



On Shabbas HaGadol It Became Apparent that the Birthright Yaakov Avinu Purchased from Eisav Truly Belongs to Yisrael

In honor of the auspiciously approaching Shabbas Kodesh known as “**Shabbas HaGadol**,” it is fitting that we examine the following ruling of the “michaber” in the Shulchan Aruch (O.C. 430): “**שבת שלפני הפסח קורין אותו שבת הגדול מפני הנס שנעשה בו**”—**the Shabbas prior to Pesach is called Shabbas HaGadol because of the miracle that occurred on it.** His source is the Tur (ibid.), who describes the miracle that occurred on that historic day:

“שבת שלפני הפסח קורין אותו שבת הגדול, והטעם לפי שנעשה בו נס גדול, שפסח מצרים מקחו בעשור כדכתיב (שמות יב-ג) בעשור לחודש הזה ויקחו להם איש שה לבית אבות שה לבית, ופסח שיצאו ישראל ממצרים היה ביום ה' כדאיתא בסדר עולם, ונמצא שעשרה בחודש היה שבת, ולקחו להם כל אחד שה לפסחו וקשר אותו בכרעי מטתו, ושאלום המצריים למה זה לכם, והשיבו לשחטו לשם פסח במצות השם עלינו, והיו שינייהם קהות על ששוחטין אלוהיהם, ולא היו רשאים לומר להם דבר, ועל שם אותו הנס קורין אותו שבת הגדול.”

The Tur attributes the appellation “**Shabbas HaGadol**” to the great miracle that occurred on the Shabbas preceding the exodus from Egypt—“*yetzias Mitzrayim*.” The exodus took place on a Thursday. On the preceding Shabbas, the tenth of Nissan, every Jew was commanded to take a lamb for his family as a Pesach offering and tie it to the foot of his bed. When the Egyptians would ask curiously about this strange ritual, the Bnei Yisrael would respond 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.

The Beis Yosef notes that Tosafos (Shabbas 87b) provide another reason for the appellation “**Shabbas HaGadol**.” They cite the Midrash which describes another miracle that occurred on behalf of Yisrael on this historic date. Here are the sacred words of Tosafos:

“ועל כן קורין אותו שבת הגדול, לפי שנעשה בו נס גדול, כדאמרינן במדרש כשלקחו פסחיהם באותה שבת, נתקבצו בכורות אומות העולם אצל ישראל ושאלום למה היו עושין כך, אמרו להן זבח פסח לה' שיהרוג בכורי מצרים, הלכו אצל אבותיהם ואל פרעה לבקש ממנו שישלחו ישראל ולא רצו, ועשו בכורות מלחמה והרגו מהן הרבה, הדא הוא דכתיב למכה מצרים בכבוריהם.”

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 went to their fathers and to 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.**”

Thus, we have two rationales for calling the Shabbas before Pesach **Shabbas HaGadol**. Firstly, because Yisrael took the lamb, the Egyptian god, for their Korban Pesach, and the Egyptians were powerless to act or object. Secondly, to commemorate the miraculous uprising of the Egyptian *bechorim* against their fathers prompted by the taking of the paschal lambs. Neither rationale, however, explains why this special Shabbas is called **Shabbas HaGadol** rather than **Shabbas HaNes—the Miraculous Shabbas**—or something similar. Additionally, we will endeavor to explain why HKB”H orchestrated the surprising, unexpected confrontation between the Egyptian *bechorim* and their fathers, resulting in many deaths among them. What type of “*midah k'neged midah*” did this represent?

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

We will begin this essay by discussing a peculiarity that the commentaries examine at length. All of the festivals and holidays mentioned in the Torah, and also Chanukah and Purim, 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. 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?

