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SHABBAT HAGADOL



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Internal Greatness

by Rabbi Daniel Fine, Living & Learning Israel Educator

My four-year-old son once took me into his room to show me what he termed 'the greatest thing ever'. I followed him into his room, only for him to perch himself on his bed and show me a somersault. I can safely assume that as my son grows up, he will define 'the greatest thing ever' differently.

Indeed, 'greatness' is defined differently across different societies according to varying values. In Communist Russia, greatness was the Stakhanov model of becoming a model worker and performing one's utmost for the nation whilst staying anonymous. In parts of the Western world, greatness and respect are according to those who 'have made it big'. If alive today, the Greek emperor Alexander the Great (d. 323 BCE), a once celebrated conqueror, would surely lose his title given his scant regard for human life; ruthlessness and greed have thankfully become unacceptable societal traits.

Although definitions of 'great' vary with time and place, there seems to be one common denominator. Yet in order to understand this, we need first to understand Shabbat HaGadol.

Named after the final verse of its Haftarah, Shabbat HaGadol (literally, the 'great Shabbat') is the Shabbat before Pesach. What is it all about?

The final verse of the Haftarah talks about the 'great day' in Messianic times when the righteous will be rewarded and the wicked punished. The normal definition of 'great' is always measured in terms of physical size and number. Alexander the Great conquered many countries. The Great Wall of China is physically large. The Torah, however, has a different definition of great. Greatness of character is much more precious than external actions, and the vital qualities of loyalty, honesty and integrity are not measured by size. 'The day of greatness' in our Haftarah is when the righteous are rewarded for their internal loyalty to G-d and when those who lacked these internal traits are punished.



This explains the secret of Shabbat HaGadol. To relive the journey from the Exodus through to the giving of the Torah as we do between Pesach and Shavuot, we first need to be taught that greatness is measured in subtle steps that cannot be seen. External noise is not the way of the Torah; rather it represents secure, internal strength. This perhaps provides another reason for the custom to review the laws of Pesach on Shabbat HaGadol; by observing these 'minutely detailed' laws, we convey our willingness to measure greatness on G-d's terms.

Born in the aftermath of the recent tragedies in Paris, a new catchphrase promptly entered the Jewish and wider lexicon: *Je Suis Juif* – I am a Jew. It has quickly been embraced as a symbol of defiance against the dangerous re-emergence of anti-semitism. Through it we proclaim determination and pride in our identity.

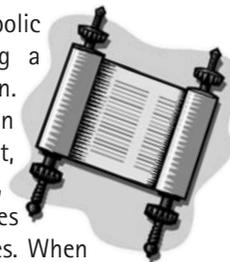
While the reaction was heart-warming, the circumstances which provoked it were not. Yet it is precisely at painfully trying times like these that our inner spark may be kindled, when our very soul cries out, when our hearts yearn for something deeper and better. It is when we feel more connected and in tune with our heritage and our people.

The question is: can we summon up this powerful inspiration on our own? Are we capable of motivating ourselves to such levels of passion and feeling without an external trigger? The opening verses of Tzav provide an emphatic answer:

“The Kohen shall kindle wood upon it [the Altar in the Tabernacle and later the Temple] every morning... A continuous fire shall burn upon the Altar; it must never go out” (Vayikra 6: 5-6). New firewood was placed on the Altar each morning, ensuring the flame would never become extinguished.

This represented renewal and regeneration. The fire may have been eternal, rising majestically towards the Heavens; yet each day unused, fresh wood was added. Yesterday's flame no longer sufficed. The fuel had run its course. A new light and warmth needed to be generated.

The human heart is symbolic of the Altar, possessing a fiery, burning, passion. However, this passion requires fuel. Without it, relationships crumble, interests fade, desires dampen and joy dissipates. When the gauge is on empty, we may soon grind to a halt.



One of the greatest challenges of Judaism is osmosis – the unconscious assimilation of ideas and knowledge, usually observed during childhood. It is what Tevye was referring to in *Fiddler on the Roof*, when he sang 'Tradition'. We make Kiddush. We celebrate the seder. We observe Yom Kippur. The 'why' may be irrelevant.

We do what we do because it is tradition.

Alas, the fuel of tradition does not last. New sources of energy must be accessed. “The Kohen shall kindle wood upon it every morning”. Each and every day needs a new dose of inspiration.

Here is a suggestion. Every morning, having thanked G-d through our prayers for restoring vitality and life, say these words: *Je Suis Juif* – I am a Jew. Now, pause and consider what that means, and how you can best live up to that ideal. How do I pray with meaning? How do I access the rich depths of our tradition? How can I be a better, kinder and more patient individual during the course of the day? Think about what G-d expects from you today.

Je Suis Juif – I am a Jew. Make a daily, tiny adjustment which will carry that statement from a declaration to a way of life.

The Dual Symbolism of Matzah

by Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

At the commencement of our Pesach Sedarim, we declare "*Ha lachma anya*" – 'this is the bread of affliction' eaten by our ancestors in Egypt. We are introduced to matzah as a symbol of our Egyptian bondage. Then, as the Seder progresses, we quote the teaching of Rabban Gamliel, who explains that matzah represents the haste with which we left Egypt, when there was insufficient time for the dough of bread to rise. Here, matzah is clearly a symbol of our freedom. How is it possible for the very same food to represent two totally different concepts?

