

Shabbat Hagadol
Tzav 5783

שבת הגדול
צו תשפ"ג



The Primacy of Questions

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שואליו ודורשיו בהלכות הפסח קודם הפסח שלשים יום

“One should ask questions and expound upon the laws of Passover thirty days prior to Passover.”

-B. Talmud Pesachim 6a

“It is known as Shabbat Hagadol, because on the Shabbat before Pesah the congregation would sit for a long time listening to the teaching of the rabbi. And the rabbi’s teaching covered many topics: the laws of *hametz* and *matzah*, rules of Pesah and *yom tov*, items related to the Exodus from Egypt, etc., and the congregation would not depart for their homes until the teaching was over. And the day is seen in the eyes of the congregation as larger and longer than other days, hence it is called ‘The Great Sabbath.’”¹

-*Shibbolei Haleket*, Zedekiah ben Abraham Anav (13th-Century Italy)

I know it is difficult to imagine, but the tradition throughout the communities of Europe was that the rabbi would stand up on the *bimah* to give a formal sermon only twice a year: on *Shabbat Shuvah* (between *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*), and on *Shabbat Hagadol*, the Shabbat preceding Passover. That’s it. No weekly sermon, no *d’var Torah* for the e-newsletter; only twice a year, to teach, and often at great length, on the laws of repentance and the laws of Passover respectively.²

These two moments in time, situated at opposite poles of

¹ In a [recent responsum](#), Rabbi David Golinkin suggests it is highly unlikely that this is the etymology for Shabbat Hagadol.

² The tradition of giving sermons on Shabbat dates to antiquity. However, it was typically delivered by a community’s *darshan* or an itinerant preacher.

the Jewish calendar—one focused on individual salvation, the other focused on national redemption—served as the perfect platform for a rabbi to stand before the community and offer a teaching meant to elevate the experience of not just the Sabbath, but the holiday that follows it as well.

So you can imagine the shock when the rabbi of Berlin, Rabbi Tzvi Halberstam, decided one year not to give the *derashah* on Shabbat Hagadol. When his congregation approached him and asked him why he would not speak, he said: “The matter of this *derashah* is referenced in the Talmud, where it says: ‘One should ask questions and expound upon the laws of Passover thirty days prior to Passover.’ First the congregation must ask the questions; only then does the rabbi know how to answer them; and as of today, no one has asked me a single question about Pesah!”

The truth is, of all the Jewish holidays of the year, Pesah requires the most forethought, the most planning, the most cleaning, and yes, the most questions! Jewish tradition understands deeply that ritual does not simply “occur;” it is instead the result of painstaking preparation and beginning with the end in mind.

There are three types of questions I believe we should ask as part of our planning for the holiday: the logistical, the pedagogical, and the communal.

The Logistical:

The first reason we must ask and answer questions thirty days prior to the holiday is that the primary experience of the holiday, the Seder, usually takes place in the home, and not in the synagogue. Each household is responsible for creating a Seder meal, and that involves a lot of questions! Which areas of the home require cleaning and which ones

do not? What is kosher this year and what is not? What's the rule about unopened tuna fish and orange juice? (Always remember to download this year's copy of the [Rabbinical Assembly's annual Pesah Guide!](#))

Other questions that need asking (and answering) long before the holiday begins are: Who's hosting this year? Who are we inviting? What's on the menu? And where's that shopping list we left for ourselves last year?

The Pedagogical:

Rabbi Moshe Isserles writes, regarding Shabbat Hagadol, "It is a tradition to read the Haggadah at *Minhah* . . ." (Gloss to *Shulhan Arukh* 430:1)

With the focus of the holiday being on the home, each Seder leader becomes the rabbi of their home, so to speak, and therefore needs to develop a "lesson plan" for how to create a meaningful experience for all involved. First, we must review the material of the Haggadah once again. What parts of it are familiar to us, overflowing with tunes and memories of Sedarim past? What parts of it need review, practice, learning, commentary?

Other pedagogical questions we must ask ourselves prior to the holiday include: Which Haggadot will we be using this year? Who's leading the Four Questions? How will we make this Seder welcoming to non-Jews with whom we share our joy? Where is there slavery today and what is our responsibility to eradicate it? Where are the lurking dangers to our values and traditions that "in each and every generation" seek to challenge our way of life?

The Communal:

Although much of the emphasis of Passover is on the individual and the household, we risk missing the entire essence of the holiday if we focus *only* on our home, on the table setting, or on the menu.

Isserles writes, "It is a tradition to buy wheat to distribute to the poor for their Passover needs. Everyone who has lived in the city for twelve months must contribute." (Gloss to *Shulhan Arukh* 429:1)

Here Rabbi Isserles teaches us that an important part of our Passover preparations must be ensuring that the community in which we live has the resources to support every individual's ability to fulfill the commandments of the holiday. As we learn in Mishnah Pesahim 10:1:

"Even the poor among [the people] Israel should not eat without reclining. And they must be given no fewer than four cups of wine, even [if they are sustained] from the charity plate."

These are our questions, our way of preparing for the holiday that is approaching, for our Jewish world, for our communities, and in our homes. By asking questions as to "how" we create the rituals of Passover, we are actually answering the question of the impertinent "wicked child" when they ask, "What is this ritual to you?"³ The answer is: "Look at all that we do for the sake of this holiday; it is because it means everything to us."

³ Exodus 12:26