



The Shabbas-Observance of HKB”H—“HaGadol” —Influenced Yisrael to Take the Korban Pesach and Withdraw from Avodah-Zarah on “Shabbas HaGadol”

In honor of the upcoming, auspicious Shabbas Kodesh, it is fitting that we examine Yisrael’s established custom of referring to this special Shabbas as **“Shabbas HaGadol.”** As the michaber explains in the Shulchan Aruch (O.C. 430): **The Shabbas preceding Pesach is called Shabbas HaGadol, because of the miracle that occurred on it.** His source is the Tur (ibid.), who cites the Midrash’s depiction of the miracle.

The Tur attributes the appellation **“Shabbas HaGadol”** to the great miracle that occurred on the Shabbas preceding “yetzias Mitzrayim.” The exodus took place on a Thursday. On the preceding Shabbas, which was the tenth of Nissan, every Jew was commanded to take a lamb for his family as a Korban Pesach and tie it to the foot of his bed. When the curious Egyptians inquired about this strange ritual, the people of Yisrael responded openly that they planned to sacrifice these animals to their G-d. The Egyptians, who worshipped the lamb, were powerless to react and were forced to watch in silence as their gods were slaughtered.

The Beis Yosef notes that Tosafos (Shabbas 87b) provide another rationale for the appellation **“Shabbas HaGadol.”** They cite the Midrash which describes another miracle that occurred on behalf of Yisrael on that historic Shabbas. According to the Midrash, when the people of Yisrael took their lambs for the Korban Pesach on that momentous Shabbas, the firstborns of the various nations gathered around Yisrael. They inquired as to the nature of this ritual. Bnei Yisrael replied that the animals were to be offered to Hashem, Who would then kill the firstborn Egyptians. The firstborns—the “bechorim”—then approached their fathers and Pharaoh, beseeching them to send Yisrael away; their request was denied. This prompted the “bechorim” to wage war against their elders; they killed many of them,

as it is written (Tehillim 136, 10): **“To Him Who smote the Egyptians through their firstborns.”**

An Amazing Insight from the Maharsha

In his Chiddushei Aggados, the Maharsha provides us with a fantastic insight combining the two rationales for the appellation “Shabbas HaGadol.” The Tur attributes the miracle that occurred on that day to the fact that the Egyptians had to bite their tongues and stand by idly while their gods were being slaughtered. Tosafos attribute the miracle to the fact that the Egyptian firstborn rebelled against their parents and killed many of them. Tosafos’s explanation prompts the Maharsha to ask: Why did only the firstborns of the nations of the world gather and inquire about Yisrael’s strange ritual? After all, at that point in time, they were still unaware that HKB”H planned to kill all of the Egyptian firstborn. Why, according to the Midrash cited by Tosafos, didn’t the rest of the Egyptians also inquire about the taking of the animals for the Korban Pesach?

To answer this question, the Maharsha relies on our early commentaries such as the Ramban (Shemos 12, 3). The Egyptians worshipped the lamb; they believed that the constellation of Aries—the zodiac sign associated with the month of Nissan—controlled the world and was the first and foremost of the constellations. Hence, they treated these animals with deference. As such, the Egyptians chose their firstborns to be the priests to this avodah-zarah. They rationalized that as firstborns, it was fitting that they be in charge of worshipping the firstborn of the constellations.

As we know, Yisrael sunk to the 49th level of tumah in Mitzrayim, and they also worshipped the lamb. For, they

entertained the false belief that HKB”H had relinquished the running of the world to the heavenly constellations, who were led by Aries. Therefore, HKB”H instructed them to sacrifice the lamb as a Korban Pesach to Hashem. Thus, He demonstrated to them that the lamb and Aries do not possess any power of their own. They are subservient to HKB”H and act in accord with His decrees.

With this understanding, the Maharsha explains: When Yisrael took these animals, these Egyptian deities, to be sacrificed as a Korban Pesach to Hashem, it was specifically the priests of this avodah-zarah—the firstborn Egyptians—who gathered to inquire what Yisrael were doing with their gods. Then, when Yisrael responded: **“It is as a Pesach offering to Hashem, Who will then kill the firstborn Egyptians”**—they were dumbfounded, because (a) their gods were going to be slaughtered and they were powerless to do anything about it, and (b) because they themselves were destined to be killed in the upcoming plague. They were stricken with fear and anger.

