

Torah Table Talk
**Past, Present or Future:
 What is *Shabbat HaGadol*?**
 Parshat Tzav/Shabbat HaGadol
 Leviticus 6:1 – 8:36/Malachai 3:4 – 24



*Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt
 in memory of their grandson, Oren Jacob Brandt-Rauf.
 "He was the perfect child."*

This Shabbat is also *Shabbat HaGadol*, the Sabbath prior to Passover. While there is no special Torah reading recited on the day as we have had with the four special Sabbaths in previous weeks, there is a special Haftorah that we read on this occasion. It is also customary for Rabbis to offer a major address to their congregations on this occasion dealing with the laws and the significance of Passover. But why do we call this day *Shabbat HaGadol*? What does it commemorate? Some believe that the special name for this *Shabbat* is related to the final verses of this *Haftorah*. And what is the connection between *Shabbat HaGadol* and the *Seder* table. We will explore these issues in this week's TTT.

Malachi 4: 23- 24

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of **the great and terrible day of the Lord**; (*Yom Adonai Hagadol V'hanorah*). And he shall turn the heart of the parents to the children, and the heart of the children to their parents, lest I come and strike the land with a curse.

Past Tense

Rabbi Ephraim Buchwald, (The National Jewish Outreach Program Website)

One of the traditional reasons for the name recorded by Rabbi Chill is that the tenth of Nisan in the year of the Exodus was Shabbat. It was on that day that, as recorded in Exodus 12, that the Almighty called upon the Jews to take a sheep to their homes and keep it there until the 14th of Nisan, at which time they were to slaughter it in order to prepare it for the Pascal sacrifice. This act of taking the sheep on the part of the enslaved Hebrews was not at all a simple act. It was, in effect, a great act of defiance. After all, the Egyptians worshipped sheep as their G-d. And so the timorous Hebrew slaves were bidden to take the sheep, in defiance of their masters, in defiance of the entire theology of Egypt, and slaughter it before the Egyptians' eyes. Hence, the Sabbath is called *Shabbat Hagadol*, the great Sabbath, because it was on this Shabbat that the Jews expressed their defiance and declared their independence.

Rabbi David Dov Meisels, Based on the Haggadah Commentary, Reiach Dudaim

Shabbat HaGadol is the day on which Moses encountered the Presence of God at the Burning Bush. This is based on the assumption that it was a three day journey from Egypt to Sinai. Since Aaron came to meet Moses at the Mountain, and they then traveled back to Egypt (another three days) it would have been the tenth of Nissan -- this assumes that the judgment of Egypt began exactly one year before the actual Exodus on the fifteenth of *Nissan*. Aaron would have traveled on the 10th, 11th and 12th, and together they would have traveled back on the 13th, 14th and arrived on the fifteenth. *Shabbat HaGadol* then is a celebration of Moses vision at the bush which he refers to as a *Marah HaGadol*-- a great appearance. Thus we have *Shabbat "HaGadol."*

1. How is Shabbat HaGadol an appropriate introduction to the celebration of Passover according to this

Midrash? In what way did the Israelites defy the Egyptians and assert their own identity by setting aside a sheep for the Passover sacrifice? Why does Rabbi Meisels think we celebrate Shabbat HaGadol? What is considered to be the reason for the word *Gadol*?

2. Compare this act with other acts of defiance throughout history. When is it appropriate to act in defiance of the government or other powers in society?
 3. If this event occurred on the tenth of Nisan why do we celebrate the event on Shabbat instead of on the day it actually occurred?
 4. How is this explanation different from the previous one? What is the difference between emphasizing defiance vs. divine experience?
 5. How does *Shabbat HaGadol* mark the beginning of Israel's redemption from slavery? What event inaugurated this process of liberation and why? Was it a divine act or a human act?
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Present Tense

Shulchan Aruch, Orech Chaim 430:1

The *Sabbath* before Passover is called *Shabbat HaGadol* because of the miracle that happened upon that day. *Ramah* – It is the custom to read the Haggadah from “We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt” until “To atone for all our sins.”

Rabbi Isaac Klein, A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice

A most cogent and yet novel explanation is that the people used to return from the synagogue later than usual on this Sabbath because of the unusually long discourse that was customary on this day. Thus this Sabbath seemed "great," i.e., longer than the other Sabbaths (*Shibolei Haleqet*, sec. 205).

