

Parshiot Metzora – Shabbat Hagadol, 5776, 2016:

Understanding the Name “Shabbat Hagadol”

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Like many other *meforshim* (Torah commentators), the second Bobover Rebbe, HaRav Ben-Zion Halberstam *zatzal* (1874-1941), analyzed the term “*Shabbat Hagadol*.” He began his quest for understanding with Tosafot’s famous statement that appears in *Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 87b s.v. v’oto*:

The reason why we call the Shabbat before Passover, “*Shabbat Hagadol*,” is because of the great miracle (*nes gadol*) that took place on that day in accordance with the words of the Midrash: When the Jewish people took their paschal lambs on that very Shabbat, all of the first born sons of the nations of the world gathered together before the Jewish people and asked them: “Why are you doing this?” The Jewish people responded: “This is a Passover offering to Hashem Who will go forth and kill the first born of the Egyptians.” They [i.e. the first born of the Egyptians] went before their fathers and Pharaoh to ask them to send forth the Jewish people and they refused. As a result, the first born of the Egyptians started a war and killed many of them. Thus the text states: “To Him Who smote the Egyptians with [i.e. at the hands of] their firstborn.” (*Sefer Tehillim* 136:10, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, brackets my own)

At this juncture, Rav Halberstam presented a classic question that was asked by a great number of commentators on Tosafot’s above-stated explanation: “If this is the case [i.e. that we are commemorating a great miracle], this Shabbat should have been called *Shabbat HaNes* (the Shabbat of the Miracle) – and, therefore, what is the relevance of the name “*Shabbat Hagadol*?” (“the Great Shabbat”). (*Kedushat Tzion, Pesach, Shabbat Hagadol*, new edition, page 57, translation and brackets my own).

Rav Halberstam answered this question by pointing his readers to the *Mechilta d'Rabbi*

Yishmael, the halachic Midrash on *Sefer Shemot*:

“And I will be glorified through Pharaoh...” (*Sefer Shemot* 14:4) The text is telling us that when the Omnipresent One punishes the [evil] nations of the world, His name becomes greater (*shemo mitgadel*) throughout the world. As it is said: “And I will place a sign upon them, and I will send from them refugees to the nations, Tarshish, Pul, and Lud, who draw the bow, to Tubal and Javan, the distant islands, who did not hear of My fame and did not see My glory, and they shall recount My glory among the nations.” (*Sefer Yeshayahu* 66:19) ...” (Parashat Beshalach, *Mesechta d’Vahayah*, Parasha 1, translation and brackets my own)

Rashi (1040-1105) also focused upon this Midrash in his exegesis of *Sefer Shemot* 14:4, and summarized some of its other verses in the following manner:

And I will be glorified through Pharaoh: When the Holy One blessed be He wreaks vengeance upon the wicked, His name becomes magnified and glorified. So it [Scripture] says: “And I will judge against him, etc.” and afterwards [the prophet says], “And I will magnify and sanctify Myself and I will be known, etc.” (*Sefer Yechezkel* 38:22-23) And [Scripture similarly] says: “There he broke the arrows of the bow,” [which refers to Sennacherib’s defeat,] and afterwards [i.e., the result of that], “G-d is known in Judah” (*Sefer Tehillim* 76:2,4) And [Scripture similarly] says: “The L-rd is known for the judgment that He performed” (*Sefer Tehillim* 9:17).

In my estimation, the *Mechilta*, Rashi, and by extension, Rav Halberstam, are teaching us a powerful *chidush* (novel idea) regarding the name “*Shabbat Hagadol*.” Instead of translating it as “the Great Shabbat,” as the words taken at face value readily suggest, we need to translate it as “the Shabbat of the Great One,” namely the One and Only, *Melech malchei hamelachim* (King of kings), the Holy One blessed be He. As Rav Halberstam so beautifully explained: “According to this [i.e. the *Mechilta*], it is completely proper that we call this Shabbat, “*Shabbat Hagadol*,” since at that time, Hashem rendered judgment against the evil ones and thereby magnified [and sanctified] His Name, may it be blessed, in the Universe.” (Brackets my own) Truly, then, this Shabbat is the Shabbat of the Great One.

Today we find ourselves on the cusp of *Pesach* and the Seder. My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993) described this exalted night of all nights as the time when we are intoxicated by our love for the Almighty. As such, and with Hashem's help, may our new understanding of *Shabbat Hagadol* lead us to even greater depths of appreciation of His mercy, kindness and beneficence, so that we may grow ever stronger in our love for Him. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on YUTorah.org using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email rdb718@gmail.com.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on "*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis," may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.