

THE LESSON OF THE SHEEP: SWEAT THE SMALL STUFF

by Howie Beigelman

The Sabbath before Passover is called "Shabbos HaGadol," the Great Sabbath. What great occurrence do we commemorate on the Great Sabbath? The answer is that on the Sabbath before the first Passover, all Jewish households designated a sheep for their personal Passover sacrifice, and brought the sheep into their homes. To the Egyptians, who included sheep among their gods, this was sacrilege -- but they were cowed into inaction by the nine preceding plagues.

The Great Sabbath? This is what we commemorate on the Great Sabbath -- the taking of sheep? Ten plagues, a burning bush, a sea split, the mightiest empire on earth humbled, G-d descending on Sinai, the Giving of the Torah... and we commemorate taking sheep?

Jewish tradition teaches that the Jews were not psychologically prepared to leave Egypt. Their slave mentality was created by centuries of dehumanizing persecution and forced labor. Some seismic event was needed to shake this people from their enslavement, to ready them for their awesome journey to Sinai and beyond.

That act was taking the sheep. The Great Sabbath. The Great Lesson. When frightened slaves openly defied their oppressors, they prepared themselves to rely only on G-d. They prepared themselves to slaughter the object of Egypt's faithful worship, committing the greatest possible theological offense to their persecutors.

A small act? Yes. But it caused a seismic shift.

New York's finest understand the power of each tiny act. Their Quality of Life campaign focuses on apprehending small-time criminals such as turnstile jumpers and squeegee men. Today this strategy is imitated in cities nationwide, because it resulted in an astonishingly deep drop in crime.

Simply put, bigger and deadlier crimes flourish in an atmosphere that lacks concern for minor

crimes. From panhandling to assault, even murder is a small leap. Zero tolerance for a small breakdown in social norms is zero tolerance for any larger breakdown in social norms. By stopping loitering, they set the stage for stopping murder.

Jewish tradition teaches that from the small, great things come. A hurricane is simply individual water molecules harnessed together. The Torah understood. The NYPD understood. A shepherd named Akiva saw drops of water wearing a hole into solid rock, and understood -- and went to study until the words of Torah penetrated his mind, and transformed him into Rebbe Akiva, the outstanding scholar. And Richie Cunningham understood better than almost anyone.

Remember the Happy Days episode where Richie (Ron Howard), hospitalized for drinking too much explained to his pacing father (Tom Bosley) that he only had those itty-bitty, teeny-weeny shot glasses? Still pacing, Mr. C asks: how many? Richie's response: about 72.

Enough of anything, no matter how little, has power. That's the lesson of the Great Sabbath, the lesson learned in taking sheep. Little things do count. Sweat the small stuff. A single sheep, repeated a few hundred thousand times, makes a Great Sabbath.

We focus on the great or dramatic, but the small and uninspiring changes eventually transform worlds and usher in greatness. Maimonides teaches that it is better to provide one coin each to one hundred individual paupers than one hundred coins to one pauper. One hundred tiny acts are better than one, awesome act. Enough small, teeny actions can transform our personality as New York was transformed, and affect us with the same power that knocked Richie Cunningham flat.

Richie Cunningham knew the power. The NYPD too. The Guardian of Israel made it a foundation of our national existence. Paraphrasing an ex-president, one point of light is totally meaningless in the black of night. But one thousand points of light is a different animal altogether. Do sweat the small stuff.

In our case, this small act began the Exodus. That laughingly minuscule moment opened the story which captivates humanity today, and shall capture the heart and mind of man forever. The splitting of the Sea, Egypt's defeat, Revelation atop Sinai, and a forty year desert sojourn culminating with entry into the Land of Israel, and Solomon's Temple on Mount Moriah in Jerusalem, hundreds of years later. Prophets, kings, heroes and heroines -- all flow from that taking of sheep on that pre-national Sabbath.

The Great Sabbath's eternal lesson is that we must each take sheep into our home. Not attending synagogue regularly? Begin to pray just a sentence a day. Don't give charity daily? Begin parting with one coin each morning. So it goes. A few moments of daily Torah study. Guarding our speech more carefully a few minutes daily. Judging others, especially those not like us, somewhat more favorably. Amazing transformations, personal and communal, may result from such small acts.