

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk** 

HOW BIG?

There's something about history. You either like it, or your eyes go all blurry when someone brings up an historical idea. Personally, I love history, and look for opportunities to discuss historical topics whenever I can. I think I'm trying to justify all the money spent on my BA in history. Whatever. In any case, I'd like to warn my dear readers who are in the 'blurry eye' category that I'm going to talk history until paragraph five. You are warned!

When did Shabbat Hagadol become a 'thing'? And which came first the special name or the special haftorah? There's no mention of it in Talmudic sources at all. The earliest mention of this custom is in Machzor Vitry, written by Rebbeinu Simcha ben Shmuel of the town of Vitry. He was a student of Rashi, and the book first appeared in 1208. There's also a mention of this practice in a Tosfot (Shabbat 87b). Both sources mention Shabbat Hagadol as if it were a known quantity. So, let's guess that the custom began in northern Europe, perhaps in the twelfth century.

Why is it called Shabbat Hagadol?

Machzor Vitry gives the famous answer that there were great miracles in Egypt that shabbat before the exodus, because the Jews tied up the lamb, a god of the Egyptians, to be sacrificed on the eve of the exodus, and they lived to tell the tale. The Shiblei Haleket written by Rabbi Dr. Tzidkiya ben Avraham also in the 13th century suggests that it's a great Shabbat because the rabbis gave major sermons. There was a marked lack of entertainment in the 1200's. The Avudraham (Reb David Avudraham, whose book on liturgical customs appeared in 1340), avers that the Shabbat before the exodus was when the Jews committed themselves to mitzva performance, and that's pretty great. But the Maharshal (Reb Shlomo Luria, 1510-1573) says we call it 'Great!', because of the Haftorah which refers to the 'great and awesome day (Malachi 3:22)' when Eliyahu will return to announce the redemption.

So, since the Maharshal was a few of centuries after the earliest mentions of this Great Shabbat, I'm going to stick my neck out and assume that the greatness of this Shabbat preceded the custom of reading this Haftorah. This is unusual, because other distinguished shabbatot get their distinct names from featured words in their Haftorot, like SHUVA, CHAZON, and NACHAMU. Nevertheless, I'm going to recklessly



discuss the end of the Haftora, because these verses discuss essential themes to this Shabbat and Pesach.

The antepenultimate (Ooh, I just love to us that fancy word for 'third from the last'.) verse of the Haftora states: Keep in remembrance the teaching of Moses, My servant the laws and ordinances which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel (Malachi 3:22). Malachi is the last prophet, and he ends the era of prophecy by warning the world to never depart from the mission of Moshe, the first great prophet, which began with the exodus. The miracle of Jewish survival is bound up with the continuity of Torat Moshe. Prophecy ends; Torah endures.

The next to the last verse: Lo, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord. At the end of next week, we will celebrate the redemption from Egyptian bondage. We recall that experience every day and night of our lives. Next week we relive it. We relive it, because it gives meaning to our existence as we live Torah lives that embody the hopes and dreams of those who were enslaved. We relive it, because all too often we have lived in chains of oppressors, who wanted nothing more than to wipe us off the face of God's world. We relive it, because it gives us hope for that future, final

redemption, ending all persecution, forever.

This 'great and awesome day of God,' of which Malachi speaks, is the day of the final revelation of God's glory. He is conjuring for us an image which compares all of Jewish history to a thread joining that redemption from Egypt and the final redemption as described in the Haftora. But while the first redemption took place in great haste and the spiritual development slowly evolved in its wake, the final redemption will begin with the visit of Eliyahu to repair and prepare carefully the hearts of all and to bring eternal peace to the world.

And, finally, Malachi concludes: that the heart of the parents must turn back to the children, and the heart of the children back to their parents. Our faith is about the MESORAH, that chain of tradition stretching back for millennia and forward to infinity. No ceremony so embodies this concept of MESORAH as the Pesach Seder. The whole night, when things go well, is about parents teaching and guiding children onto this unbroken ribbon of road. Malachi leaves us with the challenge: Don't allow generation gaps! They'll break the chain. The Haftora ends with the ominous word CHEREM, utter destruction. We can barely imagine how catastrophic a break in the MESORAH could be.



It's not our custom to end public readings on such a desperate note. So, we repeat the penultimate verse about the coming of Eliyahu. Rav Elchanan Samet in his article on this Haftorah for VBM points out how Eliyahu in Tanach and Eliyahu in Midrash are very different characters. The former stern and zealous; the latter warm and kind. Perhaps, the repetition ushers in the rehabilitation of Eliyahu's reputation. He may have been harsh in the past, but, in the future, he will be the herald of redemption.

On the Shabbat preceding our celebration of that first redemption we imagine and dream of the final redemption in order to include that, too, in our overall experience of the Seder night. How big is this connection between the redemption from Egypt and the final, complete redemption? Very big, indeed! 🤝