

One of my favorite Jewish expressions is, “We are a religion of Pots and Pans.” It is also the title of a 1989 book about theology and ancient Judaism by Rabbi Jacob Neusner.

Many of us in this room may know someone who makes their home kosher for Passover: kashering pots and pans, changing out dishes and buying specific Passover foods and abstaining from purchasing others that are usually considered kosher at other times of the year. Some of us do this in our own homes for ourselves and our families and are familiar with this idea of living out a religion of pots and pans, especially at this time of the year.

Jo Milgrom, the wife of the biblical scholar Rabbi Jacob Milgrom, who was once a rabbi of this congregation, pointed out that such a strong emphasis *on kashrut*, “pots-and-pans Judaism,” may eclipse the bigger spiritual question of what kind of a *mentsch* are you? In other words, the *mitzvah* of keeping kosher should ultimately inspire us to live out values that make the world a better place.

Is there anything spiritual about preparing our kitchens for Passover? Can we make a holy connection between the questions, “Can I use my toaster oven during Passover?” and “Can I connect deeply with freedom and live this value out in my life?” or between the questions of “Why do the rabbis say we can’t eat from our usual ceramic or porcelain dishes?” and “Can I really find God in my kosher for Passover kitchen?”

Today, known as Shabbat HaGadol, was traditionally one of only two days in the liturgical calendar when a rabbi gave a sermon: the first was Shabbat Shuvah, the Shabbat after Rosh Hashanah and the second is Shabbat Hagadol, coined after the word *gadol* which appears in today’s *Haftarah*. This morphed into “the Sermon Ha Gadol” in order for the rabbi to impart the laws of *Pesach*, making everyone in the community aware of them.

I have always struggled with timing of Shabbat Hagadol. Hasn’t everyone, by this time, really decided how they are going to observe the holiday? Why would a rabbi, in any historical period, tell a congregation on such short notice about the laws of Passover?

If we are talking about what we do in our kitchens, this may be true. However, if we are talking about what happens in our hearts and at our tables, then there is still time. The pots and pans are an important pathway to a deeper connection to God, the value of freedom and the community. But the pots and pans are not meant to be an impediment to a spiritual connection but rather a conduit. The real questions on Shabbat Hagadol revolve around connecting with freedom and finding God. So how do I re-connect with freedom and rediscover God in my kitchen?

For those of you who don't know this about me, I love to cook and I love to eat. But when I began to prepare for Passover, I begin to feel completely "*hafokb*" – upside down. The kitchen is turned upside down, the garage is turned inside out and I feel uncomfortable and unsettled and frankly annoyed by it all. What is happening? In the words of Harvard Business Professor Clayton Christensen, there is disruptive innovation going on in my house. The status quo is being disturbed: how I always do things, what I cook with, where I store things – everything is being turned on its head. Why? Passover ultimately disrupts my fixed patterns. It comes to down to ultimately simplifying life, but getting there makes me *verklemp!*

I go through a theological journey when I ready my kitchen for Passover. Yes, I feel exhausted, uprooted, but then ultimately freed. By preparing my kitchen and home for the holiday and by limiting my choices of what I eat on Passover and how I eat it, I am literally making my life simple and this brings me closer to freedom.

When I hold on to stuff, it keeps me (and others) from freedom. Passover allows me to not get stuck in my usual routines in fulfilling the most basic of my needs: what I eat. And it is linked to the freedom of others because I am reminded of how little I really do need. This ultimately frees me up to share what is mine with others – this is the basis of obligation, to see my being in relationship with God and with others. I am able to create memories with and for others.

When we are free, we can take initiative. Exodus 12:1-3 teaches us the Israelites took the lamb on the tenth day of the month of Nissan in the Jewish calendar. The rabbis reason that this happened around Shabbat HaGadol, a few short days before the Passover ritual itself. The redemption from Egypt was already set in motion when the Israelites initiated the taking of the lamb. With this one act, they were on their way to being redeemed.

The 19th century commentator Sfat Emet explains that the term "Shabbat HaGadol" results from the Shabbat taking on new significance. Only with the Israelites' redemption from Egypt did Shabbat acquire the historical identity which intertwined with the theology. In other words the belief that God will save us is now becoming a historical reality.

So, the Sfat Emet teaches, instead of reading the "Great Shabbat" but rather the "Greater Shabbat." It had now become "greater" because redemption is already on the way.

Now the second aspect of Shabbat, holiness, articulated in the repetition of the Ten Commandments, would be realized. The Israelites had reached the age of majority, became *g'dolim*, adults, with responsibilities. This was Shabbat "HaGadol."

The most basic teaching of Shabbat is the acknowledgement that God created the world in six days. By taking the lamb the Jews rejected idolatry and accepted God. This was not merely an action which took place on the tenth of Nissan. This was a watershed of Jewish history. Now the Jews joined God in a Shabbat. And this made them *'g'dolim'* or *'mevugarim'* – grownups in their relationship with God.

Like the Israelites on the Shabbat before the Passover ritual, we have the opportunity on this Shabbat Ha Gadol to become mature partners with God and with each other. How does this happen? It happens through obligation to others. For what good is freedom if it is only used to do whatever we want? Freedom is most fulfilling when we exercise it to be in relationship with God and with others. When we simply our lives and make room for what is most important.

So, as we sit around the *seder* table this year, some of us may sit with relatives. Others of us will be sitting with strangers. May we re-examine our own personal freedom as *'mevurgarim'* or *'g'dolim'* – mature partners who are willing to commit and be obligated in community with others. May we recommit ourselves to the idea of disruptive innovation so that we are always reminded of what matters most. And may we feel a great sense of gratitude that comes from letting go and embracing the freedom that we are so fortunate to count as our own. *Shabbat Shalom* and *Hag Kasher v'Sameah*.