

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Metzora / Shabbat HaGadol
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Metzora – Shabbat HaGadol

This week is Shabbat HaGadol – the Shabbat before Pesach. The Shulchan Aruch¹ explains that this Shabbat is called Shabbat HaGadol because of a great miracle that happened on that day.

The Tur² elucidates the background to the story. On 10th Nissan, before Bnei Yisrael left Mitzrayim, they were commanded to take a young lamb or goat and put it aside for the korban Pesach. The Midrash³ expounds that Bnei Yisrael took the animals into their houses and tied them to their bedposts. The Egyptians worshipped sheep and goats, so desecrating their god was a great act of courage and faith on the part of Bnei Yisrael. The Egyptians were obviously furious at this behaviour. But a miracle took place and no Egyptians retaliated. The exodus took place on a Thursday. This great miracle took place 5 days before the exodus, which was Shabbat. Thus, the Shabbat before Pesach is called “Shabbat HaGadol”.

The Taz⁴ points out that it is surprising that we don't commemorate this miracle on the 10th of Nissan. We usually commemorate important events based on the date, not on the day of the week upon which it occurred. The Taz explains that another great miracle occurred on the 10th of Nissan. When Yehoshua led Bnei Yisrael into Eretz Yisrael after wandering in the desert for 40 years, the Jordan River split to allow Bnei Yisrael to cross. This wondrous miracle, reminiscent of the more famous splitting of the Reed Sea, reminded Bnei Yisrael that Hashem was still with them and put the fear of G-d (literally) into the hearts of the Canaanite occupants of the land. This miracle also took place on the 10th of Nissan. In order not to confuse the two miracles, it was decided that the miracle of the korban Pesach would instead be commemorated on the Shabbat before Pesach. Perhaps we could suggest another reason. When it comes to happy occasions, we like to spread out our simcha over as many days as possible so as to maximise our joy. On the contrary, when it comes to sad days, we prefer to minimise the sadness – for example we commemorate many sad events on the one day of Tisha B'Av.

However, we may be left wondering why it was the miracle of the korban Pesach that was ‘pushed off’ to Shabbat? That miracle took place before the miracle of the splitting of the Jordan River, so it should take priority. Why wasn't the later miracle moved to Shabbat? I would like to suggest that the korban Pesach miracle is specifically commemorated on the Shabbat before Pesach for another important reason. And from this reason we can learn an important principle about our avodat Hashem at this time of the year.

There is a basic Kabbalistic principle that the beginning of any process contains within it the seeds of the end of that process. For instance, we sing in Lecha Dodi on Friday nights: “Sof ma'aseh b'machshava t'chila” – “last in deed but first in thought”. We see this principle throughout creation, in both the physical and spiritual spheres. For example – a fertilised egg contains all of the necessary DNA for the finished creature, it just needs to be unpackaged. Similarly, Shabbat is not just the end of one week, it is also the launching pad for the week ahead and it contains within it the spiritual seeds of the events of the coming week. We also sing in Lecha Dodi “For it [Shabbat] is the source of blessing”. The Zohar teaches that all the weekday blessings and success come as a result of the Shabbat's holiness.⁵ Each Shabbat contains

¹ Orach HaChaim 430:1

² A Halachic code authored by R' Yaakov ben Asher (1270–1340). The four-part structure of the Tur and its division into chapters (simanim) was used as the basis for the Shulchan Aruch.

³ Yalkut Shimoni, Bo 191.

⁴ A significant commentary on the Shulchan Aruch written by R' David ha-Levi Segal (1586–1667).

⁵ Artscroll Siddur (Ashkenaz), footnote to Lecha Dodi, page 317.

within it the energy for the week ahead. That is why, for example, we bless the new month on the Shabbat before Rosh Chodesh; we commemorate Shabbat Teshuva on the Shabbat before Yom Kippur; and we have a tradition to read part of the Haggadah on the Shabbat before Pesach (which of course is Shabbat HaGadol).⁶

If we commemorated the miracle of the korban Pesach on 10th Nissan, then in some years it will fall out in the same week as the first day of Pesach, and in other years it would fall out in the previous week. But by commemorating the miracle on Shabbat HaGadol, we thus ensure that it always takes place on the Shabbat before Pesach. As we learnt above, the Shabbat before Pesach already contains within it all of the energy for the upcoming festival. So, there must be an important spiritual connection between Shabbat HaGadol and Pesach. What is this link between Shabbat HaGadol and Pesach and what can we learn from it?

A major theme of Pesach is that Hashem fought for us and we remained passive⁷. Spiritually we were on a very low level (the 49th of 50 levels of impurity) and yet Hashem granted us redemption. All of the plagues and great miracles that took place were purely the work of Hashem. Even the Egyptian soldiers recognised this when they said “Hashem is waging war for them [Bnei Yisrael] against Egypt”⁸ just before they drowned in the sea. Bnei Yisrael were merely required to walk across the sea. [As an aside, in contrast, the festivals of Tishrei have the opposite theme – i.e. Bnei Yisrael is **actively** involved in the teshuva process. Thus, Nissan is the time that we are passive and Tishrei is the time that we are active. We also see the same themes in nature and the agricultural cycle. Pesach is in the spring when the plants start to blossom apparently all by themselves with no human effort. In contrast, Tishrei is in the autumn when we bring in the crops after a long season of working the land.]

However, there is a danger that we may erroneously assume from the great miracles of Pesach that we can just take it easy and not worry about our spiritual level and Hashem will miraculously save us. Thus, Shabbat HaGadol teaches us that even though Hashem does rescue us and fight for us, we still have to take the first step. Bnei Yisrael demonstrated emunah and took that first step by bravely taking the lambs from right under the noses of the Egyptians. We only have to make an opening the size of the eye of a needle and Hashem will open for us a gaping hole that loaded wagons can fit through.⁹ The taking of the lambs might only be a tiny step compared to the miracles that Hashem granted to us, but it showed real emunah. Hashem wanted Bnei Yisrael to take that first step in order to merit the miraculous redemption.

We also see the same message in the special Haftorah that we read this week for Shabbat Hagadol:

“...Return to Me and I will return to you...” (Malachi 3:7)

Hashem wants to return to us. But He is waiting for us to **first** return to Him. Hashem is waiting to come to our aid and to redeem us, but He just wants us to initiate the process.

Let's try something this week:

1. On Shabbat HaGadol, contemplate the enormous act of emunah that Bnei Yisrael demonstrated. Remember their reward – they were finally granted freedom from the land of Mitzrayim. They set a precedent, and we are blessed to have it as an example to follow.
2. In whatever area that we are working on, daven to Hashem and ask Him for assistance. Then summon every vestige of emunah and courage and act on that emunah. Remember – it's up to us to take that first step.

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Darchai Noam will take a short break for Pesach. BE”H it will return shortly after Pesach.

Shabbat Shalom and Chag kasher v'sameach, Rabbi Ledder

⁶ See the Rama's glosses to Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, siman 430.

⁷ While cleaning the house for Pesach we certainly don't feel like we are being passive. In the physical sense it is a lot of work! However, the Kabbalists teach us that in the spiritual realms Pesach is a time when Hashem is active, and we can accomplish a lot with very little effort on our part. (Heard in a lecture by Rabbi Akiva Tatz.)

⁸ Parshat B'shalach, Sh'mot 14:25.

⁹ Midrash Shir Hashirim 5:2.