

**Parshat Tzav
Shabbat Hagadol
March 23, 2012
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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 on Monday and Tuesday 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:

When I go to the eye doctor – he does a test where he asks me – which of these is clearer – and then proceeds to offer two choices – this or this and I have to choose one.

I would like to adapt this test for our purposes 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 – why is Passover more Moses than Pharaoh (about the defeat of Pharaoh and the triumph of Moses)

Why is Passover more about freedom than slavery? (Most of the symbols are freedom symbols – Karpas, Egg, four cups of wine, reclining, singing, celebration, matzah – symbol of freedom or slavery?)

Why is Seder more about Elijah than Moses? (Not really mentioned much – Elijah is key figure at climax of Seder as echoed in this shabbat’s Haft.)

And finally why is Seder more about open than 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 – even before Passover has begun – 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 2013.

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. 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 2013 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 this Monday and Tuesday nights. 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 we in 2013 live in an era of open doors or closed doors?

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

We live in a land of enormous freedom and opportunity

We have economic freedom, and incredible wealth and our tables are filled to overflowing with food

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

Economic hardships of the last few years – people have lost their jobs – things which we took for granted - food and paying the mortgage – not as assured as they once were.

Neighbors becoming more hostile – to Israel – the threats of Iran, the dissolution of one after another Arab country surrounding Israel – Syria, Egypt – even Jordan is at risk.

Or closer to home - look at our contemporary political scene as we confront one after another issue in our country: taxes, the debt, health care, gun control, reproductive rights, marriage equality – are all these issues examples of a time of openness – or closed doors?

The rise of extremist Islam - closing the doors to freedom of thought and expression in Europe and in one after another-Muslim country – is there such a thing as moderate Islam?

Internet hacking – how does the Internet function in a world of closed doors?

Cyber bullying, the loss of privacy, pornography – how do we live in a modern world where the doors are so wide open?

Israel and America – are the doors opening or closing between these long time friends?

Israel Jews and American Jews – are the doors opening or closing in our relations with each other? Are we closer or farther apart than we used to be?

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: Was President Obama's trip to Israel a success?

Now if you really want to have fun with this, here is a suggestion. Before the seder write down on a piece of paper the names of all your adult guests and your prediction about how each one will answer that question, “Was President Obama's trip to Israel a success?” Then, ask the question, and after a few minutes share your predictions. I bet you will be able to successfully predict most of the reactions around your seder table. You will be able to predict who thinks it was a great success and who thinks it was pretty much a waste of time – and exercise in futility.

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.

There was a fascinating article by David Brooks on the Opinion page of the New York Times yesterday. David Brooks was asking why is it that so many very smart pundits and experts are so bad at making predictions. A remarkable book by one professor Philip Tetlock titled: "Expert Political Judgment" focuses and how people can make better political predictions. It inspired the Intelligence Advanced Research Agency – according to Brooks one of the more creative of our government agencies – to hold a forecasting tournament to see if it could begin to identify the things that made for good predictions. Teams were organized from some of our best institutions – MIT, Michigan etc – and Prof Tetlock put together a team from Penn to test his theory. In year one his team bested the benchmarks by 60%. How was he so successful? Prof Tetlock suggests that what makes for a good prognosticator is to have a team – not made up of the smartest people in the room – but the most open-minded people in the room.

Open-minded people were willing to take in the data on any given issue and render a prediction that was much more accurate than those who were so married to their convictions that they could not see the possibilities beyond their own beliefs.

If you are still having trouble understanding what I am saying, just picture Carl Rove on the set of Fox News on Election night – as the numbers crunchers were ready to predict that President Obama had won re-election and he in his now famous and embarrassing moment – refused to give up on his prediction that Romney would emerge victorious.

Prof. Tetlock goes so far as to suggest that we can actually test for open-mindedness – here was one of their test questions: If you spent \$1.10 on a baseball glove and a ball, and the glove cost \$1 more than the ball, how much did the ball cost? Most people want to say that the glove cost \$1 and the ball 10 cents. But some people doubt their original answer and realize the ball actually costs 5 cents. That willingness to doubt, to not be so sure that what you think is correct is in fact correct – is what the professor identified as a sign of open-mindedness and a key element to making successful predictions.

So was President Obama's trip a success? Guaranteed there will be those around your table who loved the president before and love him even more now. Similarly there will be those who didn't care much for him before the trip and remain unimpressed now. But the really interesting people that you will have at your table are the ones who will say, "You know I originally thought.... But now I am not sure and here is what I am thinking."

The problem around our seder tables in 2013 is that too many minds leave the seder exactly as they arrived. In 2013 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 Monday and Tuesday night we will open the door for Elijah – such a simple act. What does it mean in 2013 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.