

## Sermon by Rabbi Eliezer Hirsch

### Shemini 20 - "Supernatural"

Good Shabbos. Shabbat Shalom. First, I'd like to express our community's gratitude to all the Mekor members who are working long, stressful hours on the front lines of providing medical care and social services during the covid-19 pandemic. May the rofeh cholim, the Almighty healer of illness grant them success in all their endeavors, and bring an end to this terrible virus very soon.

We're now approaching Shabbat, only one day after Pesach ended. On the bright side, at least it's easier than what they have to deal with in Israel when the last day of Pesach falls on Friday, and Shabbat is, to say the least, very confusing.

The Shabbat after Pesach has become known for its *Shlissel Challahs*. "Shlissel Challah" is a relatively recent - a few hundred-years-old - Ashkenazi custom to bake a challah with a metal key inside or to bake a challah in the shape of a key, (which quite literally sounds much more palatable!). While there are some rabbis who condemn this practice as 'Darkei Haemori' or pagan, I tend to think that if the custom has become so widespread among the Jewish faithful, there must be some significance to the practice.

One explanation for this custom may be found in the Vilna Gaon's teaching on the Gemara in Mesechet Ta'anit 2a:

אמר ר' יוחנן ג' מפתחות בידו של הקב"ה שלא נמסרו ביד שליח ואלו הן מפתח של גשמים  
מפתח של חיה מפתח של תחיית המתים... במערבא אמרי אף מפתח של פרנסה

that there are 4 aspects of life that are ultimately in the hands of God, where God alone holds the key.

The Vilna Gaon came up with a very clever acronym for this Gemara; he explained that these 4 things together are represented by the Hebrew word *maphteach*, *key!* The *mem* stands for *matar*, *rain*; the *pey* is for *parnasa*, *earning a living*; the *tav* is for *t'chiat hameitim/resurrection of the dead* (which includes *healing the sick of a deadly illness*, since in a sense that's what occurs when someone recovers); and the *chet* stands for *chaya/childbirth*. The gemara explains that these things are in God's realm, outside the sphere of human beings, an area for which only God holds the key.

I think this idea ties in with our parsha's name *Shemini*, which means the *eighth day*; because as the Maharal famously explains, while the number 7 represents the concept of *teva* or the natural elements of our world (like the 7 days of the week), the number 8 corresponds to all that is *limaala min hateva*, *the supernatural, the spiritual, that which is above nature, outside of our physical world*.

In contrast, challah, like all chametz, is part of our mundane, physical world. The Vilna Gaon teaches that even though it isn't required, we should nonetheless eat *seuda shlisheet*, a 3rd meal, on the last day of Pesach, in order to show God our sincere desire to perform the mitzvah of eating matzah, and our sadness that Pesach is ending. Moreover, there are many who have the custom to consume chametz immediately after the holiday ends (which could explain the hours-long lines outside kosher pizza places soon after Pesach ends), to reinforce that we were eating matzah to observe the mitzvah of Pesach, not merely to satisfy our hunger (even though this should be self explanatory!)

In these ways of elevating the matzah, we show that we can sometimes lift the mundane, such as something as basic as eating, into the spiritual realm, where we have access to the supernatural.

When the key is inserted into the challah, it symbolizes our hope that we will merit God to give us the gifts that correspond to the key -- the life and death issues that are solely within His realm.

So as we leave Pesach behind, the shlüssel, the key in the challah, which is the quintessential chametz food item, imparts us with an important message we should try to carry with us into the rest of the year, during the more ordinary days of our lives: We must remember that God holds the keys to the supernatural, a realm we can access through prayer and devotion to Torah and mitzvot.

We're currently living in a situation in which our entire focus seems to be on the mundane, on what we typically consider the basic, routine activities of our existence. And yet our homes must also serve as a sanctuary, in place of shul. If we keep in mind to try to bring God down to us, into our mundane, everyday lives, we will merit that God will help us in our difficult situation in ways that will be nothing short of supernatural. Shabbat shalom.