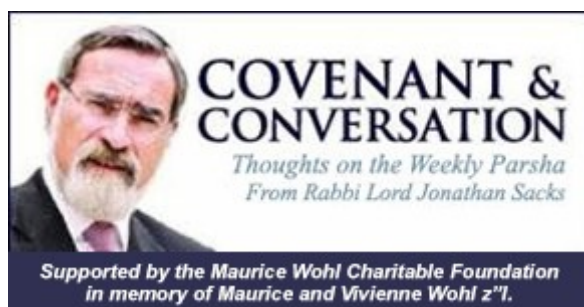


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On Not Trying to Be What You Are Not

The great 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 involved 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 systematized in the form of the musical notations known as *taamei ha-mikra*, cantillation signs, devised by the Tiberian Masoretes (guardians of Judaism's sacred texts). One very rare note, known as a *shalsholet* ("chain"), appears in the Torah four times only. Each time it is a sign of existential crisis. Three instances are in Bereishit. 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. Lot had separated from his uncle Abraham and settled in Sodom. There he had assimilated into the local population. His daughters had married local men. He himself sat in the city gate, a sign that he had been made a judge. Then two visitors came to tell him to leave. God was about to destroy the city. Yet Lot hesitates, and above the word for "hesitates" - *vayitmamah* - is a *shalsholet*. (Genesis 19:16). He 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. Had the angels not seized him and taken him to safety he would have delayed until it was too late.

The second occurs when Abraham asks his servant - traditionally identified as Eliezer - to find a wife for Isaac his son. The commentators suggest that he 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?" (Genesis 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. Loyalty won, but not without a deep struggle. Hence the *shalsholet* (Genesis 24:12).

The third 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 now living in, for him, 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

about Moses.

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 of 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 his 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]" (Leviticus 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 his older brother 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 a shadow of 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 *shalshet*. 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 easy-going 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. There is pain and conflict involved. That is the meaning of the *shalshet*. 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 not become a priest. That task fell to Aaron. He would not 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 men (and women). A leader should be content to be what he or she is. A leader must have the strength to know what he cannot be if he is to have the courage to be himself.

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



Matzah: Bread of Freedom and Poverty

Perhaps the most striking feature of the festival of Pesach is that of the unleavened bread known as matzah. Matzah plays a particularly prominent role in Seder night where there is a Torah obligation to eat matzah. However, the Maharal notes that there seems to be a contradiction as to what exactly the matzah represents.

We begin the Haggadah by raising the matzahs and stating: “This is the poor man’s bread that our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt...” This declaration focuses on the matzah as symbolic of the poverty that the Jewish people endured during their slavery in Egypt. Much later in the Haggadah we again raise up the matzah, however, on this occasion we focus on the fact that we ate matzah as we escaped from Egypt. In this vein, matzah is said to represent the freedom of escaping Egypt.

The Maharal asks that matzah seems to represent two, separate, and perhaps even contradictory concepts; poverty and freedom. How do we understand this seeming contradiction?¹

In order to answer this question, we must first understand the concepts of slavery and freedom and then examine how matzah relates to them.

The Maharal explains that a person is enslaved, in an existential sense, when he is attached to things that are external to his essence. He needs those things to give him a complete sense of identity and when he lacks them, he feels deficient. Moreover, he becomes a slave to them in that they define certain aspects of how he lives his life.

An obvious example is someone who has an addiction to alcohol or drugs. His need for a ‘fix’ drives his life, and determines much about how he lives his lifestyle. A less obvious, but, more common example, is when a person is ‘enslaved’ to his material possessions. His attachment to them may often adversely determine his life decisions.

For example, years before the Holocaust took place, the German Jews recognized the threat

from the Nazi regime. As a result, many of the less wealthy Jews decided to escape and leave their property behind. However, the more affluent Jews found it far more difficult to leave because of the wealth that they had accumulated in Germany. Tragically, many of these Jews stayed in Germany with dire consequences. In contrast, a free person is one who recognizes that his true essence is his soul, accordingly, he is in no danger of becoming bound by his possessions. He views them as a means to a greater end, but he never sees them as being part of his being.²

The Maharal explains how matzah relates to these concepts. Matzah is the combination of water and flour in its most basic form. If the dough is left to rise then it becomes chametz, which represents an addition to the pure essence of the matzah. In this sense, matzah is symbolic of the concept of freedom; that is, being free of anything external to one’s essence. *Chametz*, in contrast, is created when the yeast rises, and adds to the raw combination of water and flour. In this way, *chametz* represents additions to one’s pure essence.

