

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



SHABBAT HAGADOL

The Greatest

This Shabbat is The Greatest Shabbat or Shabbat HaGadol. Why? Nobody really knows. Much ink has flowed in the attempt to answer that question. I'll use up some bytes in that same cause.

The starting point for most scholars who look into the issue is a comment by Tosafot on this Talmudic statement: In the month of Nisan during which the Jewish people left Egypt, on the fourteenth day of the month, they slaughtered their Paschal lambs; on the fifteenth, they left Egypt; and in that evening (the fifteenth), the firstborn were stricken (Shabbat 87b).

Tosafot comments: If this is so, that they slaughtered their Pesach Offering on Wednesday (the fourteenth), then the previous Shabbat was the Tenth of Nissan ('on the tenth of this month each family shall take for itself a lamb', Sh'mot 12:3). They, therefore, took their Paschal Lambs on that Shabbat. Therefore they called this Shabbat HaGadol, because a miracle happened upon it, as recorded in the Midrash (Sh'mot Rabba): As they took

their Paschal Lambs on that Shabbat a miracle occurred: The Firstborns of the Egyptians gathered around the Israelites and asked them, 'Why are you doing this?' They said to them, 'This is the Paschal Offering. God will kill the Firstborn of Egypt.' They went to their fathers and to Par'o to beg that the Jews be sent away. They didn't want to. The Firstborns fought and killed many of their countrymen. This is the verse, 'Who struck down the Firstborns of Egypt, For His CHESED is eternal (T'hilim 136:10).

Tosafot claims that this Shabbat is 'great' because a miracle happened. This 'miracle' is not mentioned in the Torah. What is even more curious is that Shabbat HaGadol as a phenomenon was never mentioned before the 12th century in Europe.

Eventually, commentaries began suggesting reasons for this Shabbat being so very important. Tosafot pushes the miracle idea. But there are two problems with that idea. First, if there really was a miracle, wouldn't we commemorate it on the calendar date upon which it occurred, rather than the day of the week? Yeah, probably.

Plus, wouldn't we call it Shabbat HaNes? The Shabbat of the 'great miracle'. In other words, we should look elsewhere for our reason.

It has been suggested that it's a 'typo'. Really our ancestors wanted to

call it Shabbat Hagada, because of the custom of reading most of the Hagada during this Shabbat's afternoon. At some point it morphed into Shabbat HaGadol.

Rav Shlomo Luria wrote in the 16th century that the name came from the climactic penultimate verse of the Haftora we read on this distinguished Shabbat: Behold, I will send the prophet Eliya(hu) to you before the coming of the great (HAGADOL) and the awesome day of the Eternal (Mal-achi 3:23). That's why we call it Shabbat HaGadol, not Shabbat Gadol. We're quoting that verse.

Now it gets cool. The last attempts to solve this mystery which I will quote are from the last 150 years and, I think, these great scholars aren't as interested in historic reality as they are in suggesting powerful lessons to be gleaned from this Great Shabbat.

Rav Zadok HaKohen of Lublin (1823-1900) wrote that we call this Shabbat HaGadol because it precedes the first holiday in our history which is also called SHABATON, which means 'little Shabbat'. This is important because we count the Omer based on the 'day after Shabbat', which we reckon to be the first day of Pesach. Our calendar is based upon calling holidays Shabbat, too. But the every seventh day 'Shabbat' is the greater one because it was sanctified by God (B'reishit 2:3), while the Chag version

of Shabbat was sanctified by the Sanhedrin or Bet Din HaGadol, in other words, us, the Jews.

Next, the S'fat Emet (1847-1905) quotes his grandfather (the Chidushei HaRim) who explained that there are 50 Shabbats in a regular Jewish year. Since the holiday year begins with Pesach, this is the last or fiftieth Shabbat of the year. The fiftieth is like the YOVEL (Jubilee) Shabbat. That status makes this Shabbat very significant, indeed, actually GREAT or HaShabbat HaGadol.

The significance of the fiftieth member of any count cannot be underestimated. There are 50 gates of understanding, BINA. each Shabbat of the year opens another gate to greater knowledge. And we can't ignore the significance of the fact that the Exodus (Y'TZI'AT MITRAYIM) is mentioned in the Torah 50 times. The Rebbe says that we must contrast the Shabbat between Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur, Shabbat Shuva, with this Shabbat. That Shabbat brings T'SHUVA through YIR'A (fear or awe); this Shabbat brings T'SHUVA of AHAVA (love). The Rebbe concludes: A person must do T'SHUVA out of the greatness of the kindness God performed for us, by taking us out of Egypt and choosing us to be His treasured nation.

Finally, there's Rav Kook (1865-1935).

He goes back to the beginning of Moshe's mission. God tells him, 'Yisrael is My BECHOR (Sh'mot 4:34). Then God informs him that he, Moshe, will eventually tell Par'o: You will refuse to send God's children, so God will kill your BECHOR, first born. It was always about the firstborns! That's why when David HaMelech wrote about the amazing acts of God, the plague mentioned is this one: Who struck Egypt through their first-born; for His CHESED is forever! (T'hilim 11:136).

On that special Shabbat, five days before our ancestors left Egypt there was a confrontation between the Jews and Egypt's firstborns, according to Tosafot. Rav Kook concludes: The ultimate goal of the Egyptian exile and the redemption is the special relationship between God and Yisrael described as Yisrael being God's BECHOR. The beginning of our being the BECHOR was taking the KORBAN PESACH on the 10th of Nissan. This was and is GADOL!

Prepare to become God's beloved BECHOR, again! Have a Great Shabbat! 