

Shabbat HaGadol

Exodus 12:21-51; Malachi 3:4-24; Matthew 26:17-30

notes by Tim Hegg

Shabbat HaGadol is the Sabbath immediately preceding Pesach. It gained this title through rabbinic interpretation of the exodus events themselves. The Sages had determined that the 10th of Nisan fell on a Shabbat during the time of the exodus. According to the Torah, the people of Israel were to take a lamb on the 10th of the month in preparation for the Pesach sacrifice. But there was a significant problem: the lamb was one of Egypt's gods. The Israelites were fearful that if they obeyed the commandment of God, to take a lamb, the Egyptians would be upset and punishment would ensue. Yet when the Israelites obeyed, the Egyptians did not lift a finger. Moreover, so the rabbinic midrash teaches, when the Egyptians asked the Israelites why they were each taking a lamb into their homes, they were told of the impending sacrifice that would occur on the 14th of the month, and even then, the Egyptians did not become angry. The Sages attributed this to a great miracle of God Who protected the Israelites because of their obedience to His command. Thus the Sabbath before Pesach was called the "Great Sabbath," to commemorate the "great miracle" that God performed on behalf of Israel.

In the course of time, Shabbat HaGadol became the Sabbath on which final details regarding the observance of the Passover were discussed and taught. Thus, it was not uncommon that the teaching on Shabbat HaGadol became long, and some even jokingly have remarked that the reason it is called "great" is because it refers to the length of the rabbi's sermon!

We come, then, to זמן חרותנו, *zman cheiruteinu*, the time of our freedom, the celebration of Pesach and our redemption from Egypt by the hand of the Almighty. This festival looks back to a point in history when the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in accordance with His faithful covenant word (cf. Ex 2:24), stretched forth His hand (cf. Ex 6:6) and brought forth His people from the chains of slavery to freedom. As those who have Abraham as our father, we must never think that God simply redeemed that ancient generation. We must likewise see ourselves as unified with our people who came forth from Egypt—we were redeemed just as they were! The exodus is our exodus, and God's faithfulness is as much extended to us as it was to them. He has granted us freedom through the Lamb!

Thus, Moses instructs the people that in generations to come, when

our children ask why we celebrate the Pesach, we are to respond (Ex 12:27), “It is a Passover sacrifice to the LORD who passed over the houses of the sons of Israel in Egypt when He smote the Egyptians, but spared our homes.” We are not to say that He spared *their homes*, but that He spared *our homes*. We are to see ourselves as one with the generation that came out of Egypt.

Our Savior, however, emphasized another dimension of the Pesach seder—one that looked forward. From ancient times, the Pesach celebration was always considered to emphasize the ultimate freedom that Israel would enjoy in the Messianic age, when idolatry would be abolished, and all of the nations would turn to worship the God of Israel. Yeshua, in His celebration of the Pesach just prior to His crucifixion, took the matzah and used it to symbolize His own body that would be broken. Likewise, He took the third cup and spoke of His own sacrifice as the means by which sinners would be redeemed. Paul teaches that whenever we celebrate the Passover, we “proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes” (1Cor 11:26). Thus, the Pesach seder not only looks back to the inaugural event of the exodus, but also looks forward to the ultimate redemption of God’s people in the world to come. While the whole creation still groans and travails under the demise of sin (Rom 8:20–25), we know that there is coming the final day of redemption when our Messiah will return, and we will forever be with Him in a “day that is all Shabbat” (יום שְׁבִלּוֹ שַׁבָּת, *yom shekulo shabbat*). It is this freedom that we celebrate, for though our ultimate redemption is yet future, we share the reality of this salvation even now: the future has invaded the present through the completed work of Yeshua, and in His indwelling Spirit.

One of the stipulations given regarding Pesach is that no uncircumcised male should partake of the sacrificial lamb:

Adonai said to Moses and Aaron, “This is the ordinance of the Passover: no foreigner is to eat of it; but every man’s slave purchased with money, after you have circumcised him, then he may eat of it.” (Ex 12:43–44)

How do we reconcile this with the fact that Paul, in Gal 5:1–6, appears to instruct Gentile believers not to receive circumcision? Some have used this to teach that Paul did not expect Gentile believers to adhere to the commandments of Torah. For if he taught Gentile believers to forego circumcision, then he was likewise teaching them that they were not allowed to celebrate the Passover.