In the Torah, matzah is described as being *lechem oni*, the bread of affliction (Devarim 16:3). We recall how the Egyptians gave their Israelite slaves inferior food during their unbearable bondage. According to the Avudraham (14th century), matzah takes longer to digest than bread. The Egyptians figured that it would give the slaves more energy at a lower cost to them. The Seforno (d. 1550) suggests that the Egyptian taskmasters forced the Israelites back to work during their resting periods. Their bread was not yet ready and so they were compelled to rush to eat matzah, which had not yet risen. The Abarbanel (d. 1508) states that at the commencement of the Seder we uncover the matzah in order to point to the broken, middle piece. This is a strong symbol of our slavery – a time when we were allocated only scraps of bread and never a whole piece.

Intriguingly, the Torah also presents matzah to us as a sign of redemption (Shemot 12),

recalling our rushed exit from Egypt. With this in mind, the Sefer Hachinuch (13th century) writes that matzah serves as a reminder of the great miracles which enabled us to depart speedily from Egypt. Other commentators point to this similarity. In the same way as matzah is removed from the oven before it is fully baked, so too G-d took us out of Egypt after 210 years of slavery, before the full 400 years mentioned earlier to Avraham had concluded. (An allusion to this is represented by the *gematria* – numerical value – of the words *lachma anya*, bread of affliction, which is 210).



The perplexing paradox of matzah, being both a symbol of slavery and freedom, highlights for us the complete control that G-d has over world events. In a remarkable, unexpected turn of events, the Israelites were catapulted overnight from the bitterness of subjection to the elation of redemption.

Matzah, which for generations had been a negative symbol of slavery and oppression, was suddenly transformed into a positive symbol of freedom. This realisation forms the basis for our heartfelt praise for the Almighty, which is a key element of our Seder experience.

The dual symbolism of matzah provides hope for us as individuals, and for our people as a whole, inspiring us to pray: May the Almighty speedily take us from anguish to joy, from darkness to light and from subjection to redemption.

The Quinoa – Kitniyot Conundrum Part I

by Rabbi Yehuda Spitz, KLBD

Generally, this time of year is the busiest for Rabbis the world over. They are often called upon to field questions about the myriad and complex laws of Pesach. This year is no different. Yet interestingly, one particular question that seems to be on many people's minds is not about *chametz* or even cleaning properly. Rather it is whether quinoa is considered *kitniyot* and therefore whether Ashkenazim can eat it on Pesach. Perhaps the popularity of the question has something to do with the fact that the U.N. declared 2013 as the 'International Year of Quinoa'. Whatever the reason, this is a very relevant issue.

Quinoa has developed an international following. Packed with protein and fibre, as well as magnesium, phosphorus, calcium and iron (and naturally cholesterol free), quinoa has clear dietary worth. Although billed as the 'Mother of All Grains' and 'the Super Grain', this native of the Andes Mountains is actually 'a grain that is not a grain'. It does not even contain gluten. Quinoa is actually a member of the 'goose-foot' family (*Chenopodium*), related to beets and spinach. However, while its health benefits sound terrific, it still may be problematic on Pesach.

The actual prohibition of *chametz* on Pesach pertains exclusively to leavened products made from the five major grains: wheat, barley, oats, spelt or rye. However, by the time of the *Rishonim* (early commentators, from the 11th century onwards) there was an Ashkenazic custom to prohibit eating *kitniyot* (legumes; literally 'little things') on Pesach, except in times of famine or grave need. Although several early authorities opposed this prohibition, nonetheless it is binding on Ashkenazic communities, even today. Famously,

it includes rice and was also adopted by a minority of Sephardi communities.

Although great halachic authorities used different terms to describe the prohibition, they all agreed that it is binding on all Ashkenazic Jewry. In fact, the *Aruch Hashulchan* (Rabbi Yechiel Michel Epstein d. 1908) wrote that 'once our forefathers have accepted this prohibition upon themselves, it is considered almost a Biblical commandment'.

Several reasons are given for the prohibition, including that *kitniyot* often grow in close proximity to grain or are commonly stored together with grain. Therefore actual *chametz* might actually end up mixed inside the *kitniyot* container.

In addition, cooked dishes made from grain and from *kitniyot* look similar. *Kitniyot* can also be ground up into flour – one can actually make '*kitniyot* bread'. This may make it difficult to differentiate between *kitniyot* and *chametz*.

Where does quinoa fit into this picture? We will continue this discussion in the coming weeks...

Given its kitniyot qualities, KLBD does not permit eating quinoa on Pesach unless you have specific health-based dietary requirements. If you have such requirements, please contact both your rabbi and doctor for advice before Pesach. If you do not have a rabbi, call KLBD on 020 8343 6332. For the sake of completeness, it should be noted (as we will see in future articles) that there are some Kashrut authorities in Israel and the USA who take a different view as to quinoa's kitniyot qualities and permit eating it on Pesach, providing it is certified by them as kosher for Pesach and thereby free of any actual chametz which some forms of quinoa might have come into contact with.



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