

Geulas Yisrael #48 The "First" Shabbat Hagadol

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The nickname of "Shabbat hagadol" is drawn from many different customs. Traditionally, on the Shabbat prior to Pesach, large gatherings assembled to listen to lengthy shiurim detailing the intricate laws of Pesach. For all these reasons it was referred to a large, long and important Shabbat- or Shabbat Hagadol. Aside from these various customs, the name Shabbat hagadol is based upon an actual Shabbat which preceded the epic events of Pesach. The extraordinary circumstances of that original Shabbat are annually commemorated on Shabbat hagadol.

The exodus from Egypt, on Wednesday night, the 15th of Nissan, and lasted through Thursday morning. Four days earlier, on Shabbat the 10th of Nissan, liberation was launched. In commemoration of that redemptive liftoff, we mark the Shabbat before Pesach as Shabbat hagadol, even if it occurs on a different calendar date of Nissan. That original Shabbat hagadol shifted the tide of our redemption.

On the original Shabbat hagadol, we implemented divine instructions about "preparing" lambs for the eventual korban pesach sacrifice four days later. In truth, four days aren't necessary to purchase, or even to inspect a korban-designated lamb. This extended preparation was more transformative than it was practical.

Enduring over two centuries of hatred and subjugation, we had sunken into the depths of Egyptian pagan culture. Chazal laud our remarkable preservation of Jewish names, dress and language, implying that, in general, we suffered complete religious collapse. It is difficult to blame us for our religious deterioration, as we had weathered two hundred years of exploitation and bondage. However innocent we may have been, we were still in no condition to author redemption.

Ideally, Hashem desires a redemptive partnership between Man and G-d. Redemption repairs broken human history and human beings should be co-authors in rescripting their own broken narrative. Unfortunately, though, in our depressed condition, Hashem could not demand much

from us. Our voices had been muted and our imaginations had been shuttered.

Though little was expected of us, Hashem still requested one small redemptive gesture. One minor act of courage and defiance could jump-start the liberation. Selecting an animal-korban would ridicule the pervasive pagan culture. As animals were revered and worshipped, designating one for slaughter would debunk pagan dogma. By designating animals for slaughter, the slaves could take the first step toward reformation. It would not be revolutionary, but it would still excite human redemptive effort. On Shabbat hagadol our redemptive spirit was awakened. Redemption is always sweeter when it is a partnership. That partnership was forged on the first Shabbat hagadol.

So it was in Egypt and so it is today. For thousands of years, we have waited patiently for the wheels of redemption to begin turning. We suffered many years of persecution and discrimination and yet we waited with faith. Finally, growing tired of waiting we took human initiative - rallying Jews across the world to return home. Actually, Hashem was waiting for us to take the first step and He reciprocated with boundless mercy and with astonishing miracles. What a partnership! Just the type Hashem covets.

Something additional changed during that fateful first Shabbat hagadol. Designating lambs for slaughter infuriated the Egyptians. Suffering months of humiliating and painful makkot, the Egyptians were enraged at the prospect of their darling animal deities being disgraced by Jewish slaves. This horrible insult could not be tolerated, and the Egyptians threatened us with violence.

On that Shabbat hagadol, Hashem first extended His divine protection over His people. During the previous year, we had been spared the terrible afflictions which cursed the Egyptians. However, we were a clear sideshow to the main event of Hashem battering the prideful Egyptians. Shabbat hagadol marked the first direct violent faceoff between Jew and Egyptian, and Hashem shielded His people in safety.

Full redemption from Egypt was still four days away. On this shabbat Hashem treated us to a preliminary mini-redemption, which foreshadowed the complete salvation. Redemption is a radical shift and

is sometimes difficult to absorb or to comprehend. A nation of slaves, who had only known bondage and repression, could not be expected to shift “immediately” into redemptive mode or to easily understand the connotations of being “chosen”. Redemption in Egypt was staged: we first enjoyed a pre-redemptive miracle to acclimate us to liberty and to divine providence. Having tasted redemption on Shabbat, we were mentally prepared for the historical metamorphosis four days later.

So it was in Egypt and so it is today. We spent two millennia disenfranchised from history and living in a darkened world with dimmed divine presence. It is not so easy to shift from the tunnel of history into the radiance of destiny. Our eyes must slowly adjust to the blinding sun!

We are well on the road to full redemption. Hashem has gifted us with pre-redemptive miracles as a “lead-in” to ultimate geulah. The remarkable events of 1948, and the ensuing 70 years of supernatural growth are gradually conditioning us to a brave new redeemed world. We are slowly learning (sometimes too slowly) about life in a redemptive era.

A comprehensive and quick redemption is sometimes “too much too soon”. As He did in Egypt, Hashem is easing us into redemptive mode. Shabbat hagadol was the first phase of a redemption which would fully blossom four days later. We have experienced our own “Shabbat hagadol moment” and are still waiting for the next phase. Evidently, it will take more than four days to unfold. That is all right. We are people who have learned how to wait.