

Shabbat Hagadol - 28 March 2015

Here is some sagacious rabbinic advice dispensed by my late father; he used to say that a community Rabbi cannot keep everybody happy all of the time. Indeed there is the story of the Rabbi who met a discontented congregant on a Sunday morning.

“It’s your fault that I never sleep on a Saturday night!”

“Why?” asked the Rabbi.

“Because I can never sleep at night after having slept through your sermon during the day!”

Or consider this quip from a congregant who berated his Rabbi for not delivering a sermon on Shabbat morning.

“Why?” asked the surprised Rabbi.

“Because I lost my hard earned nap!”

See what I mean, the Rabbi cannot win.

I talk about sermons because this Shabbat will be a very special one. It is called Shabbat Hagadol which means the Great Shabbat, the Shabbat which precedes Pesach.

There is a multiplicity of reasons as to why it is called by this name. Perhaps it is to do with the Special Haftarah for this Shabbat from Malachi which speaks about the eschatological themes of a time when Elijah the prophet will come to announce that “Great and awesome day,” as G-d indeed did at the time of the Exodus.

Or maybe it is to do with the fact that Israel came out of Egypt on a Thursday when the tenth of Nisan was a Shabbat. On that day, the Children of Israel initially took the Paschal lamb, as commanded by G-d, and tethered it to their beds. This was the inaugural Mitzvah of the Jewish people. Reminiscent of this first-time-commandment, Shabbat Hagadol, the Shabbat before Pesach, became the unique time when Israel became initiated with Mitzvot.

Another reason postulated was that the name became corrupted and originally it was not called Shabbat Hagadol but Shabbat Haggadah- the Shabbat on which the Haggadah was read. This makes sense because there is a custom to read the Haggadah on Shabbat afternoon on the Shabbat preceding Pesach in order to review the subject matter for Seder night.

But I think that the main reason why this Shabbat has its name is because traditionally the Rabbi would expound and sermonise on only two

Shabbatot in the year (yes, you heard, only two). The first was Shabbat Shuva; the Shabbat between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and the second was Shabbat Hagadol.

It was called The Great Shabbat because of the fact that the Rabbi would explain the multitude of laws about Pesach for a protracted period on the Shabbat, making the day “great”.

There is a message in all of this. We spend a good deal of our time in the pre-Pesach countdown trying to rid ourselves of all the Chametz etc in our domains, and so we should. However, we mustn't lose sight or focus of the main theme of Pesach, the mitzvot of the day; the retelling of the story of the Exodus, the ingesting of the Matzah and Maror, the drinking of the four cups of wine and the understanding behind each of these themes. For this we need to be prepared and awake.

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Sameach.