This prompted them to approach their fathers and beseech them to release Yisrael and expel them from Mitzrayim, so that they would not have to die. Their fathers refused, prompting them to wage war against their fathers and kill many of them. Understood in this light, the explanations of the Tur and the Tosafos go hand in hand magnificently.

Notwithstanding, then why didn’t Chazal call this Shabbas **“Shabbas HaNes”**—the Shabbas of the Miracle—rather than **“Shabbas HaGadol”**? Additionally, why is it called **“Shabbas HaGadol,”** using a masculine adjective, rather than **“Shabbas HaGedolah,”** with a feminine adjective? In Yavin Shemuah (Chametz, Chapter 1), the Rashbatz, a Rishon, explains that we find that Shabbas is referred to as both masculine and feminine. In the passuk (Shemos 31, 17), it is referred to as feminine: **“כי אות היא”**. While in the passuk (Bamidbar 28, 10), it is referred to as masculine: **“עולת שבת בשבתו”**. Nevertheless, we must still endeavor to explain why Chazal opted to use the masculine adjective to name this Shabbas—**“HaGadol”**—rather than the feminine adjective.

These Miraculous Events Are Associated with Shabbas rather than with the Tenth of Nissan

We will begin to shed some light on the subject by presenting a peculiarity that the commentaries led by the

Bach examine at length. All of the festivals and holidays mentioned in the Torah are celebrated on the dates that their respective miracles actually occurred; they are not celebrated on the day of the week that the miracles occurred. The same is true of Chanukah and Purim. Yet, this is not the case with Shabbas HaGadol. The miraculous taking of the Korban Pesach occurred on the tenth of Nissan, which does not necessarily fall on Shabbas. So, why do we always celebrate this miracle on the Shabbas prior to Pesach rather than on the tenth of Nissan, even if it falls on a weekday?

In reality, the commentaries offer many answers to this question. All of them rely on one consistent, fundamental principle and theme. The kedushah of Shabbas was instrumental in the miracle of the taking of the paschal lamb. For instance, the Pri Chadash writes (O.C. 430, 1): **Perhaps the merit of Shabbas assisted them to some small degree to save them from the Egyptians.** In a similar vein, the Sefas Emes writes (Shabbas HaGadol 5632): **The taking was on the tenth, which was on a Shabbas; it is likely that this was intended, so that Shabbas would assist Bnei Yisrael.**

Let us embellish this thought. The Tur (O.C. 242) cites a teaching in the Gemara (Shabbas 118b): **אמר רבי יוחנן, כל המושמר כל המושמר שבת כהלכתו, אפילו עובד עבודה זרה כדור אנוש מוחללין לו, שנאמר אשרי אנוש יעשה זאת וגו' שומר שבת מוחללו, אל תקרי מוחללו אלא מחול לו.”** Rabbi Yochanan said: **Whoever observes Shabbas according to its law, even if he worships avodah-zarah like the generation of Enosh, he is forgiven. As it says (Yeshayah 56, 2): “Happy is Enosh (the man) who does this, etc., from desecrating it.” Do not read it as “meichallilo” (from desecrating it) but rather as “machul lo” (he is forgiven).**

The Beis Yosef explains what this means as follows: **Because Shabbas is equivalent to all of the mitzvos, since she illustrates that the supervision and renewal of the world, and the Torah are from Heaven. And since this person observes Shabbas, most certainly the avodah-zarah that he worships is not because he believes in it. Therefore, he is afforded forgiveness by means of teshuvah.** Hence, it is precisely for this reason that Yisrael were commanded to take the Pesach on the tenth of Nissan, which fell on Shabbas Kodesh. Thus, the kedushah of Shabbas would help Yisrael withdraw their hands from avodah-zarah and instead take a sheep for the sake of a mitzvah.