But the prohibition is in regard to eating the Pesach sacrifice, something that is impossible in our day, seeing that the Temple is not presently standing, nor is the Priesthood functioning. When the Torah says that no

uncircumcised male is “to eat of it,” the reference is to the Pesach lamb. Yet the question remains why the Torah would emphasize circumcision in connection with participation in the Pesach celebration.

Circumcision was given to Abraham as a sign of the Abrahamic covenant, and it was specifically required of all who were part of Abraham’s household, regardless of whether they were his physical descendants or not (Genesis 17:12). That is, community membership (being in Abraham’s household) presupposed covenant membership. The community of Abraham, and eventually Israel, was to be a nation separate from the pagan nations. But this sanctification was marked by obedience to God, not merely by physical lineage. Thus, it was expected that males who were part of the community of Israel would be circumcised as part of their obedience to the covenant stipulations. The crucial point is that covenant membership was not gained through the act of circumcision. Or to put it another way: they were circumcised because they were part of the covenant, not in order to become part of the covenant. This is Paul’s primary point in Romans 4, where he notes that Abraham came into covenant relationship with God before he was circumcised.

Unlike in later eras when the rabbis had invented the ritual of becoming a proselyte, declaring that circumcision (along with the offering of a sacrifice and undergoing a *mikvah*) was the means by which covenant membership was granted to Gentiles, in the time of ancient Israel, circumcision was a sign of those who were already part of the community of Israel. This is true for Abraham’s family as well as for the mixed multitude who were circumcised before entering the Land (Joshua 5). The circumcision at Gilgal is not presented as a way to become part of Israel. Rather, those who were already part of Israel were called to obey the Lord in receiving the sign of the covenant of which they were already a part. Granted, those who refused circumcision were to be cut off from their people (Gen 17:14). But the fact that the text clearly notes that an uncircumcised male would be cut off from his people because he had broken the covenant, would strongly indicate that he was a covenant member in spite of not being circumcised. The point is this: circumcision was an act of obedience for those within the covenant, it was not a means of entering the covenant. But it was not only neglecting circumcision that could cause a man to be cut off from his people. There were other outward signs of covenant obedience as well, such as abstaining from blood (Leviticus 17:13) or afflicting one’s soul on Yom Kippur (Lev 16:29f) or honoring the Sabbath (Exodus 20:9–10). In these examples, failure to obey God’s instructions would result in being cut off from one’s people. And, like circumcision, the native born and the *ger* (foreigner)

were expected to live in obedience to these commandments as well.

The structure of the Exodus narrative makes it clear why circumcision as the sign of the Abrahamic covenant was stressed in relationship to celebration of the Pesach. Throughout the story of the exodus, the repeated emphasis is that God acted on behalf of Israel because of His promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Indeed, the actions of God toward Israel in bringing her out from Egypt begin with the notice of the Abrahamic covenant, and this same emphasis is found throughout the exodus story:

So God heard their groaning; and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Exodus 2:24 (note also 3:6, 13, 15-16; 4:5; 6:8; 13:11; 15:2; 32:13; 33:1)

In subsequent generations as Israel came to celebrate the Passover, they were to be reminded that their freedom from slavery was in direct fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant, of which circumcision was the sign. Thus, redemption from Egypt is tied directly to Abraham's covenant, not to the Sinai covenant which came later. The whole picture of redemption is marred if it is not tied to the promise God made to Abraham. Or to put it another way, the fact that the exodus is based upon the Abrahamic covenant emphasizes that Israel's redemption from Egypt was a matter of God's pure grace, not something Israel deserved or earned, for the Abrahamic covenant is markedly one-sided, depending entirely upon God for its fulfillment. Thus, circumcision, as the sign of the Abrahamic covenant, stood as a reminder that one could not rely upon the flesh—that redemption was entirely the work of God. It is for this reason that circumcision was a basic requirement for participation in the ceremonial remembrance of redemption from Egypt.

