D’var Torah for Shabbat Hagadol April 3, 2020

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If you look outside, it looks like spring. You don’t need a Jewish calendar to tell you that tonight is Shabbat Hagadol, the Shabbat immediately preceding the onset of Passover. The flowering trees will tell you. The birds will tell you.

*Hanitzanim nir’u ba’aretz*

“The blossoms appear on the earth”

*Eit hazamir higi’ah, v’kol hator nishma’ b’artzenu*

“The time of singing has come; the voice of the turtledove is heard in the land.”

Beloved words of the Song of Songs, the *megillah* we chant during Passover. It fits with what we see *outside.*

If you look inside, it may not feel very Pesadik at all. Since when do we turn our houses upside down to prepare for a Pesach seder that no one will attend, except perhaps as little images on a laptop screen! We are all looking for ways to motivate one another to go ahead and “make Pesach,” despite the condition of ourselves and our world.

Along comes *Shabbat Hagadol*, if not to save the day, then at least to offer us what only Shabbat can offer: comfort, rest, song, and perspective.

There are several explanations for the name “*Shabbat Hagadol*,” the “great” Sabbath. One is that the Haftarah we read tomorrow features the word “*hagadol*” to refer to a time that is coming when children and parents will turn their hearts toward one another and reconcile, which is a necessary precondition to having a loving family seder.

The S’fas Emes, my favorite spiritual commentator from the late Chasidic tradition, gives us this helpful clue:

He says that until our ancestors found the courage to leave the slavery of *Mitzrayim*, there was only one reason for the existence of Shabbat. That reason was “creation,” as in “for in six days did the Eternal create the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day God rested.” So if God rested, and if we are fashioned in God’s image, and if God wishes to impart an aspect of the divine to us in order to give us fulfilling lives, then it is our duty and privilege to rest on our own seventh day each week.

But from the moment we went out of *Mitzrayim* and began experiencing one life-changing miracle after another, God decided to tack on another reason for the observance of Shabbat, namely as a regular reminder of those miracles; as a reinforcement of our newfound state of *freedom*.

Thus, says S’fas Emes, the meaning of the institution of Shabbat became “bigger.” Shabbat itself became *gadol*, “bigger” than it had been before.

His reasoning is quaint, even cute. Clever. But behind it is something deeper, as there usually is. Behind it is the subtle connection between work and dignity; between freedom and obligation; between the universal idea of creation and the particular idea of Jewish peoplehood.

For if Shabbat started out as a lovely commemoration of nature, it now becomes a testament to the meaning of work itself. We work because we are free to do so, even though of course we need to do so. We stop work temporarily to reflect on the meaning of our labor, because we should but also because we can. We are free. We can control our daily lives, as well as the arc of our greater lives.

This awareness emerges from the events of Passover:

The realization that we were not free, and that our labor was pointless;

The decision to partner with God and leave the “narrow place” of *Mitzrayim* and slavery forever;

The acceptance of the divine rhythm into our own lives – *working and resting, working and resting* - so that we might never lose sight of who and why we are.

It all comes together when Shabbat and Pesach come together, as it does tonight. Tonight, despite our inability to escape the confines of quarantine and social distancing, we can access our lifeline to meaning, *Shabbat*, courtesy of the story we are about to tell next week at our tables and on our little screens: the story of choosing dignity over slavery; free will over constriction; the *gadol*-ness of our humanity over the smallness of our routines and predicaments.

The *gadol* in *Shabat Hagadol* is us, when we let Shabbat guide us toward the inner greatness that the One of Being has planted within us like a blossom in spring.