“If you will follow My statutes” the Statutes that HKB”H Himself Performs

With this illuminating introduction, we will proceed to explain Chazal’s rationale for naming the Shabbas preceding the festival of Pesach **“Shabbas HaGadol.”** Let us refer to the Midrash (V.R. 35, 3) related to the passuk (Vayikra 26, 3): **“אם”** **“if you will follow My statutes and observe My mitzvos and perform them:**

“If you will follow My statutes.” Rabbi Elazar said: **The way the world customarily functions, a king of flesh and blood decrees a decree; if he wants to fulfill it, then he fulfills it; if he doesn’t, ultimately it will be fulfilled by others. But this is not true of HKB”H. Rather, if He decrees a decree, He fulfills it first, as it is written (ibid. 19, 32): “You shall rise in the presence of an old person and you shall honor the presence of an elderly person and you shall fear your God—I am Hashem.” I am the one who fulfilled the mitzvah of standing up for an elderly person first. This is the implication of: “If you will walk in My statutes.”** A passage almost identical to this Midrash appears in the Talmud Yerushalmi (R.H. 7b).

HKB”H Himself, so to speak, observes all the mitzvos of the Torah. This is in stark contrast to human kings; they are capricious; they may or may not comply with their own edicts. Not so HKB”H; He observes His own edicts before requiring others to do so. The Maharzu explains that HKB”H fulfilled the mitzvah of **“ויהדרת פני זקן”** when he visited Avraham. For, it is written (Bereishis 18, 1): **“וירא אליו ה’ באלוני ממרא והוא יושב פתח:”** **“Hashem appeared to him (Avraham) in the plains of Mamre, while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day. Based on a Midrash (B.R. 48, 7), Rashi comments: The spelling of the word יושב without a “vav” teaches us that he wished to stand up, but HKB”H said to him: “Sit, and I will stand; you are a sign (harbinger) for your children; for I am destined to stand in the assembly of the judges, while they are seated”—as it says (Tehillim 82, 1): “G-d stands in the Divine assembly.”**

The Bnei Yissaschar (Sivan 2, 4) uses this concept to explain the formula established by Chazal for Berachos recited before performing mitzvos: **“אשר קדשנו במצוותיו וצונו”**—**Who sanctified us with His mitzvos and commanded**

us. This implies that HKB”H sanctifies us “במצוותיו”—with the mitzvos that He Himself fulfills. Here is an excerpt from the Bnei Yissaschar: “וזהנה כביכול השי”ת בעצמו שומר תורתו ומקיים מצוותיו, כמו שאנו מברכין על המצוות אשר קדשנו במצוותיו - מצוותיו דייקא, כביכול אשר הוא בעצמו מקיים, וכענין שמצינו בדברי חז”ל מנין שהקב”ה The Almighty Himself, so to speak, observes His Torah and fulfills His mitzvos, as indicated by the berachah recited over the performance of the mitzvos—“אשר קדשנו במצוותיו וצונו”—**“Who sanctified us with His mitzvos and commanded us.” The formula specifies that they are His mitzvos—that He Himself, so to speak, fulfills. This coincides with the statement of Chazal (Berachos 6a): “How do we know that HKB”H puts on tefillin?” “How do we know that HKB”H prays?”**

The Ohr HaMeir (Drush for Succos) writes something similar. Let us paraphrase: When performing Hashem’s mitzvos, we should attempt to connect mentally with the Almighty and arouse our love. After all, we are privileged to perform the very same mitzvos that HKB”H Himself performs. We express this fact with the formula **“אשר קדשנו במצוותיו וצונו”**. Through the performance of the mitzvos that HKB”H performs, we are sanctified, since they all emanate from the heavenly realms—**“כי לכולם יש להם מקום מוצא בעולמות עליונים”**. Let us clarify this last statement: HKB”H performs all of the mitzvos in the Torah in a spiritual form. For, every mitzvah has a mundane manifestation and also a mystical, heavenly manifestation. For instance, the Gemara states that HKB”H dons tefillin. Clearly, this cannot be understood at face value; rather, He does so in a spiritual manner that is beyond our comprehension.