This, however, is a far cry from the manner in which circumcision evolved into the rabbinic mandate for covenant membership itself. By the time of Yeshua and His Apostles, circumcision had become the primary mark of Jewish identity, which in turn had become the basis for covenant membership. Rather than obedience to God being the defining characteristic of covenant members, Jewish status had become the sole criterion. Entrance into the covenant was either by birth or by the process of becoming a proselyte. Thus, when Paul prohibits circumcision to the Gentiles (Galatians 5), it is not the mere physical cutting of the flesh that he prohibits. If this were the case, hundreds of thousands of Gentile boys born in Europe and America have become estranged from Messiah (cf. Gal 5:2f). But actually Paul is prohibiting Gentiles from becoming proselytes under the pressure of some who were influencing

them against his gospel. In an era when the prevailing theology taught proselytism as the sole method for Gentile inclusion into the covenant, it is understandable why Paul prohibited it, for it was in fact “another gospel.”

Moreover, it seems very probable that in the strong and direct language of Colossians 2:11, Paul is instructing the communities of The Way that believing Gentiles, though uncircumcised in the flesh, were to be received as though they were circumcised:

and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Messiah...

For what other reason would Paul be so concerned about Gentiles and circumcision? The language is stark and straightforward: “you were also circumcised.” The Gentile believers were to be considered and received as circumcised—as *bona fide* covenant members in every way. Subsequently they would be encouraged to obey the Torah commandment regarding physical circumcision (like Timothy, Acts 16), not in order to give them covenant status but as a simple act of obedience to the Lord.

Thus, genuine faith in Messiah brings the Gentile into the circle of the covenant people. Everyone who is born from above is received as a member of God’s family. This was clearly demonstrated in the giving of the Spirit to the Gentile believers of Cornelius’ household. In Acts 15, when Peter relates the events, he emphasizes that “God, who knows the heart, testified to them [the Gentiles] giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith” (vv. 8–9). If God had received them, evidenced by giving them His Spirit, then surely they were not to be excluded from the very festival that celebrated redemption! They, like Abraham, were made covenant members before being physically circumcised.

We may also ask why unleavened bread figures so prominently with the Pesach celebration and the ensuing days of Unleavened Bread. The exodus narrative tells us:

The Egyptians urged the people, to send them out of the land in haste, for they said, “We will all be dead.” So the people took their dough before it was leavened, with their kneading bowls bound up in the clothes on their shoulders. (Ex 12:33–34)

The whole point of unleavened bread was that Israel left in haste—they did not have time to let the dough rise. In others words, the lesson of

unleavened bread was that Israel was brought out by God's hand, not by her own ingenuity. She did not *plan* her own way out, but had to leave on God's command. In addition, unleavened bread is a reminder of saying "yes" to God. We could put it this way: "if you want leavened bread, you'll have to stay in Egypt (giving the dough time to rise). If you want to be free, you'll have to leave right now!" It is certain that eating unleavened bread in freedom is far better than eating leavened bread in slavery, and Israel understood that. She left Egypt with her kneading bowls on her shoulders.

In time, of course, leaven also symbolized a haughty spirit, or being "puffed up." It even became a symbol of sin in general, since sin, like leaven, has a way of multiplying and affecting all those who come in contact with it. Since in the exodus event, obedience to God meant leaving in haste, which in turn resulted in unleavened bread, it was an easy step to link leaven with rebellion and disobedience, or to put it another way, to remain in Egypt. Thus Paul can admonish the Corinthians:

Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Messiah our Passover also has been sacrificed. (1Cor 5:7)

Each year as we come to Passover, we begin the arduous task of cleaning our homes and removing the leaven. This exercise, like all of the *mitzvot* of the Torah, has a very keen spiritual lesson: in the same way that we work diligently to remove the leaven from our homes, so we are to give all diligence to the cleansing of our souls—removing the sin that weighs us down and causes estrangement with one another and with God. The fact that Pesach and Chag HaMatzot are wedded together as a single festival extends the prohibition against eating leaven for a full week. The symbolism may well be that the spirit of submission that Israel demonstrated to God's commands for leaving Egypt were to be on-going in their journey into freedom. Only as we are willing to follow God's ways, and conform our lives to His directives, will we find true freedom. We were redeemed to serve Him, and it is in serving Him that we find genuine meaning and satisfaction in life. Paul put it this way:

Therefore as you have received Messiah Yeshua the Lord, so walk in Him, having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude. (Col 2:6–7)

