

The Month of Nissan: Tapping Into the Energy of Shabbat HaGadol (A Once a Year Opportunity)

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Introduction

We did it! We got ready for Pesach, (almost at least). The house is almost shining waiting for *bedikat hachametz* – Checking for *chametz* this Sunday night. In a corner of the kitchen the *chametz* box filled with leftover cookies, cereal, and noodles displays its ugly evil face. Soon it will be consumed if not by hungry folks then by the flames of fire, ready in the backyard. I love to gaze at my clean, spotless, cabinets and window sills with the spider web and the old dried up leaves of the plants removed. Here and there the paint is peeling, well, nothing is perfect. Perhaps before next Pesach we will do a paint job. As I sweep up the sweepings in the kitchen and notes the few remaining jobs to do after Shabbat I sigh in relief. Looking back over the last two weeks of exhausting and strenuous toil, I feel the freedom of accomplishment. Rather than slaving for a foreign master I worked for Hashem and for myself, exhilarating in fulfilling the mitzvah of removing *chametz*, getting in a bit of spring-cleaning as a *hidur* mitzvah (doing more than what is required literally ‘beautification of the mitzvah.’) This, extra spring cleaning I promise to do only when I can, knowing the famous dictum, “Dust is not *chametz* and the children are not a Pesach sacrifice.” So if doing extra spring cleaning is going to wipe us out so we will be grumpy or even become threatening to our health then we must stick to the *chametz* cleaning proper. This year cleaning it was a bonding experience as it should between the members of my family who worked well together as a team with me, naturally, as the chief master. Now we look forward to *Shabbat HaGadol* – The Great Shabbat prior to Pesach.

To Slaughter Their God

The Shabbat before Pesach is called *Shabbat HaGadol*, because of the miracle that took place on that day. On Shabbat *HaGadol*, (the first year it was on the 10th of Nissan), the enslaved Jews took the paschal lamb – the Egyptian deity – and paraded it through the streets of Egypt past the infuriated Egyptians.¹ Miraculously the Jews were able to tie the Paschal lambs to their bedposts and ultimately slaughter these Egyptian gods, to eat them as the *korban Pesach*, (Pesach Sacrifice) on the night of the Exodus.² When the Egyptians would ask, “What is this lamb for?” The Jews would answer, “To be slaughtered as a Pesach sacrifice according to G-d’s command.”³ The Egyptians would then gnash their teeth in anger without being able to utter a sound,⁴ or stop the Jews from slaughtering their god.

¹ *Shemot* 12:3.

² *Shemot* 12:6-11.

³ *Shemot* 12:6.

⁴ Rabbi Eliyahu Kitov, *The Book of the Heritage, Shabat Hagadol* p. 149.

The Pascal Lamb and the Astrological Sign of Aries

The month of Nissan is under the influence of the astrological sign of Aries (the ram).⁵ Explicitly during this time when the power of the sign of the ram was strongest, Israel was commanded to slaughter and eat it, to prove that Hashem's power nullifies the power of the ram.⁶

Additional Reason's for the Name *Shabbat HaGadol*

1. We keep Shabbat to remember that Hashem created the world, and also to commemorate the Exodus. The second reason was only added on the last Shabbat in Egypt – Shabbat *HaGadol*. On this day the reasons for keeping Shabbat were increased, to make the Shabbat itself greater.
2. "Just as a child is called *gadol* when he becomes of the age to keep mitzvot, so is the day, when the entire Jewish people kept their first mitzvot, called *gadol*."
3. Just as Shabbat is separated from the profane work of the week, so on Shabbat *HaGadol* did Israel separate themselves from idol-worship.
4. The *haftorah* for Shabbat *HaGadol* from *Malachi*, Chapter three culminates in the promise that Hashem will send us "Eliyahu the prophet before the coming of the Great (*HaGadol*) and awesome day of Hashem."⁷

Why Shabbat *HaGadol* and not the Tenth of Nissan?