HKB”H Stands over Us as a “Gadol” to Complete Our Intent

I would like to propose a wonderful explanation for this notion—that HKB”H performs all of the mitzvos of the Torah beforehand. We learn in the Gemara (ibid. 7a): **“מנין שהקב”ה מתפלל, שנאמר והביאותים אל הר קדשי ושמחתים בבית תפילתי, תפלתם לא From where do we know that HKB”H prays? For, it is stated (Yeshayah 56, 7): “I will bring them to My holy mountain and make them joyful in the House of My prayer.” It does not say “their prayer” but rather “My prayer.” From here we see the HKB”H prays. The commentaries find this perplexing. To whom does He pray? After all, He is the One and Only; He created**

everything; He is omnipotent; no one can prevent Him from doing what He wants!

We find a fantastic explanation in the Arugos HaBosem (Eikev) in the name of the Tiferes Shlomo. We learn in the Mishnah (Gittin 22b): **הכל כשרין לכתוב את הגט אפילו חרש שוטה**—**all are qualified to write a “get,” even a deaf-mute, an insane person, and a minor.** The Gemara asks an obvious question: **“והא לאו בני דיעה נינהו”**—**but they are not mentally competent.** Hence, they are not capable of writing the “get” for the sake of the woman being divorced. Rav Huna answers: **“והוא שהיה גדול עומד על גביו”**—**a mentally incompetent individual is permitted to write a “get” provided that a competent adult is standing over him** and instructing him.

Now, when mere mortals study Torah and perform mitzvos, it is difficult for them to do so without distractions and ulterior motives. Therefore, it is essential that they connect with HKB”H. Thus, even if we lack competence, HKB”H acts as an adult looking over our shoulders to guide us. The same applies to the concept of HKB”H praying. He prays along with Yisrael in the role of an overseeing adult, providing them with the influence necessary to pray l’shma, without distractions and ulterior motives. This is the gist of his explanation.

We can now better understand the formula we recite prior to the performance of mitzvos: **“אשר קדשנו במצוותיו”**. As we learned from the Bnei Yissaschar, HKB”H sanctifies us with the mitzvos that He Himself performs. However, we must first request that HKB”H act as an adult standing over us ensuring that we perform the mitzvos with the proper “kavanah.”

You Will Be a Harbinger for Your Children

We will now return to the passuk cited above from parshas Vayeira: **“וירא אליו ה' באלוני ממרא והוא יושב פתח האהל כחום היום”** – **Hashem appeared to him (Avraham) in the plains of Mamre, while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day.** Rashi comments: **The spelling of the word יושב without a “vav” teaches us that he wished to stand up, but HKB”H said to him: “Sit, and I will stand; you are a sign (harbinger) for your children; for I am destined to stand in the assembly of the judges, while they are seated”—as it says: “G-d stands in the Divine assembly.”** We must endeavor to understand why HKB”H instructed Avraham to sit, while He stood over him and, similarly, the fact that the judges sit, while HKB”H stands over them.

We will suggest an explanation in keeping with our current discussion. After Avraham performed the mitzvah of “milah,” he merited having Hashem appear to him: **“וירא אליו ה'”**. Since this was the first time that this happened to Avraham, he wanted to stand up; he wanted to perform the mitzvos with perfect, proper intent on his own—without the aid of HKB”H standing over him. This is the way of tzaddikim; they yearn to serve Hashem with every fiber of their being, as best as humanly possible. Yet, HKB”H said to him: **“Sit, and I will stand.”** In other words, you will perform the mitzvah while sitting, and I will act as an adult standing over you teaching you the meaning and intent of the mitzvah.

Then, HKB”H went on to explain to Avraham why He instructed him to sit. Even though, he was capable of performing the mitzvos on his own l’shma; nevertheless: **“You are a sign (harbinger) for your children; for I am destined to stand in the assembly of the judges, while they are seated”—as it says: “G-d stands in the Divine assembly.”** By remaining seated, Avraham prepared the way for his future descendants who would serve as judges to carry out and enforce the laws of the Torah. Thus, even if they did not measure up to Avraham Avinu, HKB”H would stand over them and guide them to arrive at proper verdicts based on the true intent of the Torah.

