

Message from the Haftara

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Redemption Begins at Home

SHABBAT HAGADOL

In the liturgical cycle, special Shabbatot surrounding the holidays are typically named after the unique passages read on them. Even Shabbatot that have no special Torah reading, but do have a unique haftara, take their name from the first line of that haftara. This is the case with Shabbat Chazon, which immediately precedes Tish'a b'Av; Shabbat Nachamu, which follows it; and Shabbat Shuva, which comes before Yom Kippur.

Why then do we call this Shabbat HAGADOL? The word HAGADOL, meaning “the great”, does not appear in the opening of the haftara, whose first verse is: V'AR'VA LASHEM... – “Then the offering of Yehuda and Yerushalayim will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and years past” (Mal-achi 3:4).

Commentaries have offered different answers to this question. The Tosafot (Shabbat 87b, s.v. V'OTA YOM) explains that in fact, the appellation HAGADOL has nothing to do with the

haftara at all. Instead, it is called “the great” Shabbat because of the great miracle that took place on this Shabbat when the Israelites were slaves in Egypt. God commanded them to designate lambs for the first Pesach offering five days in advance of the Exodus. Because the Exodus occurred on a Thursday, the animals were collected on the preceding Shabbat. The Israelites were meant to keep these animals in their homes in preparation for sacrifice, fully aware that sheep and goats were worshiped by the Egyptians. Yet God struck fear into the hearts of their Egyptian neighbors, and none dared to interfere. This explanation is cited by the Tur and later codified in the Shulchan Arukh (Orach Chayim 430), which links the name of this Shabbat to that “great”, miraculous moment.

However, in his sefer Chazon HaMikra (vol.II, p.251), Rabbi Yissachar Yaakovson (1901-1972) suggests that the name Shabbat HaGadol may in fact emerge from the haftara, whose penultimate verse reads: “Behold, I will send you Eliya the prophet before the coming of the great [HAGADOL] and dreadful day of the Lord” (Mal-achi 3:23). The verse’s use of the word “great” in reference to Israel’s final redemption at the end of days which is meant to mirror our initial redemption from Egypt so many years ago.

In this vein, the prophet Mal-achi teaches us an important lesson about the nature of redemption. The prophecy continues (v.24): “And he will return the hearts of the parents back to the children, and the hearts of the children back to their parents.” Here, Mal-achi points out that the final redemption has a prerequisite: the capacity of families to reunite in a common sense of spiritual purpose and meaning. Division and discord, along with the inability of our nation’s youth to value its past, and of the old guard to embrace the future, are the greatest obstacles to redemption.

When we think about the themes and rituals of the Pesach holiday, we see that this time, more than any other, celebrates the ability of Jewish families to come together. The command of the Korban Pesach established three thousand years ago specified that offering was to be acquired per family (Sh'mot 12:3) – and not per individual. Each family was instructed to both offer and consume the sacrifice together, in anticipation of the coming salvation.

Today, the annual Pesach Seder commemorates that original Pascal Sacrifice meal and the family gathering that accompanied it in the times of the Beit HaMikdash. This is the Jewish family event par excellence. Every year, members of immediate and extended families sit down

together for a long evening and engage in the discussion of redemption, then and now.

When we refer to this Shabbat as HAGADOL, we invoke both Mal-achi’s vision of future redemption, as well as the Torah’s depiction of the Exodus from Egypt. Past and future mirror one another, each rooted in familial unity and shared purpose. If we can internalize this message, that redemption is only possible when we are ready to be redeemed together, perhaps we will merit to see the arrival of Eliyahu and the dawn of a renewed world. 