

Shabbat HaGadol, 5783, 2023:

What is Shabbat HaGadol?

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon HaKohane, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Gittel Malka bat Moshe, Alexander Leib ben Benyamin Yosef, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The name, “Shabbat HaGadol,” has captured the imagination of Torah exegetes since time immemorial. The second Bobover Rebbe, HaRav Ben-Zion Halberstam *zatzal* (1874-1941), a member of this illustrious group, begins his analysis of this term by citing Tosafot’s explanation 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 [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 [by the hands of] their firstborn.” (*Sefer Tehillim* 136:10, this and all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, brackets my own)

Rav Halberstam now presents a classic question: “If this is the case [that we are commemorating this great miracle on this day], then this Shabbat should be called “Shabbat Nes HaGadol,” as such, why is it called “Shabbat HaGadol?” (*Kedushat Tzion, Pesach, Shabbat HaGadol*, new edition, page 57, translation and brackets my own). He answers this question with a quotation from *Mechilta d’Rabbi Yishmael*:

“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)

I believe Rav Halberstam is teaching us a powerful *chidush* (novel idea) regarding the name Shabbat HaGadol: Instead of translating it at face value as “the Great Shabbat,” we need to translate it as “the Shabbat of the Great One,” namely the special Shabbat of the Holy One blessed be He. As Rav Halberstam so beautifully explained: “According to this [that is, the *Mechilta*], it is completely proper to 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.” Truly, then, this Shabbat is “the Shabbat of the Great One.”

Shabbat Shalom and *Chag Kasher v’Sameach*

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*** 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: [The Rav](#)