

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Shabbat HaGadol

The Shabbat preceding Pesach, or Passover, is called Shabbat haGadol, the Great Shabbat. Halachik sources point out the origin of the name: “Because of the great miracle that happened on this day” [SA: OC 430]. “This day” is a specific reference. Each family took a lamb to offer up a Paschal offering, as commanded by G-d. As the verse states, “On the tenth of this month, let each one take a lamb for each parental home, a lamb for each household” [Ex. 12:3]. In the year of the redemption, the tenth of Nissan was on the seventh day of the week, Shabbat.

In order to best observe the animal, thus ensuring the health and suitability of the particular animal, the Jews tied the sheep to their bedposts and kept them there for a period of four days. Yaakov ben Asher, (Cologne, 1270 – Toledo c. 1340), the author of the halachik code called the Tur, writes (OC 430):

The Egyptians asked the Jews, “Why are you tying lambs to your bed posts?” The Jews responded, “In order to slaughter them for the sake of the Paschal offering.” The Egyptians, who worshipped the lambs, were none too pleased. Yet, G-d inhibited them from acting on their frustration. The Jews emerged from those incidents unscathed. It was a great miracle that took place at that time on that Shabbat, thus we call this Shabbat the Shabbat of the great miracle.

The fact that this miracle happened is historically chronicled. Nevertheless, it suggests to us a basic question. Throughout history, and particularly during the Exodus, the Jews experienced a myriad of wonders, a host of miracles that were seemingly bigger and greater than this. So why is this particular miracle called the “great miracle”?

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev answers this question by introducing a kabbalistic idea from the Ariza”l [Rabbi Yitzchak Luria]. There are two separate approaches to the service of G-d. These are called mochin katnus and mochin gadlus. Mochin katnus literally means “small brains,” and refers to people whose actions serve primarily their own personal benefit, and are thus on a low spiritual level. Mochin gadlus are people who have “bigger brains”; their actions are motivated solely to serve Hashem and do His will. This accurately describes the people who tied sheep to their beds. They put a large amount of trust and faith in Hashem by listening to His commandment to take these animals, considered gods by the Egyptians, without fearing the consequences. Thus, in a sense, this miracle was greater than any other, for it was a direct result of their courage to serve G-d in the face of threats to their lives. In comparison to the other miracles they experienced, the role they played for this one was of greater significance.

Calling this particular day Shabbat haGadol seems a bit peculiar for another reason. We are told that Shabbat itself is called the yom hagadol the great day, as it says, “Ki yom zeh gadol vikadosh hu - for this day [Shabbat] is great and holy.” It must be that this particular Shabbat is even greater than the others. How are we to understand this Shabbat being even more significant?



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Exploring the nature of Shabbat itself will help us answer this question. Perhaps the most well known active mitzvah of Shabbat is to make kiddush. The text of Kiddush echoes the language of the Ten Commandments, both the version in Exodus [ch. 20] as well as the version in Deuteronomy [Ch. 5]. These versions are similar, but differ by emphasizing different motivations for Shabbat observance. The first recognizes that G-d created the world. We observe Shabbat *zecher limaaseh bereishit*, in remembrance of the act of creation. By doing so we testify that the world has a Creator. The second asks us to safeguard Shabbat *zecher liyitziat mitzrayim*, in remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt, in effect testifying that G-d takes an active role in determining life as we know it. Thus, Shabbat itself is a day of testimony. By keeping Shabbat, we express a belief about the nature of the world, and our belief in G-d as Producer and Director of all that transpires.

These beliefs directly contradict ancient Egyptian values. Earlier we made reference to the fact that the Egyptians worshipped sheep. Rabbi Zvi Elimelech Shapiro of Dynov [Dec. 1841] in his magnificent work called *Benei Yissaschar*, ties together all the connections between Shabbat, the Egyptians' god and the Jewish people.

As Rabbi Shapiro explains, ancient Egypt was very much in tune with *mazalot*, or the constellations in the sky. The Egyptians believed that the *mazalot* above them, each imbued with a unique strength, nature, and personality, together controlled events on earth and the lives of earth's inhabitants. Of all the heavenly beings, the Egyptians worshipped the *mazal* called *Tileh* [lamb] most fervently; for they thought that it was the most powerful. They believed that nothing had the ability to supplant any of the *mazalot*, let alone *Tileh*, the "choicest" one. However the Jews, through the events of the Exodus from Egypt, boldly turned this belief system upside-down. Acting upon the orders of the Supreme G-d, Jews took sheep, representing this most esteemed and feared Egyptian *mazal*, and tied them to their bedposts. And to what end? To prepare them for slaughter and throw their blood in the manner prescribed by G-d [for the blood of a being (human, animal or otherwise) represents the strength, life and vitality; its very living force]. This was a very grandiose way of expressing the idea that the *mazalot* are not all powerful, but rather are themselves guided, controlled and manipulated by G-d Himself, for it was He who designed them and enabled them with specific properties.

On what day were the Jews commanded to take the sheep? On the tenth of Nisan, on Shabbat, for the ultimate lesson of Shabbat is to teach the Jewish people that G-d is the Creator of the world. Therefore, this Shabbat is called the Great Shabbat, *Shabbat haGadol*, for on this day, was demonstrated the fact that G-d is the greatest of all.

Shabbat Shalom

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