

Shabbat HaGadol (Great Shabbat) is the Shabbat immediately before Pesach unless it's a leap year. The origin of the name has many sources. According to tradition, the 10<sup>th</sup> of Nisan fell on Shabbat in the year of the Exodus, and on that day the Israelites were commanded to select a lamb for each household. It is a great miracle that they were able to do this without repercussions from the Egyptians since for them, the ram and all its related animals were sacred. Another explanation holds that in committing themselves to HaShem by fulfilling this *mitzvah*, the Israelites became adults, i.e., *gadol* (Hezekiah da Silva, "Pri Chadash") The Chatam Sofer (Moses Schreiber) teaches that it is because the Israelites returned to monotheism, and acknowledged the greatness of HaShem. In addition, the Haftarah reading mentions the greatness of HaShem (Malachi 3:23). Finally, because rabbis usually take full advantage of the fact that this is traditionally one of the only two times a year that they must present a sermon, the service feels longer than usual.

Pesach, like Yom Kippur, is associated with lengthy services, including our traditional Seder, which in some cases, lasts far into the night. Strangely enough, one person has only a minor role in our Haggadah: Moses! Why? Who was he? And what does all that have to do with the *shalshet*, the longest, and one of the rarest cantillation signs?

Why? The Haggadah refers to Moses by name only once, in a quote from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century Midrash Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael, Beshalach 7:113), when Rabbi Yosi the Galilean cites it to prove that the Egyptians suffered 50 plagues in the Sea of Reeds. The midrash itself is a rabbinic polemic against the heresy of dualism. Because nascent Christianity elevated Jesus to the status of divine intermediary, and the Samaritans revered Moses in similar fashion, it was imperative to ensure that Moses remain unequivocally human. The many midrashim that point out Moses' shortcomings allude to the great precautions taken by the rabbis to prevent later generations from worshiping him alongside HaShem. In this light, our Haggadot emphasize that only HaShem has the power to bring us out of Egypt.

Who was Moses? We call him by this name, which refers to his being drawn out of the water by the Egyptian princess, as well as being drawn out of his self-imposed exile in Midian by HaShem in order to help draw his fellow Israelites out of Egypt. Our sages gave him other names as well, many of which refer to particular attributes. Foremost among these traits is his modesty, which is offset by his irascibility. Both influence the main driving forces in his life: compassion, sense of justice, and sense of duty, which in themselves are positive, but when taken to the extreme, as Moses is wont to do, often produce negative results. Like all human beings, Moses has his share of complexity. On the one hand, his profound sense of justice leads him to impulsively kill the Egyptian who was tormenting a slave, while on the other, his immense humility has him doubting his ability to answer HaShem's call to leadership. Midrash Exodus Rabbah 2:2 illustrates his extraordinary compassion: "Once, while Moses was tending Jethro's sheep, one of them ran away. Moses ran after it until it reached a small, shaded place. There, the lamb came across a pool and began to drink. As Moses approached it, he said, 'I did not know you ran away because you were thirsty. You are so exhausted.' He then put the lamb on his shoulders and carried him back. The Holy One said, 'Since you tend the sheep of human beings with such overwhelming love – by your life, I swear you shall be the shepherd of My sheep, Israel.'" But the fractious group he is leading more than once activates Moses' short temper, as evidenced in the incident of the golden calf and at the Waters of Meriva when he strikes the rock and berates the people for their complaining and lack of trust. His boundless sense of duty drives him onward as leader and teacher, but also causes him to neglect his wife and sons, and to wear himself out mitigating quarrels. How human, and how easy to identify with him now, as we continue to deal with COVID!

What about the *shalshet*? Weaving back and forth, up and down, this cantillation sign exudes indecision, both positive and negative. Lot at Sodom, Abraham's servant on the way to choose a bride for Isaac, Joseph resisting the advances of Potiphar's wife, and now, Moses in his final act of consecrating Aaron as High Priest. Modesty and sense of duty surely must collide with a tinge of pain at not having been chosen by HaShem for this office, which means his family will fade into the background after his death. He hesitates, both awestruck by his mission and wistful over the turn it has taken. By his very life, Moses – Moshe Rabbinu – is the quintessential teacher in whom we see the entire spectrum of what it means to be human. In one way or another, we are all leaders and teachers as well as followers and students, and like Moses, we must learn to understand and channel both our strengths and our weaknesses as we progress through the various phases of our complex lives. We are not immortal, but the choices we make during our short time on this earth may outlive us by many lifetimes, for good or for evil. So, we would do well to emulate Moses and choose the often more difficult, but nonetheless life-affirming path of good, with all its twists and turns, and all its joys and sorrows.

Shabbat shalom and CHAG PESACH SAMEACH!