships, the regular maintenance of reflecting and doing our best to repair what may be broken is holy work. And there are many ways to do this. This morning, I want to offer one framework that I think might be helpful – connected both to Parashat Metzora and to the upcoming holiday.

In our Torah reading this morning, the priest serves as a witness, taking in information. He relies on his sense of sight to diagnose disease and to determine if particular afflictions have healed. In our parasha, the Torah repeats the Hebrew word, "ra'ah," "he sees." The priest is an observer and analyst, taking in information and making decisions.

While we are not priests, we too find ourselves in this role of making judgment calls, and the choices that we make are rooted in our observations. Many of us are not likely

spending much time inspecting rashes, unless you are a doctor or have young children. But just like the priests, we gather information from those around us and we respond, to the best of our ability, based on what we see. Our responses affect our relationships.

While our Torah reading describes taking in information, Passover is all about sharing our story – retelling the narrative of the birth of our people and our transformation from being slaves in Egypt to serving God.

In our relationships, we must hold both of these pieces.

We need to listen to – and see – the other, and we also need to share our stories. Although relationships are dynamic and need different things depending on the moment, our most successful relationships have some mutuality – a balance between receiving and giving.

This Shabbat, I'd like to challenge us to take stock of both how we tell our stories and how we take in the stories of others. Each of us has a variety of narratives – our family history, descriptions and anecdotes from our Jewish journeys. And we each have our own experiences of the events of the past two years. We are all in this mess together, but we also have our own individual challenges.

We are coming out of a narrow moment, and with every step into expansiveness, it can feel like two steps back into constriction. Perhaps big steps are too much for this year, but let's focus on the small ways we can make peace with one another. This year, let's translate Shabbat HaGadol as the Shabbat of Significance and Growth and the Shabbat of Interpersonal Repair.

There is a debate in the Mishnah<sup>1</sup> about the role of Elijah the Prophet, the harbinger of the Messianic Era, who may have been a priest. The Mishnah claims that in the world to come, Eliyahu HaNavi will not come to make judgements on what is ritually pure or impure. Instead, he will make peace in the world – לַעֲשׂוֹת שְׁלוֹם בְּעוֹלָם

In the coming week, as we prepare to celebrate our freedom, let us not forget that our small steps toward peace and reconciliation add up. Let's also remember that the hard work of striving for peace, even and especially in our closest relationships, has the power to emanate outward and to bring more peace to a world that is in desperate need of reconciliation.

Cantor, Rabbi Shoshi Levin Goldberg

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<sup>1</sup>Eduyot 8:7