

There are many reasons why the Shabbat before Pesach is called *HaGadol* (the great). Based on a discussion in Talmud Tractate Shabbat 87b, 10. Nisan, the day HaShem commanded the Israelites to prepare for the Exodus, was Shabbat. Others say that when the Israelites chose to obey HaShem's command, they became adults (*gadol*). The Chatam Sofer (Moses Schreiber 1762-1839) teaches that in affirming monotheism the Israelites acknowledged the greatness of HaShem. The Haftarah reading is also cited: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great (*ha-gadol*) and awesome day of the Lord," (Malachi 3:23). And on the lighter side, this is one of the two times during the year when rabbis must offer a sermon, and many take full, long-winded advantage of the opportunity. But most of all, it marks the beginning of the Israelites' transition from slavery to freedom. They are entering a time of expectation and learning accompanied by confusion and anxiety. For generations the Israelites had no choice but to obey orders. Now, they are free agents. Slavery, rooted in fear, requires nothing more than unquestioning obedience. Freedom, rooted in autonomy, requires discernment and accountability – skills that must be carefully cultivated. In the first two chapters of our parashah HaShem instructs Moses to issue precise commands to Aaron concerning the priests' duties in the *mishkan* and the rituals and laws corresponding to each type of offering. But these commands are not mere orders; they are the entrusted obligations designed to enable connection between HaShem and the people. It will not be easy for the Israelites to understand that freedom from slavery means that they are now free to serve HaShem in perpetual gratitude for this gift of freedom. Freedom from is lawlessness; freedom to involves obligations. The Israelites were not forced to prepare for the Exodus. They chose to do so, and it required great courage to publicly take an animal from a species sacred to the Egyptians, butcher it, and place some of its blood on the doorframes of their houses. They will not always be so courageous or so obedient, and there will be many missteps along the way. As we know humanity is still grappling with the concept of freedom. Parashat Tzav exemplifies the discipline of freedom, and the laws discussed in Leviticus teach freedom grounded in gratitude to HaShem and respect for all of HaShem's creation. In precise, repetitive daily practice the priests keep the holy fire burning, prepare and perform the offerings, and clean up afterward. Every single detail – blood, fat, and waste, flour, spices and oil, time and place – requires deep concentration. And the portions allotted from the offerings are to be eaten in gratitude and holiness. The priests are expected to model the consistency, focus, reverence, and commitment that the people must learn to emulate. Freedom without restraint collapses into chaos – like the episode of the golden calf. Freedom without obligation dissolves into egotism – like the rebellions against Moses and Aaron. Freedom without gratitude disintegrates into forgetfulness – like the incessant yearning for Egypt whenever they face a new challenge. And freedom without shared responsibility is anarchy – the unfettered lawlessness that creates tyrants who lead their subjects back into slavery. In this fragile time of transition it would have been easy for a lesser man than Moses to seize power. He could have claimed the priesthood and declared himself the sole representative of HaShem. And he could have used fear to force these vulnerable, frightened, inexperienced people to comply. But he does the exact opposite. He dresses Aaron and his sons, anoints the *mishkan*, and offers the inaugural sacrifices. He acts as High Priest only to perform the inauguration ceremonies. When they are completed, he and his descendants will be removed from the priestly lineage. In essence, he is mirroring HaShem's act of *tzimtzum* – of withdrawing to create space, thus actually anticipating HaShem's commandment "You shall be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy" (19:2). Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534-1572) used the term *tzimtzum* to describe how HaShem withdrew to make room for creation to exist. Moses emulates this by creating room for new leadership structures to arise. Good leaders do not need be the center of a personality cult, and they do not need to bribe or threaten to create followers. They lead by embodying values that attract people, and they encourage others to develop their own leadership potential. But Moses did not arrive at this understanding alone. His wise father-in-law Yitro taught him that leaders need to delegate responsibility and build a strong, trustworthy chain of command. True leaders surround themselves with advisors who challenge them, not with people who flatter them by echoing their views and slavishly doing their bidding. No one has all the answers, and genuine leaders seek counsel from those whose competence and integrity they trust. Moses understood and followed Yitro's advice. Now, as his tenure as High Priest ends, that rare, wavering cantillation sign called *shalshelet* (chain) not only reveals his very human ambivalence as he slaughters the "ram of investitures," it also symbolizes the chain that links us from generation to generation to each other and to HaShem. We are all links in an unbroken chain of holiness, memory, belonging, and responsibility. This chain is not a shackle. It is a living chain forged by choice. Each link is added freely, each link is unique, and each link is an essential part of the whole. We are bound together in the freedom of our eternal covenant. We will soon celebrate the beginning of that freedom. Let us do so in love, gratitude, commitment, and joy.

Shabbat shalom and chag Pesach sameach!