Clearly, the commentaries offer many answers to this question? All of them, however, rely on one consistent, fundamental principle. The kedushah of Shabbas was instrumental in the miracle of the taking of the paschal lamb. For instance, the Pri Chadash writes (ibid. 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.**

I would like to propose my own explanation for the reason the Shabbas preceding Pesach on which the miracle occurred is named **Shabbas HaGadol**. Regarding the mitzvah of Shabbas, we find that the first and second sets of Aseres HaDibros offer very different rationales for the mitzvah. According to the first Aseres HaDibros, Shabbas commemorates the creation, as it is written (Shemos 20, 8): **“זכור את יום השבת לקדשו... כי ששת ימים עשה ה' את השמים ואת הארץ את הים ואת כל אשר בהם וינח ביום השביעי.”** **Remember the Shabbas day to sanctify it . . . for in six days Hashem made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day.**

According to the second Aseres HaDibros, Shabbas commemorates “yetzias Mitzrayim,” as it is written (Devarim 5, 12): **“שמור את יום השבת לקדשו כאשר צוך ה' אלקיך... וזכרת כי עבד היית בארץ מצרים ויציאתך ה' אלקיך משם ביד חזקה ובזרוע נטויה, על כן צוך ה' אלקיך לעשות את יום השבת.”** **Guard the day of Shabbas to sanctify it, as Hashem, your G-d, commanded you . . . and you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Mitzrayim, and Hashem, your G-d, has taken you out from there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm; therefore Hashem, your G-d, has commanded you to make the day of**

Shabbas. Accordingly, we mention both reasons in the kiddush we recite on Friday night: **“ושבת קדשו באהבה וברצון הנחילנו זכרון”**—**and His holy Shabbas with love and favor He gave us as a heritage, a remembrance of the work of creation; for it is the day that is the prologue to convocations of holiness, a remembrance of “yetzias Mitzrayim.”** So, why, in fact, did HKB”H provide a different rationale for Shabbas-observance in the second set of dibrot? Furthermore, what is the connection between “yetzias Mitzrayim” and Shabbas-observance?

To explain the matter, let us introduce a fascinating passage in the Midrash related to Shabbas (D.R. 3, 1): **“ואת סבור שמא לרעתך: ואתי לך את השבת, לא נתתי לך אלא לטובתך. כיצד, אמר רבי חייא ברבי אבא, את מוקדש את השבת במאכל ובמשתה ובכסות נקיה ומהנה את נפשך, ואני נותן לך שכר, מניין וקראת לשבת עונג וגו', מה כתיב אחריו אז תתענג על ה' ויתן לך.”** According to this Midrash, a person might have thought that Hashem gave us the Shabbas to our detriment. We are taught that this is not so. By sanctifying the Shabbas with food and drink and clean clothing, we are rewarded. For it says (Yeshayah 58, 13): **“If you proclaim the Shabbas a delight.”** Elsewhere it says (Tehillim 37, 4): **“And take delight in Hashem and He will grant your heart’s wishes.”**

The commentaries are perplexed by this Midrash. How could a person possibly think, chas v’shalom, that the Shabbas was given to us for our detriment—to the point that HKB”H has to reassure us that it was given for our benefit? The Ahavas Shalom (Vayakheil) interprets the Midrash based on a statement in the Gemara (Shabbas 118b): **“כל המשומר שבת כהלכתו אפילו עובד עבודה: זרה כדור אנוש מוחלין לו”**—**whoever observes Shabbas with all of its halachos, is forgiven even the serious transgression of idolatry—“avodah-zarah.”** This then is the way to read the Midrash: **You might think perhaps that I gave you the Shabbas to your detriment (on account of your negative deeds)—for you believe mistakenly that I gave the Shabbas to you to compensate and make up for your evil deeds, including your sins of “avodah-zarah”; I only gave it to you for your benefit—to enhance your kedushah, in keeping with the passuk (Shemos 31, 13): “To know that I am Hashem, Who sanctifies you.”**

Moshe Instituted the Shabbas in Mitzrayim to Atone for Avodah Zarah

Let us embellish this sacred thought. Why would Yisrael have thought that HKB”H gave them the Shabbas on account of their misdeeds and sins of “avodah-zarah”? To explain this, we

will refer to a Midrash (S.R. 1, 28) related to the passuk (ibid. 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, he 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 Moshe 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, in Mitzrayim, Yisrael sank to the 49th level of tumah, including the worship of “avodah-zarah.” This is evident from the following Midrash (Yalkut Shimoni, Beshalach, 234) related to the passuk (ibid. 14, 29):