Greenspan's Theory

Somewhere in my studies a teacher conjectured that originally the name of this *Shabbat* was written as an abbreviation: *Shabbat HaGa'* – for *Shabbat Haggadah* since we are supposed to read the *Haggadah* on this day in preparation for Pesach. Somehow, possibly because of the final verses of the Haftorah, *Haggadah* became *HaGadol*.

1. Which of the theories on the origins of the name *Shabbat HaGadol* makes most sense to you? Why? Which is most meaningful?
 2. What issues and topics should we consider as part of the *Seder* this year? What is happening in the world that we should incorporate into our *Seder*?
 3. Why do you think we celebrate *Shabbat HaGadol*? Note that grammatically it can not mean the great Shabbat which would be written *HaShabbat HaGadol*. It must be translated the Sabbath of the Great. What does “the great” refer to? Consider all the possibilities...
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Future Tense

Rabbi Shimon Apisdorf

Our tradition teaches that as history approaches the climactic era of universal peace and brotherhood, it will be Elijah the Prophet who announces the heralding of the messianic era. Additionally, when the Talmud is unable to definitively resolve certain questions of law or practice, it often states that the question have to wait for Elijah. With the advent of the final era, one of Elijah's roles will be to resolve all those lingering scholarly quandaries.

Rabbi Barry Dov Lerner

The cup of Elijah is a problem in Talmudic law. There is debate over whether four or five cups of wine should be drunk at the Passover Seder. The verses on which the four expressions of deliverance are based apparently also contain a fifth expression of deliverance. So, we fill the fifth cup, but we don't drink from it - the perfect Jewish compromise. We call the fifth cup "the cup for Elijah." The idea is that when the messiah comes (Elijah is expected to precede the messiah), we'll find out which opinion is correct regarding drinking four or five cups at the Seder. In some customs, each person at the Seder contributes some wine to the fifth cup, thus everyone shares in the messianic hope. In others, wine from the cup of Elijah is mixed with the fourth cup. But "Elijah" isn't explained - just used.

1. What is the connection between the future event and the prophet Elijah? Why of all the prophets does Malachi single out the prophet Elijah even though he had already been dead for centuries?
2. Which of these two explanations above for the cup of Elijah do you find more satisfying?
3. What other occasions do we associate with Elijah in Jewish life? Do you think there is a common theme to all these occasions?
4. How does Passover both celebrate the past and anticipate the future? What is the great and terrible day of the Lord? Why would people associate this Shabbat prior to the celebration of Passover with the great and terrible day of the Lord?
5. What does Malachi mean when he says that God will cause the heart of the children and parents to turn to one another? How is this idea of parents and children reunited and reconnected expressed through the Passover Seder? How can the Passover Seder be a paradigm for encouraging intergenerational dialogue and understanding?

Glossary

Rabbi David Dov Meisels: Hasidic Rabbi associated with the Kotzker Rebbe who lived in Poland and passed away in 1876. He is the author of a commentary on the Haggadah called the *Reiach Dudaim*, the Aroma of Poppies

Shulchan Aruch, Orech Chaim, Important code of Jewish law published by Joseph Karo in the sixteenth century. The first section of this work is called *Orech Chaim*, Way of Life. It deals with prayer, daily practices, Shabbat and holidays. It also includes the Rama, the addenda of Rabbi Moses Isserles, Karo's Ashkenazic counterpart.

Announcing a New Haggadah Commentary

I am pleased to announce that I have just publishing a new commentary on the Haggadah as I do each year. This will be the fifth year that I have created such a commentary. Unlike past years, however, this year's commentary is original. It is called the HaHa Haggadah, a Commentary of Learning and Laughter. It has been published in conjunction with *Around the Table, A User Friendly Haggadah*.

If you would a copy of these Haggadot please send me your address and a check for \$18 to cover costs. Checks should be made out to the Rabbi's Discretionary Fund at The Oceanside Jewish Center, 2860 Brower Avenue, Oceanside, New York 11572. If you would prefer, I can send the text as attached PDF file. Be warned – The commentary is 130 pages and the *Around the Table* is about 50 pages.

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