With this understanding we can now explain how matzah can represent both freedom and poverty. A person who grows up with a high standard of living will almost certainly become so used to this standard that it will be extremely difficult for him to break away from it - in a certain sense he is overly attached to it. For example, a woman who grew up with an ensuite bathroom all to herself, found it very difficult to adjust to sharing a bathroom when she got married.

In contrast, one who begins with very little external baggage (in the form of material

possessions) finds it far easier to avoid becoming overly attached to things that are external to himself. In this sense, poverty is highly conducive to the form of freedom that the Maharal describes. The poor person never accustomed himself to owning numerous possessions, thus he is not bound by them.

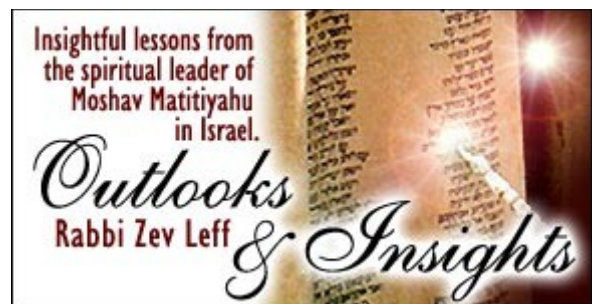
This explains how matzah can represent both poverty and freedom. Poverty is conducive to freedom because the poor person is not enslaved to the physical world and material possessions. Accordingly, the 'poor man's bread' that the Jews ate in Egypt represented the fact that they had no possessions that were external to their essence. Because they had nothing, it was far easier for them to attain the freedom of identifying themselves by their pure essence alone.

One may ask, why was it so important for the Jewish people to attain this level of freedom at this time in particular? The answer is that the Exodus was the birth of the Jewish nation as 'God's Nation', a process that would lead to the receiving of the Torah. It was essential that at this time, they would be free of any external 'baggage' contaminating their true essence. The very fact that they were so poor during their tenure as slaves in Egypt facilitated their ability to begin their new role as God's Nation.

On Passover, and on Seder night in particular, we try to recapture this sense of freedom that our ancestors attained when they left Egypt. We eat matzah as a symbolic reminder of the need to strip ourselves of things that are external to us and to find our pure essence.³ Of course, it is insufficient to merely perform the rituals without trying to internalize their messages. Passover is a time to examine our level of

freedom; to assess how attached we are to things that are external to us; and to remind ourselves of our true essence - our souls and to remember that our spiritual accomplishments are the only things of true value.

1. Maharal, Haggadah Shel Pesach, Divrei Negidim, p.51.
2. Heard from Rabbi Aaron Lopiansky.
3. There are other aspects to the Seder night that allude to this concept of freedom. The Maharal writes further that the minhag to wear a kittel on Seder night is based on this idea. The kittel is a plain white robe, representing the pure essence without anything external additions. Similarly, one cannot fulfill the mitzvo of matzo by eating matzo ashira (matzo that has additional ingredients) - this is also because it represents additions to one's pure essence (heard from Rabbi Aaron Lopiansky).



Four Aspects of Thanksgiving

"If he shall offer it for a thanksgiving offering, then shall he offer unleavened loaves mixed with oil, unleavened wafers smeared with oil, and loaves of scalded fine flour mixed with oil..." (Leviticus 7:12)

The *Korban Todah*, thanksgiving offering, is basically a "peace offering" (*Shelamim*). But unlike any other peace offering it is brought with four different types of flour offerings, ten of each type. Three are types of Matzah, and the fourth is *chametz*. In addition, the normal time span within which the peace offering had to be eaten - two days and one night - is reduced to one day and one night for the *Todah*. To understand the significance of these deviations

from the normal laws, we must first analyze the dynamics of thanksgiving.

The Talmud (Berachos 7b) relates that from the day God created the world, no one thanked Him until Leah thanked Him for the birth of her fourth son Yehudah. At first glance, this defies understanding. Didn't Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel have countless reasons and opportunities to thank God? And why didn't Leah herself thank God for her first three children?

The Midrash (Bereishis Rabba 71:4) sheds light on this enigma:

Rabbi Berachiah said in the name of Rabbi Levi, "This can be compared to a Kohen who was given a large amount of *terumah* by one individual and did not thank him. He was then given a small measure of unconsecrated grain, and he thanked the donor.

Said the first individual to the Kohen: "I gave you a large amount, and you did not thank me; he gave you a very small amount and you thanked him. [Why?]"

The Kohen replied: "You gave me what rightfully belonged to me, so I saw no reason to thank you. He gave me what belonged to him and upon which I had no claim. Therefore I thanked him."

