D’var Torah for First Day of Pesach 5780 – 2020

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One of the happy quirks of the written Torah is its lack of diacritical markings. The so-called “vowels” and “trope signs” were developed centuries after the written Torah took its final form. Those signs preserve a precious tradition about how to pronounce and sing the words, but they also lock in a specific set of meanings.

Often the Torah spells a word in such a way that it could be read as a different word entirely. But because we know the “right” way to read that word, we don’t erroneously misinterpret the meaning that tradition has attributed to it.

Still, if you look at the Torah scroll itself, it resembles nothing more than a piece of hand-made matzah, so-called *sh’murah matzah*. If you take the matzah in hand and contemplate the look and feel of it, you begin to free-associate. You go back in history. You go deep into legend. You reimagine theology. You feel close to your past, your ancestors, your relatives, your sense of destiny. Likewise with the Torah scroll.

If you look at the words of Torah, you sometimes see words and meanings emerge that aren’t necessarily there, but that suddenly become part of your subconscious understanding of the text.

The great medieval teacher Rashi, sitting in the Rhineland in the 11th century and anticipating the meaning of Pesach for his own time, notices just such a quirk in the portion describing the Exodus from Egypt. In Exodus chapter 12 verse 17, he sees the word “matzot” and suddenly flips the word to read “mitzvot.”

So, when the Torah is telling us to “guard the matzot” – *ush’martem et hamatzot* – so that no moisture will come in contact with the wheat, interact with yeast spores in the air, and turn the flour into *chametz*, Rashi knows that the Torah is expressing an urgency, even an anxiety, lest the core symbol of Pesach be spoiled by our neglectful timing.

Suddenly his creative mind inserts the word *mitzvot* in place of *matzot*. He reads, *ush’martem et hamitzvot*, “you shall guard the commandments!”

Building on his “mistake,” Rashi quotes a midrash that no scholar has ever been able to locate, leading us to think that Rashi is modestly making his own midrash here. He tells us that just as we are to hurry ourselves in the preparation of matzot lest they become *chametzdik*, unfit for Passover consumption, likewise “when a mitzvah comes into our hand, do it immediately,” lest it, too, become *chametzdik*. *Ba’ah l’yad’cha mitzvah, asey ota miyad.*

So often, especially in these frightening times, we are given opportunities to make a huge difference in someone’s life. We get the opportunity to call shut-ins and lonely individuals to let them know we are thinking about them. We get a chance to provide food for those whose access to food has dried up. We get a chance to give direct or indirect medical care to those who fall suddenly ill. We are asked to keep strangers company while their loved ones fight for their lives alone in special virus units. We are invited to advocate for refugees running for their lives across our borders, where they are destined to be turned back toward certain death while their own relatives continue to supply our grocery stores, deliver our mail, cut our lawns, and collect our garbage.

In every case, we could legitimately say “not now.” “Not now, because I am overwhelmed with keeping my own affairs in order. I will do what I can soon, but not now. Please understand.”

Rashi would say, “I understand. Nonetheless, *ush’martem et hamitzvot*. Don’t let a mitzvah go untended until it putrefies and becomes ineffective. Do it now, when it needs to be done. Treat it with the same urgency that you would the matzah that so touches your heart on this beloved holiday.”

Just as we refer to *sh’murah matzah*, we need to begin calling these urgent tasks *sh’murah mitzvah* - holy acts made holier by our willingness to reach out beyond our own very real personal needs before it becomes too late to make a difference. Before it becomes *chametz*. *Asey ota miyad.* Do it now.