“והמים להם חומה, שירד סמאל ואמר לפניו, רבוננו של עולם, לא עבדו ישראל עבודה זרה במצרים ואתה עושה להם נסים, והיה משמיע קולו לשר של ים ונתמלא עליהם חמה וביקש לטבען. מיד השיב לו הקב”ה, שוטה שבעולם וכי לדעתם עבודה, והלא לא עבדוה אלא מתוך שעבוד ומתוך טירוף הדעת, ואתה דן שוגג כמזיד ואונס כרצון.”

“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; and he became enraged and wished 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 compelled act as being voluntary.”

With this understanding, 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 an extremely serious transgression. Hence, Moshe wisely instituted the practice of Shabbas-observance in Mitzrayim. In its merit, even the transgression of “avodah-zarah” was forgiven.

Thus, we can interpret HKB”H’s statement to Yisrael as follows: **You might think that perhaps I gave you the Shabbas**

on account of your negative deeds—to make amends for worshipping “avodah-zarah” in Mitzrayim, seeing as that is why Moshe Rabeinu instituted Shabbas-observance there. Do not think that! Know with certainty that **I only gave it to you for your benefit**—that even if you already made amends for the flaw of “avodah-zarah,” you should nevertheless observe the Shabbas to ascend and be sanctified with the kedushah of HKB”H.

This illuminates for us the reason why HKB”H mentions two distinct rationales for the mitzvah of Shabbas. HKB”H gave Yisrael the first set of dibros at Matan Torah, shortly after they exited the tumah of Mitzrayim. At that juncture, he gave them the mitzvah of Shabbas on an extremely high level: **“Remember the Shabbas day to sanctify it”**—so that they would connect with HKB”H Who observed the Shabbas Himself—**“for in six days Hashem made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day.”** This is the implication of **“זכרון למעשה בראשית”**—**a commemoration of the work of creation.**

The second dibrot, on the other hand, were given to Yisrael after they had committed the sin of “avodah-zarah” with the “cheit ha’eigel.” Thus, they had an additional reason for observing the Shabbas; they required atonement for the sin of “avodah-zarah,” just as they did in Mitzrayim. Therefore, HKB”H said to them: **“Guard the day of Shabbas to sanctify it, as Hashem, your G-d, commanded you”**—in other words, observe the Shabbas on the same high level as you were commanded to do in the first set of dibrot—**“זכרון למעשה בראשית”**. However, since you committed the “cheit ha’eigel,” you now have an additional reason to observe this mitzvah: **“Remember that you were a slave in the land of Mitzrayim**—and, due to the mental strain, worshipped “avodah-zarah”—nevertheless, **“Hashem, your G-d, has taken you out from there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm”**—in the merit of the Shabbas-observance that Moshe instituted for you—**“therefore Hashem, your G-d, has commanded you to make the day of Shabbas”**—for this reason, as well, to atone for the “cheit ha’eigel.”

We can now propose a novel reason for calling the Shabbas preceding Pesach **Shabbas HaGadol**. During all of the years that Yisrael observed Shabbas in Mitzrayim, they did so on a low level; they did so to atone for their worship of “avodah-zarah.” That was no longer the case on the Shabbas HaGadol in Mitzrayim. On that historic day, they were instructed by HKB”H: **“משכו וקחו לכם צאן למשפחותיכם ושחטו הפסח”**—**draw away and take for yourselves sheep for your families and**

between the body of kedushah—represented by Yisrael, Yaakov’s descendants—and the body of tumah—represented by the descendants of Eisav and the forces of evil. Each side wants to own the birthright and control the other. Seeing as we are in galus under the rule of the ministering angels of the nations of the world, it appears as if Eisav has succeeded in getting the birthright back. At the time of the future geulah, however, the entire world will see that Yaakov and his descendants are the true owners of the birthright. This is evident from HKB”H’s promise to David HaMelech, the forbear of the Melech HaMashiach (Tehillim 89, 28): **“אף אני בכור אתנהו: עליון למלכי ארץ—I, too, will make him a firstborn, supreme over the kings of the earth.**

