

B"H

This week is Shabbos Hagadol, "the Great Shabbos." What is so great about this Shabbos?

There are at least 10 reasons for this.

One of my least favorite explanations is that it is called a big Shabbos because on the Shabbos before Pesach the Rabbi supposed to give a veery biiig speech. (There are contemporary commentators, many in our Shul, who reject this explanation. A "great" speech is short and to the point and entertaining, they argue. This is a reason to call it the Boring Shabbos or the Sleepy Shabbos, in their opinion.)

Here is another explanation:

The Midrash says that when the Jews took a sheep per household on the tenth of Nissan as commanded by Hashem, the Egyptians asked them what they were doing.

The Jews replied, "We are commanded to take a sheep and four days later we are to slaughter it and eat it at night with Matzah and Marror. That night, at midnight, all of the first born of Egypt will die."

When the first born Egyptians heard this, they went to their elders and argued: "Everything that Moshe has said until now has come to pass. Certainly this will come to pass as well. Why should we die? Send out the Jewish people as they have asked!"

The elders replied, "Even if every single Egyptian were to die, we will not send out the Jews."

The first born did not accept this response and went to war against those who refused to let the Jews go. A great battle ensued and many died in this civil war.

The Midrash concludes that this is the meaning of the Pasuk in Tehillim (Ps. 136:10) which we recite every Shabbos morning, *למכה מצרים בכוריהם* – "Who struck Egypt through their first born." The verse is not just referring to the fact that the death of the first born was one of the Makos which befell the Egyptians. Rather it is saying that the Egyptians were smitten at the hands of their own first born.

Tosfos in Tractate Shabbos (87b) makes the following observation: The Gemara there says that the Jews left Egypt on a Thursday. If Thursday was the 15th of Nissan then the slaughtering of the Korban Pesach must have been Wednesday, and the day that the sheep were taken, the tenth of Nissan, which was four days earlier, as noted above, must have been the preceding Shabbos. Thus the incident with the first born and the ensuing civil war took place on the Shabbos before Pesach.

And this, says Tosfos, is the reason that the Shabbos before Pesach is called Shabbos Hagadol, the Great Shabbos, because of this great miracle.

Let us think about this for a minute. We have established, by combining the information in the Midrash and the information in the Gemara, that this incident took place on Shabbos. We can even see how such an extraordinary event, a civil war initiated by the first born who were considered the elite in the society, can be considered unnatural or maybe even miraculous. But great miracle? Greater than other miracles?

Is this greater than the splitting of the sea, for example? We know that splitting the sea was a great miracle. Often, when the Gemara wants to say that a certain thing is very difficult, even for G-d, so to speak, it will use the expression *קשה כקריאת ים סוף*, as difficult as splitting the sea. So, why isn't the seventh day of Pesach, the day the sea was split, referred to as a great day?

And, by referring only to this event as a great miracle, doesn't that imply that it is great in comparison to other miracles? Is this miracle in fact greater than the miracles of a few days later on the fifteenth of Nissan. After all, this uprising did not succeed in convincing Pharaoh to let the Jewish people go, whereas the death of all the first born at midnight of the fifteenth made him realize the error of his ways. So, why is this the Great Miracle, giving the title of Great to the 3332 Shabbosos before Pesach which have followed it, plus those yet to come in the future?

The answer lies in understanding why we might refer to a miracle as great or greater than another miracle.

What are miracles? They are events which are out of the ordinary, unnatural, in which we clearly see the hand of Hashem. Nature is also the hand of Hashem, but

since we are accustomed to it and find it predictable, the fact that it is being done by Hashem is not readily obvious to us.

We can predict that the sun will rise in the east tomorrow, giving the exact moment and the point on the horizon that it will appear. We don't have a good explanation for it happening other than this how Hashem set up the clockwork-like mechanism of our universe, but since it has happened unfailingly according to this pattern in the past, we do not need to be a prophet to predict sunrise in the east tomorrow. We call that nature.

Imagine the sun would rise in the west tomorrow! We can't. And, if it would happen it would definitely be declared a miracle because there is nothing in nature which can account for that possibility. A river turning into blood is a miracle. All of the first born of the nation dying as predicted at the split second of midnight is a miracle.

Miracles serve to remind us of the hand of Hashem, not only causing the miracle, but also in everything "natural" which happens because of the hidden hand of Hashem. But in order to reveal that hand of Hashem in nature, we must disturb nature to some degree in the form of a miracle. So, nature and Hashem are still incompatible in our perception. Either nature prevails and Hashem is hidden, or Hashem's revelation prevails and nature is distorted.

This is one reason why Purim is a great miracle. In the story of Purim, Hashem reveals himself to us, not by disturbing and distorting nature, but by shining through the natural events and occurrences which make up the Purim story.

Back to the rebellion of the first born:

The Maharal explains at length that Egypt and the Jews are polar opposites. Jews are "form" and Egypt is "substance." Jews are spiritual and Egypt is material. Jews are other-worldly and Egypt is this-worldly. Jews are G-dly and Egypt is mundane. You get the idea. And therefore, they can't coexist peacefully. Like two magnets which repel each other, each one is a rejection of the other. Therefore, either Egypt totally dominates and crushes the Jews when the Jews are not yet fully developed and formed, or, when the Jews reach that level of fullness as happened on the fifteenth of Nissan, they totally disassociate with the Egyptians, who are destroyed as the Jews leave. That is simply in the nature of things.

The first born represent the country in the strongest form. Think of what Yaakov said to Reuven in Parshas Vayechi (49:3): "Reuven, you are my first born. My might and my power ..." If Egypt in general is the opposite of the Jews and therefore must crush and enslave them, this should be especially the case with regard to the first born. They should be the strongest advocates for oppressing the Jews no matter what the cost. That is the nature of things. It is like those videos of two different animals trying to eat each other until they both die. It is in their nature and they can't help it.

Now, when the first born take the totally opposite position, fighting and killing the other Egyptians in order to set the Jews free, this is nature turning on itself! The hand of Hashem is being revealed here not by disrupting nature, not by merely shining through nature as in the Purim story. Nature itself is being totally unnatural, advocating, on its own, that which is the very opposite of its nature. Egypt is fighting for G-dliness, other-worldliness, the spirit, for the Jews to go free!

And, that is the greatest miracle of all.

We are living through times when nature seems to be turning on itself. For all of history, the way to get ahead was to be industrious, active, productive. To do the right thing for and in society, one needed to be engaged, among and with people, out there. No the opposite is true, the best thing that we can do for ourself and for others, per the natural order and the orders of the powers that be, is to stay home, stay away from other people, don't visit the sick or elderly, don't go to Shul to daven, etc.

We are experiencing an extraordinary disruption of the natural order of the entire world. We know that it is Hashem's plan and that it is "good for the Jews" even though we do not yet know why or how. As we sit isolated in our homes we are front seat witnesses to the unfolding of perhaps the greatest Nes Gadol in history. Hopefully it will all come to an end speedily in a way that is truly good for everyone. May we merit this year to celebrate Pesach all congregated together in the Third Bais Hamikdash to bring the Korban Pesach, with the coming of Moshiach NOW.