

What is Shabbat Hagadol?

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Leading up to Pesach there are five special Shabbatot: Shekalim, Zakhor, Parah, Hachodesh, and Shabbat Hagadol. Of all of these special Torah readings/Shabbatot, Shabbat Hagadol is the only one not mentioned in the Talmud.

The origins of the term and concept Shabbat Hagadol seem to be in the Middle Ages, probably in France/Germany. It is first mentioned in a work called Sefer HaOreh which is a collection of halakhic rulings issued by Rashi's students (11th century, Germany).

There we find:

People are accustomed to call the Shabbat before Pesach "Shabbat Hagadol (the Great Shabbat)," but they don't know why it is greater than any other Shabbat. The reason seems to be that the Israelites left Egypt on the fifth day of the week, which means that they would have set aside their paschal lamb on the tenth of the month, which was the Shabbat before Pesach. They (the Israelites) said "how can we sacrifice that which is an abomination to the Egyptians before their eyes and not have them stone us?" (Exodus 8:22). God responded to them: Now you will see the miracle that I perform for you. They went and set aside a lamb to keep it until the fourteenth of the month.

In the continuation of the midrash, the Egyptians see the Israelites setting aside lambs in order to slaughter them and the Egyptians want to kill the Israelites as an act of revenge. God afflicts the Egyptians with diseases and protects the Israelites. The midrash concludes, "In remembrance of this miracle performed for Israel on the Shabbat before Pesach, the Shabbat before Pesach is called Shabbat Hagadol." In summary, what makes this Shabbat "gadol" - great - is what God has done for us. However, in other sources there is a somewhat different explanation for Shabbat Hagadol. In a work called Sefer Abudraham written in 13th century Spain we find, "It is called Shabbat Hagadol for it was on this Shabbat that the Israelites performed their first mitzvah." Using the same chronology as above, the Israelites left Egypt on Thursday, making the tenth of the month, Shabbat, the day they set aside the lamb that they would eventually sacrifice (see Exodus 12:3). We celebrate Shabbat Hagadol not in

remembrance of what God did for us, but what we did for God by performing our first mitzvah.

These two different explanations for Shabbat Hagadol (God's miracle or first mitzvah) foreshadow the process that we begin on Pesach and complete on Shavuot. The first explanation of Shabbat Hagadol focuses on God. On the Shabbat before Pesach, God performed a miracle for the Israelites, one that allowed them to observe a critical commandment. On Shavuot we accept upon ourselves the mitzvot, which through their performance ensure God's continued presence among the people. This is, indeed, the essence of the covenantal relationship: God manifests God's bond to us by protecting us, and by making God's presence known when we are performing the commandments. The two acts are inseparable, both this week in Shabbat Hagadol, and in the inseparability of Pesach from Shavuot.