

The Weekly Message of Torah from Rabbi Rheins

Shabbat HaGadol: What Makes It Great?

This Friday night we usher in *Shabbat HaGadol*, “The Great Sabbath.” It is the Shabbat that directly precedes Pesach. Some maintain that it was called “*HaGadol*” (“Great”) because the sermon this Shabbat was frequently a long and detailed review of the laws and rituals of Passover and the Seder. That is, the “greatness” was not the quality of the Sabbath. Rather, it was the quantity, the great length of the service. Notwithstanding the kernel of truth at the center of that bit of folk wisdom, there are other explanations that are worthy of our attention.

Rabbi Avraham HaLevi, a 17th century Polish scholar who is also known as The Magen Avraham, wrote a commentary in the Shulchan Arukh. He refers to a *midrashic* interpretation that maintains that this Shabbat is called “*HaGadol*” because a great miracle happened. Just before the Exodus from Egypt, on the 10th of Nisan, for some reason the Egyptian task masters did not try to prevent our ancestors from selecting the lambs that would be sacrificed and used the night of 14th, the evening of Passover. On this night, our ancestors began their preparations for their long awaited moment of redemption. The Passover began the evening of 14th of Nisan and was experienced on the night of the 15th, but the miracles that led up to and enabled the Exodus started well before.

And so it is that though we will observe Passover with Seders next week in our homes on Friday night, April 19, we know that the greatness of that night depends on the preparation we make in the coming days. Indeed, the most significant preparation goes beyond a review of the *seder's* rituals, or the removal of the *chametz*, or cleaning, and the cooking. Above all else, we are urged to prepare our hearts and souls. The entire *seder* is dependent not just on the *Haggadah* or the *shmura matzot*, or the brisket, chopped liver and chicken soup. Rather, the *seder* is dependent on our spiritual connections with the story of our ancestors. The greatness of Passover comes from the stories of redemption that are shared by the guests at our tables. The greatness of Passover is created by moist eyes of parents and grandparents who look over at the youngsters who are trying to make sense of this unique gathering: *Mah nishtanah?*

Why, indeed is this night so different? It's different because on all other nights we gobble our food while trying not to glance at cell-phones and televisions. But on this night we read from a sacred text and tell time-honored stories. On all other nights we may be satisfied with a sandwich or leftovers. But on this night we make a festive meal complete with symbolic foods that evoke questions and fascinating discussions. On all other nights we're not really sure who will be there for dinner; we might even have to eat all alone. But on this night, we have family and friends and even a few new guests--- because on this night we don't want anyone to be alone.

It is not too late to sign-up for Temple Sinai's 2nd night Passover *seder* (Saturday night, April 20). A very generous Sinai family has subsidized the cost of the *seder* to make it quite affordable. I will also make sure that any Temple Sinai family who would like to attend this 2nd night *seder* will be able to do so regardless of their ability to pay. Please call me or Lisa Thorner to reserve your place.

As we observe *Shabbat HaGadol*, let's reaffirm that what makes this Shabbat and the coming Passover truly great is you. So find ways to add your spirit and your blessings to elevate all those around you.

Shabbat Shalom v'Chag Pesach Sameiach,

Rick

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