

Shabbat HaGadol

It is hard to imagine a Shabbat which is not great! What is it about the Shabbat before Passover that earns it the designation “the Great Shabbat,” and the distinction of being, apparently, the greatest of the great?

The Gemara¹ tells us that we would be redeemed if our entire people observed two Shabbatot. This does not necessarily refer to two different weeks. Rather, the Gemara may be alluding to two separate and distinct aspects of a Shabbat well lived and appreciated. You can find a hint of the notion that Shabbat contains many facets in the Torah verse² “and observe My Shabbatot,” in the plural. Shabbat contains a natural plurality; there are several ways to understand its different aspects.

Take the familiar set of *zakhor* and *shamor*.³ At their root is the difference between the chief ways in which we serve God: through *ahava* and through *yira*, love and reverence. *Zakhor* instructs us to enhance

Based on *Netivot Shalom* 2:228–229.

1. Shabbat 113b.
2. Lev. 19:3.
3. “Remember” and “observe” – these two words introduce the mitzva of Shabbat in the two different versions of the Ten Commandments that appear in Exodus and Deuteronomy.



Shabbat through particular observances. Like all affirmative mitzvot, these are expressions of our love for God. *Shamor*, on the other hand, obligates us to protect the Shabbat by avoiding behavior that would be inconsistent with the day's innate holiness. When we rein ourselves in, when we obey laws that restrict our activity and keep us safe from the deterrents to a spiritual life, we serve God with reverence.

Two special Shabbatot hold positions of prominence on the calendar. One is *Shabbat HaGadol*, the topic of our discussion. The other is *Shabbat Shuva*, the Shabbat of Repentance, which falls between Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur.

It is easy to see the link between these extraordinary Shabbatot and the dual nature of Shabbat we introduced above. Each of these special days relates to one of these two chief approaches to serving God. *Shabbat Shuva* focuses on our shortcomings in doing what God asks of us; it urges us to take our fear of God more seriously. *Shabbat HaGadol* opens a season of love between God and His people.

We know from the *Be'er Mayim Hayim*,⁴ based on the Zohar, that all blessing flows from the Shabbat which precedes it. In a spiritual sense, whatever happens during the week began its journey toward us on the Shabbat before. The special gifts, then, of Passover and Yom Kippur are rooted in the Shabbat that precedes each of them. *Shabbat Shuva* joins us to the attribute of reverence, while *Shabbat HaGadol* binds us to our Creator with ropes of love.

Serving God with love is a loftier accomplishment, a more elevated state, than using reverence alone. While indeed all Shabbatot are great, two stand out because of the unusual bounty they bring us in advance of the coming week. Of the two, the one before Passover is the greater, because the attribute of love is superior to that of reverence.

Shabbat HaGadol, then, is truly “the Great Shabbat.”

We can explore another approach. Shabbat invokes two distinct forms of *emuna*. By focusing on the events of Creation, of the necessary role of God in calling forth all phenomena as we know them, we affirm

4. Deut. 29:9.



out belief in God's existence. This view predominates in the first version of the Ten Commandments, as recorded in Exodus.⁵

The second version, however, shifts Shabbat's emphasis away from prehistoric antiquity to our beginnings as a people. We remember how a group of slaves was given safe passage out of Egypt as God unlocked the grip of a powerful enemy. We appreciate the distinctions God made in the process, deflecting the hardship and pain of each plague away from His people and directing it at the oppressor. In other words, Passover connects us with a more subtle kind of belief – belief in God's providence.

While one cannot possibly believe in providence without first accepting God's existence, it is certainly possible to believe in a God who does not choose to involve Himself with the details of human lives. Many non-Jews have deep religious conviction based on their belief in God. But God remains to them generally distant and remote. He can be reached through prayer, but He is felt as acting from a far-off place in heaven. We see God acting in a very different way – directly coordinating the smallest of events. We relate to Him as the One who “dwells on high, but lowers Himself to supervise both heaven and earth.”⁶ Our sense of the extent of His providence – of His constant involvement and immediate, local presence – creates a different bond, a more intense and immediate relationship.

Belief in providence, then, is the more sophisticated form of belief. Taken together with belief in His existence, we have the “two Shabbatot,” the currency for acquiring our national redemption.

There is yet another avenue open to us. Shabbat goes by two different names. When first introduced in Genesis, it is simply called “the seventh day.” This day contrasts an active period of creation, followed by God's cessation of activity and His introduction of rest. The world at large can respect and understand such ideas.

Only with the arrival and election of the Jewish people does the Torah attach a new label to this day and call it “Shabbat.” Attached to the new name is the notion of *brit*, of a mutual covenant: “It will be a

5. Ex. 20:1–14.

6. Ps. 113:4.



sign forever between Myself and the children of Israel.”⁷ This Shabbat day, says the Torah, will be an eternal sign, an active and vibrant connection between God and His people.

This, too, is part of the “two Shabbatot” idea that leads to our redemption. It is rooted in the two reasons for Shabbat given by the two versions of the Ten Commandments: remembering Creation and remembering the Exodus. The notion of a seventh day, of a time of recognition of God’s dominion, is inherent in the Creation story. The Exodus from Egypt allowed for another theme to be added. It turned us into a people, a nation that would forever share signs of closeness and bonding between ourselves and God.

Passover is also called “Shabbat,”⁸ because it marks the time that we entered into a special relationship with God. The Shabbat that precedes the beginning of this holiday is the conjunction of two time periods that focus on this relationship. It is truly the greatest of Shabbatot – *Shabbat HaGadol*.

7. Ex. 31:17.

8. Lev. 23:12.