This battle over the birthright appeared in full force in Mitzrayim. At the start of the galus in Mitzrayim, it is written (Shemos 1, 8): **“ויקם מלך חדש על מצרים אשר לא ידע את יוסף, ויאמר אל: עמו הנה עם בני ישראל רב ועצום ממנו, הבה נתחכמה לו פן ירבה, והיה תקראנה מלחמה ונוסף גם הוא על שונאינו ונלחם בנו ועלה מן הארץ. A new king arose over Mitzrayim, who did not know Yosef. He said to his people, “Behold! Bnei Yisrael are more numerous and stronger than us. Come, let us act wisely with him, lest he become numerous, and it may be that if a war will occur, he, too, may join our enemies, and wage war against us and leave the land.”** Since they were the offspring of Yaakov, who had purchased the birthright from Eisav, the Egyptians wanted to control the children of Yisrael. Hence, Pharaoh suggested that they act wisely (ibid. 11): **“וישימו עליו שרי מיסים למען ענותו: בסבלותם—so they appointed tax collectors over it (Bnei Yisrael) to afflict it with their burdens.**

This explains very nicely the teaching in the Kol Bo (58) that the Egyptians sanctified their firstborns by making them priests of avodah-zarah. In this manner, they wished to demonstrate that the birthright legitimately belonged to the body of tumah stemming from Eisav, and that they do not recognize Yaakov’s claim to the birthright. Therefore, when Pharaoh saw that the descendants of Yaakov were multiplying, he feared that they might regain the birthright; so, he decided to enslave them.

We can now comprehend why HKB”H sent the following message to Pharaoh: **“So said Hashem, ‘My firstborn son is Yisrael.’** He was informing Pharaoh that the birthright rightfully belongs to Yaakov, who purchased it lawfully, and that Eisav and his evil forces are not deserving of the birthright. **“So, I say to you, ‘Send out My son that he may serve Me’”—because you are not worthy and do not deserve to rule over them; it is they**

who are sanctified and deserving of the birthright, to use it to serve Hashem. Yet, since you refuse to acknowledge the truth, **“and you have refused to send him out”—because you want to rule over them with the power of the Egyptian firstborn that you have devoted to the practice of avodah-zarah—“behold, I shall kill your firstborn son.”**

The Birthright Is Shabbas Kodesh

Following this line of reasoning, let us delve deeper into the incredible miracle of Shabbas HaGadol. The Ravid HaZahav (Balak) brings down in the name of the great Rabbi Naftali Tzvi of Ropshitz, zy”a, an interpretation of Yaakov Avinu’s request of Eisav (Bereishis 25, 31): **“מכרה כיום את בכורתך לי”—sell me your birthright, as of this day.** They expound in the Midrash (B.R. 63, 13): **“מכרה כיום, אמר לו זבין לי חד יום מן דידך.”** In other words, Yaakov was asking Eisav to sell him one of his days. Thus, we must attempt to clarify which day of Eisav’s Yaakov wished to acquire.

Now, we know that the two brothers already began to scuffle inside their mother’s womb: **“ויתרוצצו הבנים בקרבה.”** Based on a Midrash (Yalkut Shimoni), Rashi explains that Yaakov and Eisav battled over control of the two worlds. They agreed to split up the two worlds, with Yaakov taking Olam HaBa as his portion, and Eisav taking Olam HaZeh as his portion.

Based on this premise, the great Rabbi of Ropshitz, zy”a, proposes a fascinating interpretation. According to their agreement, Yaakov agreed to only benefit from Olam HaZeh as much as would be necessary to survive. Yet, we know that it is a mitzvah to delight in the Shabbas (Yeshayah 58, 13): **“וקראת: לשבת עונג.”** According to Chazal (Shabbas 118b), this means to eat and drink more extravagantly on Shabbas. Now, if Yaakov were to detach himself completely from all matters of Olam HaZeh, he would be unable to observe the mitzvah of **“oneg Shabbas”** properly.

