

Parsha Achrei Mot 5768

April 19, 2008

Shabbat Shalom

This is Shabbat HaGadol. This is the great and awesome day. This year Shabbat HaGadol provides different challenges because it is juxtaposed to Pesach. Typically on Shabbat HaGadol the rabbi would speak about the detailed laws of Pesach. Then, all would have a week or a good part of a week to plan and do the work for the holiday. This year, obviously is different. Our work is all done and your kashrut has presumably been taken care of. So, we search for meaning in this Shabbat HaGadol.

It is called Shabbat HaGadol for other reasons. In addition to the rabbi expounding on the laws, the name Shabbat HaGadol is associated with the Haftarah that was chosen for today. It is from the Prophet Malachi; *V'hinei Anochi Sholeach laChem et Eliyahu Navi Lifnei Bo Yom HaGadol V'HaNorah...* Behold I will send you Elijah, the prophet on this GREAT awesome Day... Yom HaGadol V'HaNorah! Passover is about a historical redemption, a time of freedom; the prophet's promise here is for another redemption. When will it come? This redemption, by the coming of a Messiah, and the future is foretold by Elijah, Elijah serving as the messenger. You know me...I am an open teacher. When a passage of the Torah, an idea, or an aspect of our tradition is troublesome, I won't hide from it and I will share the problem or the challenge that the problem brings. From these areas we learn the most. Remember the notion I taught: from ambiguity comes interpretation...Out of uncertainty comes growth. My understanding of history, ours and the world's indicates that Messianism leads to absolutism. It is dangerous. And this has provided great pain for human kind. The idea of perfection is equated with impossibility. The weight of our tradition indicates that we live in a world that resides between poles...good and evil, sweet, bitter, kodesh and chol; that is the human condition. But yet, the figure of Elijah and his promise of redemption is very significant in parts of our ancient tradition.

What's Elijah going to do when he comes? Well, in a very beautiful expression it says, "The prophet, Elijah will turn the hearts of parents to their children, and children to their parents." Elijah will bring reconciliation between opposing forces, people who see the world differently, from different places and different perspectives.

If I had to categorize the major problems that people come to me with, I would say perhaps 80% of them have to do with raising children, have to do with differences between generations, an older generation feeling a younger generation doesn't take responsibility; A younger generation feeling an older generation doesn't understand. Today, we are dealing with tremendous challenges, an aging population and the responsibility of families for that. There is transformation taking place in politics and social situations which create a division between the hearts of parents and children. So, Elijah will come and he will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents. What a beautiful notion. The Messiah is contingent on that.

Tonight, you're going to welcome Elijah. Today, I'd like us to learn a little about him. My discomfort with Messianism compelled a little learning which I'd like to share.

Elijah is a rather mysterious figure in our literary tradition. We all have great memories of Seders from childhood, at least I hope so. If not, then our job is to create new great memories. When I was a child the Seder was held on the third floor of my grandmother's flat. The dining room and living room became one with a long table where we would all sit. When it came time to open the door for Elijah, there was once a coincidence that took place. In those days my grandmother had a boarder, a person who rented a room from her. One year, Mr. Moore walked in when the door for Elijah was opened. It was a source of great intrigue and fascination. So, for many years I thought that Elijah was the boarder in my grandmother's apartment! But, I quickly learned that that was not the case. No, I learned it wasn't the case as we would sing Eliyahu Hanavi towards the end of the Seder or at the end of Shabbat.

Elijah is one of the most popular and beloved biblical figures in Jewish legend and yet there is less known about him than most prophets. There are no writings attributed to him. We know that he is from Tishbi; it's a little town in Gilead which is east of the Jordan. In fact, there are two Elijah's in the tradition. They may or may not be the same person; one emerges from the Bible and the other comes from Rabbinic Literature. The Bible's Elijah is upright, fearless, uncompromising, he is a zealous man. He is always in pursuit of righteousness and the service of God. He assures that ritual and practice are done absolutely correct. He was an outspoken critic of Queen Jezebel who introduced the worship of Baal into Israel and he denounced Ahab for causing the death of Navot. His encounter with the priest of Baal on Mount Carmel is one of the dramatic highlights of prophetic literature. Wandering at Sinai, he hears God's voice.

But it his death that propels him into a higher realm. His death, as the Bible reports, is what made rabbis propel him into a new identity. The Book of Kings said that he departed life in a chariot of fire and he was born up to heaven by a whirlwind. The last dramatic act, he flings down his mantel to be taken up by his faithful servant and his disciple Elisha. The Bible's Elijah had a zealotry that was the source not so much of hopefulness, but of a type of religious zealotry that in fact has been dangerous. It's interesting to note that to this day feminist thinkers object to his removal of all female symbols to cultic worship.

The Elijah that I want to look at is the Elijah of the Rabbis. That Elijah didn't die but flew into the heavens. This gave the rabbis incredible soil to plant their legends and ideas. Based on the personality that is created in the legends of the Midrash, Elijah wandered over the face of the earth in many disguises. Usually, as a Bedouin, like figure from the desert, where he would act as a messenger of God, he would warn people when they were facing disaster. He'd feed the hungry and shelter the needy. He would advise people how to improve their condition and the world. He especially appeared in times of great distress and danger. Elijah would bring consolation to the outcasts of society, to the afflicted and Elijah would also test the arrogant. Elijah's name became associated with hope and expectation. He became the model of giving. And he would herald the time when all would be well, all would be equal, the world will be at peace. And that is his chief role on this holiday. He is the prophet of hope, the symbol of a dream. As our people experienced redemption in history one time after years of oppression and hate we would once again find a place of comfort.

