

THE GREAT SHABBOS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

This Shabat is the great Shabat - Shabat Hagadol. Shabat Hagadol this year falls on erev Pesach. It is really most appropriate that Shabat will be already part of the Pesach experience for it is Shabat that truly provides us with the key to the appreciation of Pesach and freedom.

On the first Shabat Hagadol - tradition teaches us that the Exodus itself that year fell on a Thursday - Jews took their paschal lambs and tied them to their bedposts to prepare for the Pesach sacrifice that would herald their deliverance from Egyptian bondage.

The lamb was a symbol of Egypt, of its gods and empire and vaunted powers. The taking of the paschal lamb was therefore most risky and dangerous for the Jews. Apparently freedom and independence cannot be gained without risk and danger.

Only a people willing to risk comfort and even life itself for its freedom and independence earns that freedom and independence.

Thus it was the actions of Israel on that first Shabat Hagadol that guaranteed the deliverance from bondage and Egyptian slavery that very same week. The importance of the paschal sacrifice is directly traceable to this idea of risk taking and danger inherent in any drive for freedom and self-improvement.

One of the reasons that this Shabat is called Gadol -great and large - is because of the importance of this lesson in how freedom is achieved. Freedom is a great and noble goal both in terms of personal and national life. But the Torah wished us to know its price and cost. Hence the Shabat Hagadol that precedes Pesach.

Shabat itself is a great risk taking adventure, independent of the story of Egypt, the Exodus and Pesach. Being idle and economically non-productive for one-seventh of the week appears to be a dangerous course for one attempting to earn a living for himself and one's family. Shabat has always been a sacrifice for its observers. Its benefits were not easily known or describable to outside observation. Especially in a world where for millennia Saturday was considered to be an ordinary day of the work week,

Shabat stood out as being an anomaly and an irrational waste of time and opportunity. Therefore Shabat itself was always seen in Jewish life as being gadol - the defining issue of Judaism itself.

The seeming sacrifice of Shabat observance itself achieved Jewish self-identity and true internal

independence over the centuries, in a fashion that has been unequalled in the human experience.

It is the greatness of the Shabat, its ability to bring serenity and hope to a person and a family that sparks all other positive activities in our lives. As we say in Lecha Dodi - "For it -Shabat - is the source and core of all blessings." Freedom without Shabat only leads one to different and more subtle forms of tyranny but tyranny nevertheless.

That is why aside from all of the physical, cleaning and food preparations for Pesach there comes Shabat Hagadol to prepare us mentally and spiritually for the great holiday of redemption.

Shabat shalom Chag kasher v'sameach

Rabbi Berel Wein

Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com