

The CHASSIDUS PERSPECTIVE with Reb Yoel Kahn



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A MIRACLE AND A BIRTHDAY

The Shabbos before Pesach is called Shabbos Hagadol. What is the reason for this name?

The Alter Rebbe explains in his Shulchan Aruch that since Bnei Yisroel left Mitzrayim on Thursday, the Shabbos beforehand was the tenth day of Nissan, the day when the Jews designated sheep for the *korban pesach*. When the firstborn Egyptians asked the Jews what they were doing, they explained that Hashem would be striking the firstborns in just a few days, and He had commanded them to sacrifice a *korban*.

Hearing this, they approached Pharaoh and demanded that he free the Jews. Pharaoh refused, and a civil war ensued between the firstborns and Pharaoh's men. To commemorate this great miracle, the Shabbos before Pesach is called Shabbos Hagadol.

Despite the greatness of this event, it appears that the Jews didn't gain anything from it. The firstborns were unsuccessful in influencing Pharaoh to let the Jews leave any earlier, and all that happened was that one Egyptian fought against another Egyptian! What was so special about this occurrence, to the extent that it is marked until today?

The Tur cites another miracle as being the reason behind the name: When the Jews tied sheep to their bedposts, the Egyptians were furious at what they were planning to do to their deity, yet miraculously they were unable to harm them.

This miracle indeed benefited the Jews and protected them from harm. But the Alter Rebbe chooses instead to cite the other miracle as the reason behind Shabbos Hagadol. What's so significant about this event?

BEYOND DIRAH BETACHTONIM

The *avodah* of a Jew is divided into two aspects: his *avodah* in influencing the world, and his personal *avodah* that far surpasses his effects on his surroundings.

Chassidus explains that the goal of our *avodah* is to transform this lowly world into a *dirah lo yisbarech*, a place where Hashem Himself can dwell. However, despite the greatness of this

accomplishment, the independent quality of a Jew and his *avodah* of Torah and mitzvos is far more precious.

These two aspects are reflected in two distinct periods of time: the state of the Jewish nation in Mitzrayim, versus once they left Mitzrayim. In Mitzrayim, incorporated within Egyptian society, their primary focus was on elevating the world around them. Yetzias Mitzrayim, however, marked the birth of the Jewish nation as a separate entity, one whose worth is defined by their personal, unique existence, beyond what they accomplish on their surroundings. Indeed, the *navi* Yechezkel compares Yetzias Mitzrayim to the birth of a child, as that event symbolized the birth of our nation.

EGYPTIAN TRANSFORMATION

Which day epitomized the *avodah* of Bnei Yisroel to influence Mitzrayim? Shabbos Hagadol.

The Egyptians had received a command from Hashem to release the Jews. Until that point, they had adamantly refused to fulfill this directive. However, on Shabbos Hagadol, the Jews succeeded in influencing them to listen. Through selecting sheep for the *korban pesach* and discussing what Hashem would be doing in a few days' time, the firstborns were motivated to demand that Pharaoh fulfill Hashem's instructions to let the Jews leave!

This is what made this miracle unique.

The firstborns didn't become new people; they remained wicked men, and what's more—they were Egyptian *firstborns*, symbolizing the pinnacle of the *kelipah* of Mitzrayim. And yet, being who they were, they demanded from Pharaoh that he fulfill Hashem's command! This represented a change in nature—not a change in *physical* nature (as is the case with most miracles), but rather something even more miraculous: a change in the "nature" of spirituality..

This idea—our *avodah* to elevate the world—is connected to Shabbos, the day of the week when this miracle is commemorated. Shabbos is the day that brought completion to

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Creation. As Chazal tell us, the world was lacking the concept of rest, and Shabbos ushered in rest, thereby concluding the work of Creation. The times of Moshiach are similarly called “a period that is entirely Shabbos,” because it will bring perfection to the world and humanity.

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Still, despite the greatness of this *avodah*, it falls short of encapsulating our true essence. A Jew is essentially beyond the material word, and even beyond making it into a *dirah* for Hashem.

Of course a person must occupy himself with this task, and through performing mitzvos with physical objects, he elevates them to *kedushah*. However, that’s not what a mitzvah is truly about. Torah and mitzvos are about connecting to Hashem, and they—and we—are intrinsically far more precious to Hashem than transforming the world into a *dirah lo yisbarech*.

Which day emphasizes this second, higher aspect? The eleventh day of Nissan.

Although the birth of the Jewish nation took place primarily when they left Mitzrayim on the fifteenth of Nissan (as mentioned above), it began earlier, with the preparations for the *korban pesach*. *Pesach* means to jump, symbolizing a leap beyond worldly limitations. The *korban* that carries this name (and the preparations for it) thus signifies the birth of a Jew, and that his value lies beyond his influence on the world around him.

Though the *korban pesach* was selected on the tenth of Nissan, on that day the Jews were still associated with Mitzrayim. On the *possuk*, “Draw and take for yourselves sheep,” Chazal explain: “Draw forth your hands from *avodah zarah*, and take for yourselves sheep for the mitzvah.” On the tenth of Nissan, the Jews were divesting themselves from the *avodah zarah* of Mitzrayim. The first day devoted entirely to the preparations

for the *korban pesach*—highlighting the Jews themselves as they are independently unique—was on the following day, Yud-Alef Nissan.

THE BIRTHDAY OF EVERY JEW

These two aspects are further associated with the numbers ten (the tenth of Nissan, the day when the above miracle took place) and eleven (Yud-Alef Nissan).

The number ten is a “worldly” number. The ten divine *sefiros* are the source of Creation, and we therefore find many areas in which worldly concepts are comprised of ten components. (For example, every created being consists of three dimensions—width, length, and height. Each one in turn consists of a beginning, middle, and end. When added to the entity itself, a total of ten is reached.)

Eleven, by contrast, is the number *after* ten, signifying a level that surpasses Creation. As we say in *Pesach Eliyahu*, “You [Hashem] are One, and are beyond the sum [of the ten *sefiros*].”

Although we are currently after Yetzias Mitzrayim, every year we re-experience the events that occurred then. Shabbos Hagadol emphasizes the importance of elevating the world around us, including non-Jews, by influencing them to fulfill the *sheva mitzvos bnei noach*. Yud-Alef Nissan, however, reminds us that a Jew is inherently much

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greater than that. Yud-Alef Nissan is the true birthday of the Jewish nation, teaching us who we truly are—a nation infinitely higher than the world, who connects to and unites with Hashem through Torah and mitzvos.

For further study, see *Sefer Hasichos* 5749 vol. 1, pp. 384ff.

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