



THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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SHABBAT HAGADOL

The Great, But Not Yet Holy, Sabbath

There are many steps that we ascend on our journey towards the holiday of Passover. It is as if it is impossible to just plunge into the holiday without proper preparation. These steps include the many special Sabbaths that precede the holiday. They include the *Parshiyot* of *Shekalim*, *Zachor*, *Parah*, and *HaChodesh*, and they culminate this week with *Shabbat HaGadol*, the Great Sabbath, the final Sabbath before Passover.

I fondly remember the wise old rabbi whose little *shul* I frequented before I became a *shul* rabbi myself, back in Baltimore. His name was Rav Yitzchok Sternhell, may he rest in peace. He had many astute observations, only a few of which I recall.

In one of these insights, he pointed out that when one has a question about some aspect of Torah study and finds a single answer, then, essentially, there is no longer a question. It is answered, plainly and simply, once and for all.

But when one has a question and there are many answers, then the question remains as strong as when it was posed. There is no need for many answers when there is one correct answer. The multitude of answers indicates that not one of them was sufficient enough to completely resolve the question posed.

One question that has received many answers over the centuries is, “Why is this Sabbath called the Great Sabbath, *Shabbat HaGadol*?” One answer points to the closing phrase of this week’s selection from the Prophets, the *Haftarah*, which reads:

“Behold, I will send you
Elijah the Prophet
Before the coming

Of the great and awesome day of the Lord.”
(*Malachi* 3:24)

Since we read of the “the great day,” we call it “the Great Sabbath.”

Another approach emphasizes that on the Sabbath preceding the Exodus, the Jews were finally able to prepare lambs and goats for the paschal offering. They did so in the face of their Egyptian slave masters, for whom those animals were considered divine. To be able to fearlessly defy their former slave masters was a “great miracle.” Hence the term “the Great Sabbath.”

לעילוי נשמות

בת שבע בת י'קב אריה ע"ה
Bat Sheva Rubinstein a"h

On her 30th yahrzeit - 26th Nisan

Mark & Livia Rottenberg

The list of answers goes on, and space does not allow even a small sample of the others. But I would like to share with you, dear reader, a very creative approach to the term “the Great Sabbath.” This approach is creative because, contrary to all the other interpretations with which I am familiar, this approach sees this week’s Sabbath not as greater than all the others of the year, but as lesser.

The creative commentator to whom I refer is the Chassidic Rebbe, Rabbi Shaul of Modzitz, may he rest in peace. He was known for his prodigious repertoire of musical compositions. The musical creativity of Rabbi Shaul was expressed in his ability to surprise the ear of the listener. His homiletic creativity also contains the element of surprise, of divergent thinking. Using this same divergent thinking, he held a very unique and thought-provoking approach to the Passover *Haggadah*.

Most of the reasons that are given for the fact that this week’s Sabbath is called the Great Sabbath insist upon the superiority of this particular Sabbath over all the others of the year. Rabbi Shaul diverges from all these other explanations and provocatively suggests that this week’s Sabbath is inferior to all the others.

Therein he asks the question, “Why do we praise this Sabbath as ‘great?’ Is every Sabbath not ‘great?’ In the special blessing that we incorporate in the Grace After Meals, the *Birkat HaMazon*, every Sabbath, we refer to ‘this great and holy Sabbath... this day which is great and holy before Thee...’”

His surprising answer is that every Sabbath of the year is both “great and holy,” but this final Sabbath before Passover is, in a certain sense, merely “great” and not “holy.”

For every Sabbath, argues Rabbi Shaul,

has two components. We might refer to them as the physical component and the spiritual component. The former is built in to the cosmos and can be traced back to the verses in *Genesis* 2:3. There, God blesses and hallows the Sabbath as part of the process of creation. That is the Sabbath of the physical rest and gives recognition to God’s creative powers and omnipotence. It is “holy,” but only potentially so.

The second aspect of the Sabbath is a spiritual one; “*zecher lyetziat Mizrayim*,” a memorial day celebrating the Exodus from Egypt. This has to do with the experience of freedom, of becoming a nation, of undertaking an historical mission.

On this last Sabbath before Passover, the Exodus had not yet taken place. And so, the Sabbath was merely “*gadol*,” “great.” On that Sabbath, the Jew could only celebrate

his freedom from utter bondage and his ability to defy his former slave master. That was “great,” but not yet “holy.” He did not yet have a sense of spiritual freedom and religious destiny.

Only after the first day of Passover, with the actual departure from Egypt, and the march into the desert and towards Mount Sinai, could the Jews begin to sense that something “holy” was in store for them. Only then could they begin to anticipate not just “great” freedom, but “holy” freedom, in order to sense that something spiritual and “holy” was in store.

After that first Passover day, and with every ensuing Sabbath since, the Jewish people experienced not just “a great Sabbath,” but a “great and holy Sabbath.”

Sabbath prior to Passover is “great,” but not yet fully “holy.” After Passover, every Sabbath is transformed and is not only “great,” but “great and holy.” Passover and all that it symbolizes adds a new dimension to every Sabbath that follows it.

This week, then, we remember a Sabbath long ago that was the last of the merely “great” Sabbaths: A Sabbath only of respite from slavish toil, of relief from physical slavery. Next week, after we tell the full narrative of the Exodus and experience all of the *Seder* night’s rich symbolism and profound lessons, we will be able to celebrate a complete Sabbath, a Sabbath of spiritual freedom and full religious significance. Not just “*Shabbat HaGadol*,” but “*Shabbat HaGadol VeHaKadosh*.” ■

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