

**PARSHAT TZAV
SHABBAT HAGADOL
APRIL 8, 2017
RABBI VERNON KURTZ**

On the Shabbat following 9/11 I decided that the American and Israeli flags, which for many years were housed on the stage in Blumberg auditorium, needed to find their place on the bimah here in the Field Family Sanctuary. We moved them to the bimah and they have remained there ever since. Clearly in my mind this was a very symbolic action. For me it represented our resolve that the memories of those who were killed in 9/11 would forever be remembered and that we would hold the perpetrators responsible for this horrible event. The flags sitting on our bimah on that Shabbat, and every Shabbat since then, have great symbolic meaning.

I'd like to pause for a moment and ask you to think about that meaning. Take a look at the American flag and spend a moment contemplating it. What does it mean to you? Now, look over at the Israeli flag and think of what it represents to you.

Symbolism plays a very important role in our lives. Generally, we understand it as an object representing another to give it an entirely different meaning that is much deeper and more significant. It may be an action, an event, a word, or something material. Think, for example, of the dove. It is not merely a bird, it represents for all of us the symbol of peace. Think of the color black. For most people it is a symbol that represents evil or death. What is the symbolism of red roses? For most of us it represents romance. And what is the symbolism of a broken mirror? For many of us, whether we are willing to admit it or not, it represents bad luck. Words, actions, even colors, represent things other than themselves. Now think of how symbolism portrays itself in literature, art, poetry, and even in music. Clearly, symbols are an important part of our life and the meaning we attach to it.

Abraham Joshua Heschel in his book *Man's Quest for God* makes a distinction between real and conventional symbols. "A real symbol," he writes, "is a visible object that represents something invisible; something present representing something absent." He suggests a real symbol a representation of the Divine "because it is assumed that the Divine resides in it or that the symbol partakes to some degree of the reality of the Divine." An idol represented the god to whom the worshipper sacrificed or prayed. This was an anathema to Israelite religion and over a period of time both ancient Israelite religion and its later manifestation, Judaism, rebelled against it. There are no representations of G-d in our synagogues or in our homes. G-d cannot be represented in a "real symbol."

Instead, we use what Heschel called conventional symbols. "A conventional symbol," Heschel writes, "represents to the mind an entity which is not shown, not because its substance is endowed with something of that entity but because it suggests that entity, by reason of relationship, association, or convention, e.g., a flag."

Heschel explains that conventional symbols are part of our lives and a significant part of Judaism. As he writes, “To Jewish faith there are no physical embodiments of supreme mysteries. All we have are signs, reminders.”

Think, for instance, of the Mezuzah. There is no better example of rabbinic tradition’s understanding of the Written Law and the Oral Law’s interpretation thereon than the Mezuzah. The Torah simply tells us, “And you shall inscribe these words on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” It makes no further elaboration. We are not sure exactly what words, where they are to be presented, how they are to be placed, and in what manner they are to be found. Yet, all of us know that the words on the parchment are those of the Shema and the two succeeding paragraphs, that it is placed in a container on the right doorpost entering a room, about two-thirds of the way up, facing into the room. While it has now become standard practice, it symbolizes many things. It reminds us as we enter the room of the sacred nature of our Torah and our faith. It teaches us that wherever we are to live our lives by those dictates. In today’s society it is a sign of Jewish identity. Putting up a Mezuzah on our doors, especially on the one facing the outside, symbolizes our pride in our Jewish tradition and our identification with our people. The same can be said for Tefillin and even the Shabbat which is seen as a sign between G-d and the Jewish people.

No holiday has more symbols than the holiday of Pesach. Today on Shabbat HaGadol it is customary to read the Maggid section of the Hagadah, preparing us for the Seder experience. We read the story of our people’s liberation from the bondage of Egypt and the rabbinic interpretation of what it meant not only for that generation, but for all generations.

When we sit down at our Seder tables Monday and Tuesday nights we will be involved in many symbolic acts. Rabbi Hayyim David HaLevi, a past Sephardic Rabbi of Tel Aviv, in his book *Makor Hayyim* in detailing the laws of Pesach writes that the Passover experience is truly unique. Sitting at our tables the major mitzvah of the evening is to tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt. We do so by the eating of matzah and maror. When we think of it matzah is simply flour and water. And, what is maror? It is nothing more than bitter lettuce. Yet, he reminds us that these simple things serve as symbols of the bread of affliction and the bitter times our people had in the land of Egypt. We remember those days as we sit around our Seder table and using these symbols we discuss the great story of our liberation and its meaning today.

In fact, the entire Seder is a symbol. At certain points in the Seder experience we eat foods which are used symbolically to teach us a lesson, for example, not only the matzah and the maror, but the haroset. The roasted egg on the Seder plate, the shankbone, and even the salt water, are representative of things other than themselves. We recline as free people symbolic of our liberation and when we recite the plagues we empty a full glass of wine just a little bit as we cannot be fully pleased as others suffered during our liberation.

During the evening we take those symbols and make them meaningful for us. We recall the ancient story and retell it in our words. We re-enact an ancient ritual and make

it meaningful and relevant for our own day. We acknowledge that G-d was present in the Israelite experience and we challenge ourselves to recognize G-d's presence in our lives as well. The symbolism reminds us of the importance of ancient events even as it challenges us to recreate the experience and discuss its meaning in our lives.

Heschel goes even one step further. He writes, "What is necessary is not to have a symbol, but to be a symbol." Since we are all created in the image of G-d we are the greatest symbol ever created. Heschel informs us that "the Tselem or G-d's image is what distinguishes man from the animal, and it is only because of it that he is entitled to exercise power in the world of nature. If he retains his likeness he has dominion over the beast; if he forfeits his likeness he descends, losing his position of eminence in nature."

In other words, it is not simply the Pesach symbols on the plate that are important for us. As symbols ourselves we represent the Divine presence in the world. We can either elevate it or desecrate it by our actions, deeds, words and behavior. It is a privilege to represent G-d's presence in the world but it is a great challenge as well.

Heschel writes, "Jewish festivals do not contain any attempt to recreate symbolically the events they commemorate. We do not enact the exodus from Egypt nor the crossing of the Red Sea. Decisive as the revelation of Sinai is, there is no ritual to recreate or to dramatize it. We neither repeat nor imitate sacred events. Whatever is done in religious observance is an original act. The Seder ritual, for example, recalls; it does not rehearse the past."

Rabbi HaLevi suggests that this is the great challenge of the Jewish people sitting at Seder tables around the world and retelling the story - to recognize the national liberation of our people and the challenges it presents for us.

This is Shabbat HaGadol, always the Shabbat preceding the holiday of Passover. The Prophet Malachi, whose words we read today as the Haftarah, concludes the passage with the promise that "G-d will send the Prophet Elijah before the coming of the awesome, fearful, day of the Lord." For us, Elijah symbolizes many things. He was the zealous prophet for G-d, the one who would brook no compromise in the worship of the one G-d. He is the one who is present at a Brit Milah, symbolically with us at the end of Shabbat, and also at the Pesach Seder. Shabbat HaGadol anticipates the great day when the Messianic Age will occur and calls upon us to reorder our spiritual tasks. When we open the door for Elijah the Prophet at our Passover Seder we recall that message and symbolically invite him into our home to challenge us to do so.

As we sit at our Passover Seders this week, I pray that the symbolism of the food, the story, and the rituals will motivate us to become more sensitive to the lessons of the Passover experience and to work towards that great day which will mean liberation and freedom for all.

