

THE GREAT SHABBOS

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Shabbos HaGadol

Many reasons are given for the unique name of this week's Shabbos - Shabbos haGadol, the Great Shabbos. After all, aren't all Shabboses great?

The Tur (chapter 430) explains: We find in the Torah (Shemos 12:3) that on the 10th day of Nisan the Jews were commanded to take a sheep and set it aside for the Korban Pesach (Pesach offering). They did so - the head of each family took a sheep and tied it to the foot of his bed. When the Egyptians saw what they were doing, they were mystified. "What are you doing with these sheep?" they asked. "We are putting them aside in order to slaughter them as an offering for Hashem (G-d)," they replied. Now the sheep was the god of the Egyptians, and thus the Egyptians were extremely agitated by the Jews telling them this. Under normal circumstances, they would have incited riots and pogroms against the Jews. Yet, for reasons unknown even to them, they found themselves unable to react. ("For fear [of the Jews] had fallen upon them," (Tehillim/Psalms 105:38).) Now we know that the day Bnei Yisrael (the Jews) left Mitzrayim (Egypt), the 15th day of Nisan, was on a Thursday (Seder Olam). Thus, the miracle of the Egyptians' non-reaction occurred on Shabbos, five days earlier. This is why it is called Shabbos haGadol - because of the Great Miracle which occurred on this Shabbos.

Some question this: If so, why was Shabbos chosen to commemorate this miracle? True, the miracle occurred on Shabbos that year, but wouldn't it have been more appropriate to designate the 10th day of Nisan, no matter when it falls, as the day of commemoration?

They answer that the neis (miracle) only transpired because it was Shabbos. Normally, there would have been nothing so unusual about the Jews putting sheep aside. What caught the Egyptians' eyes was that it was Shabbos, and they knew that the Jews were forbidden to handle live animals on Shabbos. Their interest was piqued, and they asked, and that's how the whole miracle came about. Thus the neis is attributed to Shabbos.

Others answer that under normal circumstances the Egyptians' questions would have posed no problem for the Jews. In matters of life-and-death, one is permitted to lie. Thus, they could easily have fabricated an excuse as to why they were setting these animals aside. Talmud Yerushalmi (the

Jerusalem Talmud; Demai ch. 4) states, however, that on Shabbos even an unlearned Jew fears to tell a lie, out of fear of the sanctity of Shabbos. This is why Shabbos was set aside to remember the neis; on a weekday none of this would ever have happened. [The above reasons are quoted in Sefer haToda'ah]

Rabbi Tzvi Elimelech of Dinov in his sefer Bnei Yisasschar (Nisan 3:2) quotes Sha'alos veTeshuvos Shemen haMor who offers the following explanation regarding the name "Shabbos haGadol." The Torah commands us to start counting Sefiras Ha- omer (the counting of the 49 days between Pesach and Shavuot) "mi-macharas ha-Shabbos, on the day after Shabbos. (Vayikra 23:15)" Translated literally, it appears we should begin counting sefirah on the Sunday (- the day after Shabbos) following the first day of Pesach. Yet Chazal, our Sages, tell us that this is not correct. In this instance, they say, "Shabbos" does not refer to the seventh day of the week, but rather to the first day of Pesach, which is also called Shabbos. Thus, no matter which day of the week it comes out, we begin counting on the second day of Pesach.

The Tzidokim (Sadducees), a sect which interpreted the Written Torah in its most literal sense, and refused to accept Torah she-ba'al peh (Oral Torah), understood this pasuk literally, and thus maintained that one must begin counting on the Sunday following the first day of Pesach.

In many instances, Chazal instruct us to do certain things in order to refute the corrupt view of the Tzidokim. This is why, he explains, they gave the name of the Shabbos before Pesach "Shabbos haGadol, the Great Shabbos," implying that there is another, "smaller" Shabbos following (the first day of Pesach which is also called "Shabbos"). It is of lesser kedushah (sanctity) than a regular Shabbos day, inasmuch as it is permissible to perform on it work relating to food.

Rabbi Aaron of Belz zt"l explains the name "Shabbos haGadol" as follows: The Midrash (Shemos Rabbah 1:28) relates that even in Egypt, the Jews kept Shabbos. How was this possible? Moshe appealed to Pharaoh that if he would not allow his slaves at least one day of rest during the week, their stamina would be weakened and they would be unable to continue exerting themselves. Pharaoh saw the logic in this, and decided to give the Jews one "day-off" a week. Moshe then chose Shabbos to be their "Yom Menuchah - day of rest."

Thus, although the Jews did not work on Shabbos in Egypt, they didn't actually "keep" Shabbos. They were not observing the laws of Shabbos because of the mitzvah (commandment), but rather because it was their day-of-rest. This is referred to as "eino metzuvah ve-oseh, one who does without being commanded." Now that they were about to leave Egypt, however, Moshe revealed to them the true reason he had declared the seventh day as a day-of-rest - because it is a mitzvah which Hashem wants us to observe. This Shabbos, the tenth of Nisan, was the first Shabbos the Jews observed as metzuvah ve-oseh, ones who were commanded to do so.

Chazal say (Kiddushin 31a) that one who performs a mitzvah out of obligation is GREATER (gadol) than one who does a mitzvah voluntarily. [The reason for this is that one who performs a mitzvah

voluntarily experiences no moral conflict - there is no yetzer hara (evil inclination) telling him not to do it.] This, then, is why this week's Shabbos is called "Shabbos haGadol, the Great Shabbos," for it was on this Shabbos that Bnei Yisrael achieved the greatness of keeping Shabbos because it is a mitzvah, and not just as a day-of-rest.

This Shabbos is great in many ways. Above all, it is great, for it is on this Shabbos that we have the opportunity to make our last spiritual preparations for Yom Tov. This coming week we will likely be occupied with our material preparations for Pesach, so let's take advantage of Shabbos to do a bit of spiritual bedikas chametz (search for leaven) - getting ourselves into the right frame-of-mind for Yom Tov.

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