Hence, he requested of Eisav: **“Sell me your birthright, as of this day.”** The Midrash interprets this as: **“זבין לי חד יום מן דידך—sell me one of your days.** Yaakov was asking Eisav to sell him one of the days of the week from his portion of Olam HaZeh. Specifically, he wished to acquire the **“bechor,”** the most important day of the week, the day of Shabbas, so that he would be able to indulge in food and drink on Shabbas and fulfill the mitzvah of **“oneg Shabbas.”** This interpretation is alluded to by Yaakov’s words: **“מכרה כיום.”** For, the word **כיום** can be interpreted as an abbreviation for: **כ’ולם י’שבעו ו’יתענגו מ’יטובך—they will all be**

satiated and derive pleasure from Your goodness. In other words, the purpose of this transaction was to enable Yisrael to enjoy the wealth and pleasures of Olam HaZeh on the day of Shabbas. This concludes his intriguing explanation.

Yaakov Purchased the Birthright—the Day of Shabbas

As a loyal servant in the presence of his master, I would like to embellish this wonderful idea. As we have learned, to acquire the day of Shabbas, Yaakov requested of Eisav: "מכרה כיום את בכורתך לי". This implies that the Shabbas day is the birthright. Clearly, this deserves further clarification. What is the connection between Shabbas and Eisav's birthright? Let us suggest that the Shabbas day itself—that is holier and more blessed than any of the other days of the week—represents the bechor of the six workdays. As it states (Bereishis 2, 3): "ויברך and G-d blessed the seventh day and sanctified it."

This is highlighted by a teaching in the Zohar hakadosh (Yisro 88a): "כל ברכאן דלעילא ותתא ביומא שביעאה תליין... משום דההוא יומא: All heavenly and earthly Berachos depend on the seventh day . . . because all of the six weekdays are blessed from that day. Thus, the Shabbas day is the bechor of the days of the week. This prompted Yaakov to request of Eisav: "מכרה כיום את בכורתך לי"—sell me the bechor of your days, so that I may honor the Shabbas with the delights of Olam HaZeh.

Proceeding along this sublime path, we can now explain why HKB"H arranged for this momentous miracle—the firstborn Egyptians waging war against their fathers—to occur on the Shabbas preceding Pesach. As we explained above, the title

Shabbas HaGadol indicates that this was the very first Shabbas that Yisrael observed on the lofty level of the first set of dibrot—commemorating the fact that HKB"H rested on the seventh day of creation. Until then, they had only observed Shabbas to atone for the worshipping of "avodah-zarah." When they took the lambs of the Egyptians for their Pesach offerings, however, they were forgiven for the practice of "avodah-zarah."

Thus, on that historic Shabbas, Bnei Yisrael became intimately connected with their forefather, Yaakov Avinu, who had purchased the Shabbas from Eisav. For, undoubtedly, Yaakov Avinu never worshipped any form of "avodah-zarah," and was holy from the moment he was conceived. As such, he surely observed the Shabbas in the most ideal way, on the loftiest level, attaching himself to the kedushah of HKB"H, Who rested on the seventh day. By observing the Shabbas on that level, Yisrael merited inheriting the kedushah of the birthright from him.

Now, we have an opportunity to present a novel rationale for calling the Shabbas prior to Pesach **Shabbas HaGadol**. For, on this Shabbas, it was revealed that Yisrael merited inheriting the birthright that Yaakov acquired from Eisav. Thus, they were considered to be like Yaakov Avinu, "הגדול", the elder, rather than Eisav. This enlightens us as to why HKB"H arranged for the miraculous battle between the firstborn Egyptians and their fathers to occur on the Shabbas preceding Pesach. As we have learned, Yisrael were now associated with the kedushah of the birthright acquired by their father, Yaakov. Now, we know that when one rises to greatness, the other falls. Therefore, the firstborn Egyptians fought with their fathers, signaling their downfall, while the opposite occurred with Yisrael; they connected with their father Yaakov as bechorim.

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