We can now begin to appreciate why it is essential for HKB”H to fulfill all of the mitzvos beforehand. Clearly, He performs the mitzvos in the ideal, unsurpassed manner. Therefore, HKB”H performs the mitzvos first to enable Yisrael to fulfill the mitzvos to the best of their abilities afterwards. Then, He can augment and complete their intent as an overseeing adult.

Moshe Implemented Shabbas-Observance in Mitzrayim to Atone for Avodah-Zarah

Following this sublime path, we will now explain why HKB”H commanded Yisrael to take the Korban Pesach on the tenth of Nissan which fell on Shabbas Kodesh. We will refer to a teaching from Chazal in the Midrash (S.R. 1, 28) related to the passuk (Shemos 2, 11): **“It happened in those days that Moshe grew up and went out to his brethren and saw their burdens.”** They expound: **“ראה שאין להם מנוחה, הלך ואמר לפרעה, מי שיש לו עבד, אם אינו נח יום אחד בשבוע הוא מת, ואלו עבדיך אם אין אתה**

מניח להם יום אחד בשבוע הם מתים. אמר לו לך ועשה להן כמו שתאמר, הלך משה ותיקן להם את יום השבת לנוח". Seeing their suffering, Moshe appealed to Pharaoh on their behalf. He argued that without a day of rest once a week, the slaves would surely die. Pharaoh conceded and told him to give them a day of rest. Moshe went and established Shabbas as their day of rest.

Moshe Rabeinu made a profound calculation; of all the mitzvos, he specifically chose the mitzvah of Shabbas to allay their suffering in Mitzrayim. As we know, Yisrael sank to the 49th level of tumah in Mitzrayim; they were even guilty of worshipping "avodah-zarah." This is evident from the following Midrash (Yalkut Shimoni, Beshalach 234) related to the passuk (ibid. 14, 29):

"The water was a wall for them." Samael went down and protested to Him: "Master of the Universe, didn't Yisrael worship avodah-zarah in Mitzrayim? And yet, You are performing miracles on their behalf." He voiced his complaints to the prince of the sea, who became enraged and wanted to drown them. Immediately, HKB"H responded to him: "You incredible fool! Did they worship idols of their own accord? They only worshiped idols because of their enslavement and out of mental duress. You are judging an unintentional act as being deliberate, and a coerced act as being voluntary."

Accordingly, we can suggest that although Yisrael worshipped "avodah-zarah" in Mitzrayim due to the mental strain and temporary insanity caused by their enslavement; nevertheless, they still required atonement, since "avodah-zarah" is a very serious transgression. Hence, Moshe wisely initiated the practice of Shabbas-observance in Mitzrayim. In its merit, even the transgression of "avodah-zarah" was

forgiven. Clearly, they did not yet observe Shabbas ideally, with the perspective of (ibid. 31, 13): **"כי אות הוא ביני וביניכם—for it is a sign between Me and you for your generations, to know that I am Hashem, Who sanctifies you."** They only observed the Shabbas, because they were in desperate need of a day of rest from their intense labor. Nevertheless, their less than ideal, unintentional Shabbas-observance was meant to atone for their unintentional worship of avodah-zarah.

Now, we know that Yisrael continued to worship avodah-zarah throughout the galus in Mitzrayim. After all, they had sunk to the 49th level of tumah. So, when the exodus could not be postponed any longer, due to the concern that they would sink to the 50th level of tumah, HKB"H commanded them to bring a Korban Pesach. He chose their god to be the sacrificial animal and instructed them to do so on the Shabbas preceding Pesach. They were inspired and illuminated by the Shabbas Kodesh that the Blessed One observes above; this enabled them to observe the Shabbas below in a more exalted manner. As a result, they withdrew their hands from avodah-zarah and took the Korban Pesach as an offering to Hashem.

It is with great joy and enlightenment that we can now comprehend why Chazal chose to call the Shabbas prior to Pesach **"Shabbas HaGadol."** It indicates that on this special Shabbas, HKB"H stood over Yisrael like a **"gadol"**—an attentive adult—influencing them via His Shabbas-observance to observe the Shabbas in a more ideal fashion. This enabled them to overcome the yetzer hara of "avodah-zarah" that had overwhelmed them and dragged them down spiritually, and motivated them to courageously offer their lambs to Hashem as a Korban Pesach.

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