

**Parshat Tzav
Shabbat Hagadol
March 28, 2015
Rabbi Alan B. Lucas**

Today is known as: *Shabbat HaGadol* – “The Great Sabbath” where we read the words of the prophet Malachi and where in closing verses, the prophet states: “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord.” (Malachi 3:23-24)

Shabbat Hagadol is the Shabbat before Passover and it introduces us to some of the great themes of the Passover holiday and as is my custom, I like to use it to help us prepare for some of the conversations we will have around our Passover tables for next Friday and Saturday nights.

As most of you know, one of the things I love to do is connect ancient words and the modern world; to take sacred recitations which we have gone over and over, from generation to generation, and give them new meaning and new life – by connecting them to current realities and new understandings.

Nothing gives us a greater opportunity to do this than the Passover Seder and the reading of the haggadah. The words are old and familiar, but the challenge is to constantly find in them new associations and fresh meanings.

Let’s start with a little exercise:

Do you know what is a forced choice? I give you two options and you have to choose one. That is what we are going to do this morning. I am going to give you a series of choices and you tell me which is more Passover – in each of the pairs which do you *more* associate with the Passover holiday and the Seder experience in particular.

Let’s start easy: Moses or Pharaoh – which is *more* Passover

Let’s get a little harder – freedom or slavery? I know Passover is about both, but which is it *more* about?

Let’s make this a little more difficult: Moses or Elijah?

And lastly, open or closed? Which of these two words do you most associate with Pesach?

OK – time to defend your choices – Is Passover more Moses or Pharaoh (about the defeat of Pharaoh and the triumph of Moses – so maybe more Moses?)

Is Passover more about freedom or slavery? (Most of the symbols are freedom symbols – Karpas, Egg, four cups of wine, reclining, singing, celebration, --matzah – symbol of freedom or slavery? Could argue both bread of affliction – slavery and bread made in haste -- freedom)

Is Seder more about Elijah or Moses? (Moses not really mentioned much in the haggadah–Elijah is key figure at climax of Seder as echoed in this Shabbat’s Haft)

And finally is Seder more about open or closed? Open door for Elijah at the end – and at the very beginning of the Seder? “All who are needy let them come and eat – custom to open the door at the beginning as well.

So today – a week before Passover has begun – a week before the first drop of wine is drunk, before the first *matzah* is cracked, before the first bite of Gefilte fish is dipped in the horseradish – today before anyone spills any wine on your fresh white table cloth or stains it with *haroset* or horseradish – I want to take just a moment and discuss with you the implications of opening the door for Elijah at the end, and the welcome mat we put out for the needy at the very beginning. I want to speak of this holiday of Elijah and freedom and all that it means and can mean and should mean for our Passover observance in 2015.

Such a simple gesture – at the end we open the door and we invite Elijah to come into our homes. At the very beginning when we recite *Ha Lachma* and we say “This is the bread of affliction – let all who are needy come and eat, let all who are in need join our *seder*...”

The open door is a wonderful image. It represents hope and opportunity and optimism. Did you know that there were periods of Jewish history when this practice fell into disuse? For most of us opening the door seems such a small thing, almost trivial – but look back over the course of Jewish history and consider what it meant to the Conversos of Spain in 1492 to open that door? People who were forced to live their Judaism in secret under penalty of death – what did it mean to open their door onto a world that was waiting for reason to expose them and destroy them? Think what it meant in the 17th century, the 18th and the 19th century in European Pogroms threatened *shtetels* – to open that door? Medieval Haggadahs with pictures of rabbit and hunters – couldn’t understand - Jews didn’t hunt – until we realized the Jews saw themselves as the rabbit! Think what it meant to Ann Frank to open that door? What it meant to a Jewish family in hiding during the *Shoah* to open that door? Can you imagine a *seder* at Auschwitz? Can you imagine just reciting the familiar words of the *Haggadah* - let all who are hungry come in and eat – what a sad and terrible joke those words must have been on the lips of those in the death camps of Europe. Think of the imminent danger that lurked outside those doors and the physical and moral courage it had to take and the fervent hope for redemption that a simple act of opening the door meant and should still mean.

The words of the *Haggadah* were written in an era of open doors and meant to be recited in an era of open doors but too many times we Jews found ourselves living in an era of closed doors and broken dreams.

What kind of era do we live in? Is 2015 a time of open doors or closed doors? A time when we as Jews, a time when we as Americans, live in security and peace, or insecurity and fear? Can we open our doors and invite all who are hungry to join us – or do we too live in an era of closed doors and broken dreams? Let the conversation begin. And I hope it will around your Passover tables next week. Here is the question I hope you will place at your table for discussion – after sharing what I have shared with you about the value of the open door in Judaism – you can then ask your guests if they believe that in 2015 do we live in an era of open doors or closed doors? Or better yet - do they feel that doors around them are opening? Or closing?