The rabbis in the Talmud evoke Elijah. How? The Talmud is based on learning through questions and answers, the Socratic method. There are questions and there are answers, and their answers and their questions are about the answers and about the questions. Sometimes the dialogue can go on for pages and there doesn't seem that there will be resolution. And often there is no resolution. Then, a word appears on the page. The word is Teiku. Teiku is really not a word at all, but rather an acronym for *Tishbi Yitaretz Kushiot U'Brayot*. That is the one from Tishbi, Elijah, will solve all the problems. Then the Talmud presents a new conversation that is maybe unrelated because there is a realization that not all questions have answers. None of us can know all the answers even if they did exist. All the legal difficulties that are unresolved will accumulate and someday there will be an answer, but not now. We have to live with contradictions and we have to learn with uncertainty. That I believe is the sign of spiritual maturity. Elijah will do this and when he finally comes at the end of the day, in this legend, the answers will become clear and that will denote the coming of the Messiah. So, Elijah has played a very important purpose as a symbol of a world that will be redeemed, as a symbol for a world that needs redemption, a better world. Elijah symbolizes a world where there is reconciliation in families, where problems are solved; a world that is ready to accept the Messiah.

You know that there are arguments about the Seder table. Just about everything is questioned and one question is how many cups of wine? We all assume there are four, but there are some who say there are five based on a passage in Exodus. Today we have four cups and a fifth cup is the cup of Elijah. Maybe, he will come to our Seder table and he will drink of it himself. I remember that cup of Elijah sitting on the table all night long. The next morning waking up and like a little child going down to find his gifts on our neighbors holiday, looking to see if any wine was taken from that cup. So if you see Elijah's cup with some wine taken from it, be glad because it meant that Elijah had been there!

The Rabbis taught that Elijah comes to the bris of our sons. A special chair is there. Keisai Elijah and his purpose there at that time, at that moment of is to express the great hope in a young couple's life as they celebrate their newborn entering into the covenant of the people Israel. Could there be a moment of greater hope? So, we welcome Elijah and give him a chair that is supposed to have mystical powers.

His major work according to rabbinic legend will be three days before the return of the Messiah. He is going to appear in Israel and he is going to announce peace will come upon the earth. An angel will blow a trumpet and Elijah will introduce the Messiah and then skeptics, like myself, will look and say, I don't really believe this and we will demand a miracle! There will be a miracle. In fact, we are told that he will perform seven wonders. He will bring Moses and the generation of the desert back to life, Korach and his band will rise out from the earth, the holy vessels of the Temple will return and the secret of redemption will be revealed. Then, we will all believe in him. And the next set of miraculous events will be even more intriguing. Elijah will blow a trumpet and we will see the light of creation and then he will blow it again, and the dead will arise and then he will blow it again, and God's presence will be visible to all people and the Temple will rise up in complete perfection as Ezekiel described it. And the age of universal peace will reign supreme. Elijah, of course, will be one of eight who will form the Cabinet of the King Messiah. As Cabinet Minister, Elijah will be in charged of bringing the parents and the children together again and evil will be banished forever.

So what do we do with this?

Let me tell you what earlier Chasidim did with this.

Chasidim were more realistic and sensible in their story of Elijah. A story follows: At the Seder table of a great Chasidic Rebbe, one of the disciples was asked to open the door for Elijah. He did so and after he did so his face turned white. He was afraid that Elijah would really come in. The Rebbe admonished him. He said, "You don't have to be afraid. When Elijah comes, he will come not through that door, not at all. Elijah is going to come through your heart." If redemption comes to the world, the secret of redemption will be when people's hearts are open to each other. When people's hearts are open to life, then they will respect each other, they will listen to each other. Children and parents will not become one; children and parents will get even closer as they live with each other's differences. Teiku...Elijah is a symbol of the ability to live with questions, disagreement, uncertainty...and move forward retaining hope.

The secret of Elijah is not through the open door, but through the open heart. The secret of Elijah is then through the capacity of people to give and receive the love that is planted there. The secret of Elijah will create a sense of responsibility of each human being for all of humanity. It is then that redemption will come. The open door is a symbol; it is a symbol of an open heart. It is an open heart that leads to an open home. It's an open home that leads to an open community and an open nation. There were times when Jews lived in places that were dangerous to open their doors. Even during those days we sang Elijah Hanavi and we would open our doors because it proved faith in the guardianship of God, but more so, it was an expression of faith in the future.

Passover is a time of openness. We are to open to our hearts, to new possibilities, to new growth. Hope is a constant companion of the Jewish people. Our hope in the coming of a Messiah, a Messianic period cannot be rooted in either an empty ritual, in words which are sung or myth, but rather must be transformed into action.

Another Chasidic Rebbe indicated that the cup of Elijah should remain empty on the table until it was time to welcome him. Then the empty cup would be passed from person to person. Each one spilling a little of their own wine into the cup until it was full.

What did this teach?

Ultimately the changes that need to be made in the world are made by each one of us....We create the conditions for redemption. When we teach respect for all, the respect for woman in every culture, the end of

poverty and oppression. Yearning for better days will not just happen through faith or words, but rather action. That's the essence of the Jewish vision. We hope, we pray, we learn and through it all we need to be transformed to take responsibility for the world we live in.

May your Pesach be sweet. May your fondest dreams be realized and may we together, together with the rest of the world work to improve the conditions of all human kind.

The redemption, the miracles we celebrate remain incomplete...but they allowed us to get to Sinai. And there we received the instruction that would define...not a dream, but responsibility to do our part to feed the hungry, free the captives, clothe the poor, shelter the weak...that's when our hearts open to Elijah.

May we create a world where every man will live in his own tent and be free and be satisfied.

Shabbat Shalom