Why do we commemorate the miracle of the Pascal lamb on Shabbat, and not every year on the tenth of Nissan when the event took place, regardless of which day of the week it falls? During Shabbat, each of the ten plagues that Hashem inflicted upon the Egyptians was temporarily suspended. In honor of the greatness of Shabbat, even the plagues 'rested.' On the tenth of Nissan, in the middle of the plague of darkness, the Jewish people led the lambs through the streets of Egypt. Had this event taken place on a weekday instead of on Shabbat, due to the plague of darkness, the Egyptians would not have been able to see what the Jews were doing, and there would have been no need for Hashem to miraculously protect the Jewish people. Therefore, we celebrate Hashem's performance the wondrous miracle of saving the Jews specifically on the Shabbat before Pesach, rather than on the tenth of Nissan, because it was Shabbat that caused the miracle. Had the date not occurred on Shabbat, the entire land would have been engulfed in darkness, and this event would not have been a miracle worthy of commemoration.

⁵ B'nei Yissaschar, *Articles about the Month of Nissan*, 4.

⁶ Ibid.; Rav Yitzchak Arama, *Akeidat Yitzchak*.

⁷ *Malachi* 3:23.

Rabbi Eliyahu Kitov explains that the Egyptians were fully aware that the Israelites kept Shabbat and would not busy themselves with animals on that day. Therefore, when the Egyptians saw them take the sheep and bind it to the bedpost on Shabbat, they were surprised and inquired about it. The Israelites were in great danger at being thus confronted and were saved only by a miracle.⁸ A further reason to remember the miracle on Shabbat and not on the tenth of Nissan is that, forty years later, Miriam died on that day and the well ceased to exist.

The Anniversary of Miriam's Death

The source of water for the Israelites in the desert was the well of Miriam. Its source was at the entrance of the courtyard of the Tabernacle, near the tent of Moshe. The waters of the well would separate into different rivers to form boundaries between each tribe and even between each family, so that everyone knew his personal place and position in the camp of Israel.⁹

Why did the well of Miriam determine the boundaries of Israel?

Miriam was the midwife of the nation of Israel. She gave birth to the redemption. She was the one who molded the Jewish people. Miriam was the mother who enabled her children to find their place and bring forth their full potential. It is, therefore, fitting that she determined the boundaries of each tribe.

What is the spiritual significance that the well dried up on the tenth of Nissan?

On the tenth of Nissan we gained spiritual freedom from the Egyptian exile. This is followed by our physical freedom on Pesach. Thus, Israel went beyond themselves on this day. They freed themselves from their personal boundaries to merge with the Divine.

Shabbat *HaGadol* includes the Spiritual Powers for the Entire Year

Rav Raphael Luria explains that the holiness of Shabbat is beyond time since the worlds rise on Shabbat through the revelation of the root of emanation. The holiness of all the holidays derives from the power of Shabbat that precedes it. The first holiday that we celebrated as a people, is Pesach. Since Pesach is the head of all our holidays, the other holidays receive their sustenance from it. First we bring holiness into the head and from the head into the rest of the body. Therefore, when we draw down the holiness for the holiday of Pesach, on Shabbat preceding Pesach, its lights include the holiness for all of the other holidays.¹⁰ From this we may conclude that we should be extra careful to honor Shabbat *HaGadol* properly, as this will enable us to draw down more holiness not only for the holiday of Pesach but for all the other holidays as well. As difficult as it may be this last Shabbat before Pesach, let us make the greatest effort to light the Shabbat candles at the preferred time. Let us tap into the energy of Shabbat *HaGadol* which occurs only once a year by being careful to speak only words of holiness, avoiding mundane activities, and devoting ourselves to prayer and Torah learning!

⁸ Rabbi Eliyahu Kitov, *The Book of the Heritage, Shabat Hagadol*, p. 152.

⁹ *Yalkut Shimoni, Pekudei*, Chapter 40, Allusion 426.

¹⁰ Rabbi Moshe Rephael Luria, *Seder Leil Shemurim*, Article about *Shabbat Hagadol*, pp.21-22.