--What do you think might be some of the arguments in favor of our living in an era of opening doors?

We live in a land of enormous freedom and opportunity

For many, and for many of us – economy is improving? Do you feel economic doors opening or closing?

--What do you think might be some of the arguments in favor of this being a time of doors closing?

College more accessible or less accessible?

Economy for many – not getting better for too many.

Lets look at the world around us – the disintegration of the Middle East - a time of opening or closing of doors? We had high hopes for the “arab spring” that has turned into the “arab winter”. Agree or disagree – the Israeli election revealed an Israeli mindset of people who feel they are besieged – that the doors are closing around them.

Yemen, Iran, Syria, ISIS, Hizbollah, Gaza, -- not an optimistic time in Israel.

How about Europe and the rise of anti-semitism – a time of opening or closing of the doors?

I met with a Bar Mitzvah family the other night - daughter goes to a SUNY school in Potsdam, NY on the border with Canada. I asked if she had a warm coat. I also asked if the school had tunnels that made getting to class easier. Yes – they said but they can't use them anymore due to the rise of rapes on campus!

Recent article in NY Times on “free-Range children” – how today's children have much less freedom to roam than a generation ago – even though dangers of abductions are way down – we keep a close eye and close reign on our children – doors open or closed?

A time of more fear or less – worried about the guy who flies the plane! And our airports are veritable armed fortresses – we take off our shoes and security checks are spreading to every walk of life – even our shuls are no longer are places of wide open doors.

Security on the internet – how do we close doors and protect ourselves, our children, our financial data – from hacking – how do we have privacy in a world where the doors are so wide open – cameras everywhere.

Are the doors opening or closing in relations between Israel and America? Unprecedented changes – at least if we are to believe what we read in the papers.

Israel and the Palestinians – a time of opening doors or closing doors?

I know some of you are going to complain – “but rabbi – when I get my family together around the Passover table the two topics I try and avoid are politics and religion and here you suggest we should put that front and center of our Seder conversation?”

Well – I can promise you this – it won't be boring.

Here is something that is guaranteed to create a lively conversation around your Passover Seder table: IS our president a door opener? Or closer? Is Prime Minister Netanyahu a door opener? Or closer?

Now if you really want to have fun with this, here is a suggestion. Before the seder write down on a piece a paper the names of all your adult guests – and your prediction about how each one will answer that question – IS our president a door opener? Or closer? Is Prime Minister Netanyahu – a door opener? Or closer?

I bet you will be able to successfully predict most of the reactions around your seder table. And the reason you will be able to make that prediction, and make it so accurately is that when it comes to politics – when it comes to too many things – most of us are more closed than open. Our minds are made up and events are merely interpreted in light of our preconceived notions of right and wrong, good and bad.

And I have to tell you, the really interesting people around your tables will not be the ones who launch into lectures about why recent events prove they were right all along, but those who begin by saying - “You know I originally thought.... But now I am not sure and here is what I am thinking.”

Those are people with open minds. In fact – you might even want to frame the question – who has been changing their opinions about the president or the prime minister lately – and why?

The problem around our seder tables in 2015 is that too many minds leave the seder exactly as they arrived. In 2015 our minds and our opinions are formed – and closed off to any possibility of growth and change. More and more we only talk to those who share our preconceived notions, we read newspapers and watch TV news that already conforms to our beliefs and opinions - we no longer trust each other and we no longer value each other and we no longer believe in each other - that is why I hear the doors shutting across America and around the world and in one context after another.

At our *seder* tables next Shabbat, we will open the door for Elijah – such a simple act. What does it mean in 2015 to open our doors in a world where so many are closing their doors? What does it mean to be open to other beliefs, other politics – while strengthening your own? We have had some wonderful discussions over the past few years as our Conservative Judaism has struggled to open its doors – to women, to Intermarried Jews, to Gay and Lesbian Jews – I am not asking you to agree with everything we have done, with everything I believe - - but talk about it around your tables – it is ok to argue to debate – that is the beauty of a home with an open door – it welcomes all kinds of opinions.

This year as you open the door for Elijah, think of how wonderful it is to be part of a people that believes in the power of the open door. As you see your Jewish neighbors open their doors think of the millions of Jews the world over who will be opening theirs as generations have done before them – and reflect with pride that you are part of a people that believes in *Eliyahu Hanavi* – the Prophet of the open door.