So, too, our matriarchs knew that Jacob would have 12 sons, and each one of the four matriarchs expected three [sons]. Therefore, when Leah had her fourth son, she thanked God, for she had received more than her portion.

Thanksgiving is a recognition of receiving something undeserved and feeling indebted to repay the giver with gratitude. The more one feels that the bounty received was indeed earned or deserved, the less necessary the show of gratitude. A laborer does not owe his boss a thank-you for paying him his previously agreed-upon wages, but for an unexpected bonus a thank-you is appropriate.

From the time the world was created, no one ever felt that the bounty given to them by God was totally undeserved. Even the greatest people thought that what was given to them was part of God's plan for the world, and therefore not completely undeserved. But God's plan could have been equally fulfilled if the fourth son born to Leah had been born to any of her sisters. Thus Leah felt his birth was totally unearned, and required the full measure of gratitude.

CORRECTING THE SITUATION

The Midrash (Berashis Rabba 71:5) links Leah's thanks to the admission of Yehudah that he was responsible for Tamar's pregnancy. In Hebrew, the same verb, *l'hodot*, means "to confess" and "to thank." An admission that what one has received from God was totally undeserved is the foundation of thanksgiving.

Usually we offer thanksgiving to God for a salvation from a misfortune or calamity. But if we truly believe that everything that occurs in this world is the result of Divine Providence, then it is hard to understand why we should thank God for saving us from misfortune, since He Himself caused that misfortune! Would we thank somebody for paying our medical bills if we fell into a concealed trap he had left in a public thoroughfare?

The answer is that we have chosen the wrong analogy. Consider an orthopedic surgeon who notices someone walking in a manner that is symptomatic of a rare, crippling bone disease. The condition can only be cured if the bones are broken and reset before the disease progresses to the point of no return. Realizing that the patient's gait reveals little time left before his condition is irreversible, the surgeon takes an iron pole and swiftly breaks both of his legs - and then proceeds to set them and nurture the patient back to health. In this instance the surgeon deserves thanks both for breaking and setting the legs.

So, too, when we cause ourselves spiritual illnesses because of our shortcomings, God brings misfortune and calamity to atone and correct the situation. Thus, our gratitude for the salvation can only be significant if it includes a confession that the misfortune and calamity was also deserved. Full, uninhibited thanksgiving requires both confession of the justice of the misfortune and admission that the salvation was undeserved.

PUBLIC ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

There is one final aspect of thanksgiving to be considered.

Rabbi Levi taught: Leah grasped the idea of thanksgiving and all her descendants followed suit. Yehudah confessed, and David [said], "Praise God for He is good and His kindness endures forever."

When one recognizes his own guilt in bringing spiritual illness upon himself and God's kindness in saving him from misfortune, his feelings of gratitude must be expressed publicly, as David's were. That expression of gratitude

then becomes a lesson to others in recognizing God's goodness and intimate involvement in the events of this world.

We say in the Amidah:

"we will thank You, God... and we will recount Your praises."

It is not sufficient to thank God quietly; one must recount his debt of gratitude to others:

"I will sacrifice to You a thanksgiving offering, and I will call out and proclaim to others the name of God." (Psalms 116:17)

Abarbanel explains that the eating time for a *Korban Todah* is reduced to one day and a night precisely to necessitate having others share in its consumption. In this fashion, one's gratitude and raise of God are made public.

FOUR BREADS

The four types of breads of the *Korban Todah* represent four aspects of true thanksgiving. The *chametz* represents the *yetzer hara*, the confession that even the misfortune and calamity were for our benefit and were brought about by our sins.

The Matzah that is boiled first in water so that it will absorb and hold in the oil is symbolic of the ability to contain oneself and admit that the bounty one received is unearned and undeserved.

The Matzah made of flour saturated with oil is symbolic of the feelings of gratitude that permeate one's entire being.

And finally, the Matzah fried in oil from without symbolizes the responsibility to publicize and share with others the enlightenment one

receives from experiencing God's Divine Providence.

Today, in place of the *Korban Todah*, we recite *Birchas HaGomel*. It too, reflects all four aspects of thanksgiving:

Hagomel l'chayavim tovot ("God grants good to those who are guilty and undeserving") signifies an acceptance of our guilt for the misfortune and admission that the subsequent salvation was undeserved. *Gamalnu kal tov* ("Who benefited us with total good") is an expression of total thanksgiving for God's undeserved beneficence.

This blessing must be said publicly in the presence of a *minyan* and evoke in those hearing it the response:

"He who benefited you with total good, may He benefit you with total good forever."

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