However, the symbolic aspects of leaven, when connected with the Torah commandments of Pesach and Chag HaMatzot, are primarily

given to remind us that our redemption was God's doing, not ours. We had to leave on His schedule, which meant leaving Egypt in haste. Conversely, the loaves offered on Shavuot are specifically said to be made with leaven:

You shall also count for yourselves from the day after the sabbath, from the day when you brought in the sheaf of the wave offering; there shall be seven complete sabbaths. You shall count fifty days to the day after the seventh sabbath; then you shall present a new grain offering to the LORD. You shall bring in from your dwelling places two loaves of bread for a wave offering, made of two-tenths of an ephah; they shall be of a fine flour, baked with leaven as first fruits to the LORD. (Lev 23:15–17)

This seems to be at variance with Lev 2:11–

No grain offering, which you bring to the LORD, shall be made with leaven, for you shall not offer up in smoke any leaven or any honey as an offering by fire to the LORD. (Lev 2:11)

The explanation is that the two leavened loaves are not offered upon the altar, but are simply given as a wave offering (*tenuphah*) to the priests themselves. Thus, anything burnt on the altar could not contain leaven, but wave offerings given to the priests could.

What is the significance? Leaven loaves take time to rise. This speaks freemen, where they are in control of their own schedules in contrast to slaves who live under the demanding schedule of taskmasters. No longer under the slave masters of Egypt, Israel is able to obey their new Master. Paul uses this same metaphor to speak of eternal redemption:

But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. (Rom 6:17–18)

The Apostolic portion chosen for this Shabbat is Matthew's account of Yeshua's last Passover with His disciples. In this account, it is clear that Yeshua is eating a Pesach seder. The text clearly denotes the time-frame: "Now on the first *day* of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Yeshua and asked, 'Where do You want us to prepare for You to eat the Passover?'" In the time of Yeshua, the 14th of Nisan was considered the first day of Unleavened Bread, since the prevailing *halachah* was that all leaven be removed by noon on the 14th. Thus, this is the day on which the lambs were slain, and then roasted in preparation for the

Pesach seder. The disciples ask Yeshua where they should “prepare to eat the Pesach,” which would surely have included the roasting of the Pesach lamb. This could hardly have been done on the 13th for there is no evidence whatsoever that the lambs for Passover were slaughtered in the Temple on the 13th, which would have been in direct violation of Ex 12:6, which specifies “twilight” (בֵּין הָעֶרְבָיִם) on the 14th as the time for slaughtering the Pesach sacrifice. Twilight comes at the end of the day, not at the beginning. Thus, according to Matthew’s account, Yeshua and His disciples celebrated the Pesach in accordance with the Torah, at the end of the 14th, and continuing into the 15th. In like manner, according to Matthew’s account, Yeshua would have been crucified on the 15th, the day following the slaughter of the Pesach lambs. The fact that Yeshua was not crucified at the same time as the paschal lambs in no way diminishes the fact that He was the fulfillment of the Pesach sacrifice. For surely Yeshua fulfilled the Yom Kippur sacrifice as well, but His crucifixion in no way coincided with that Festival.

The Gospel accounts would suggest that Judas was sitting next to Yeshua, for they shared the same dipping bowl. This could have been the bitter herbs into which the matzah or some vegetable was dipped. If so, how ironic that the symbol of bitterness would be the agent for pointing out the betrayer! Judas, sitting next to the Lord of redemption, would remain in the bitterness of slavery, for he would inevitably reject the Messiah and the freedom He offered. What was it that made the difference? Why did eleven of the disciples follow their Master, even giving their lives for His testimony, but Judas betrayed Him? Here we find the mystery of God’s sovereign grace. Peter declares on the day of Shavuot:

Men of Israel, listen to these words: Yeshua the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know — this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death (Acts 2:22–23).

Here we come face to face with the mystery of God’s sovereignty and the unexplainable methods by which He brings about His purposes for mankind. How are we to know if we are His chosen ones, the recipients of His grace in Yeshua? By turning to Him in faith; trusting Him for our lives, and accepting from Him the freedom He gives in Yeshua. Our exodus from the domain of darkness, and our being brought into the kingdom of His Son (Col 1:13) is proof that we are His chosen ones, the recipients of His eternal and sovereign love.