

Dear Community,

The Shabbos before Pesach is traditionally named 'Shabbos Hagadol:' the "large" or "great" Shabbos. This title dates back at least a thousand years, but the etymology of the title is debatable. My personal favorite is the opinion of the Shiboley Haleket (circa 13th century), who ascribes the word 'Gadol' to the custom of holding an extended rabbi's sermon, making the day feel really long for all the congregants. Whatever the source, this Shabbat, on which the rabbi traditionally devotes the majority of his sermon to the laws of Pesach, is the formal prelude to our upcoming festival.

Pesach is a holiday so entrenched in the Jewish consciousness that for many Jews, no matter our level of observance, however much we might doubt the historical nature of the events, or even doubt the actual existence of G-d, the Pesach Seder remains essential. If we value our Jewish identity at all, we make sure to celebrate this, what is to some an arcane, ritual. In fact, the author of the Haggadah presciently alludes to this phenomenon in the passage about the Four Sons, claiming that no matter the level of faith, or educational background, these archetypes will still be by the Seder.

Indeed, this level of observance extends not only to the actual Seder, but to the week of Pesach. Many who don't observe the laws of Kashrut during the year hound the kosher aisle to ensure that their food for the Seder, and for many their food for the entire holiday, is chametz-free. But for all preparation and dedication to the observance of the holiday, how many of us emerge from the holiday any richer in spirit and inspiration? How many of us simply spend the Seder, slightly woozy from

the wine, coveting more *karpas*, and wishing unkind things on the Maggid *shlepper* (untranslatable word)? We spend the rest of Pesach complaining about the various digestive properties of matzah, fantasizing about a simple slice of crusty bread with butter, and convincing ourselves that matzah pizza is not a sin against the Italian community. If we are to embrace this holiday, shouldn't we be thinking about what message this holiday is sending us?

The only way we can fully access the true spiritual wealth that Pesach has to offer is to prepare for the holiday intellectually and spiritually, as intensely as we prepare physically. When was the last time we sat down with a Haggadah and some commentaries to study the timeless messages sent to us through the ages? Are we taking some time to introspect about what being Jewish means to us? How can we expect to celebrate the creation of a Jewish people, an identity, without any thought as to what role it does and should play in our lives?

Shabbos Hagadol should be a reminder of the arrival of yet another Pesach, yet another Seder, and yet another chance to emerge from our present-day emotional and spiritual bonds to the freedom of becoming the Jewish nation. Let's use this opportunity to empower ourselves to experience the power and inspiration of Pesach.

Good Shabbos,

Rabbi Shlomo Agishtein

