

Parshas Tzav – Shabbos HaGodol – David Levy (reprint)

י ניסן תש"פ – 4^ה שבת פ"צ

As happens without exception in a non-leap year Shabbos Hagodol, the Shabbos immediately preceding Pesach, coincides with the Torah reading of Parashas Tzav. Rashi on Vayikroh 6:2 quotes Rabbi Shimon that the expression Tzav meaning "command" implies encouragement and urging and is especially necessary in a situation where there is loss of money. The Cohanim, to whose obligations, this Parasha is devoted, suffered financial loss because they had to forego the regular means of earning a living. Perhaps slightly tongue in cheek we can find a link to Pesach in that people need to be commanded to undertake the expense of buying Chometz free food and special utensils!

Let us however focus on why this Shabbos is referred to as Hagodol. Dozens of explanations for it have been given. Grammatically Shabbos Hagodol is incorrect. Shabbos is normally a feminine noun but Hagodol is the masculine form. Secondly, the correct formulation would be either Shabbos Godol ("a Great Shabbos") or Hashabbos Hagodol ("the Great Shabbos"). Shabbos Hagodol literally means "Shabbos of The Great"

Mateh Moshe citing his teacher Maharshal says the name is taken from the Haftorah read on this Shabbos - Malachi 3;4-24 whose penultimate verse states: "Behold I will send you Elijah the Prophet before the great (Hagodol) and awesome day of Hash'm".

However some places only have the custom to read this Haftorah when Shabbos Hagodol actually falls on Erev Pesach (Aruch HaShulchan 430:5 explains why) which does not happen in most years. So that would not explain why in those other years it is still called Shabbos Hagodol

Rashi in Sefer HaPardes says that as Y'tzias Mitzrayim, 15th Nisan, occurred on a Thursday (count back 50 days from Matan Torah which occurred on a Shabbos) therefore 10th Nisan, the day when B'nei Yisroel each took a lamb ready for the Korban Pesach (Sh'mos 12:3) was Shabbos. Although this animal was worshipped by the Egyptians a great miracle happened in that they were prevented from harming B'nei Yisroel hence the name Shabbos Hagodol.

This explanation does not address the two grammatical questions raised above. Eliyahu Kitov in "The Book of our Heritage" Vol 2 explains the apparently wrong gender by saying: "We often find the feminine form changes to the masculine when it denotes something great and important" – apologies to the feminists amongst us!

Mateh Moshe considers that as B'nei Yisrael spoke Aramaic rather than Hebrew if the meaning were "the Great Shabbos" it would be called Shabbosoh Rabboh (like Hoshanoh Rabboh). So he concludes Hagodol is appropriate as it refers both to the great miracle and to the special Haftorah of the day.

He also offers another answer in the name of the Shibbolei Haleket. On the Shabbos before Pesach people stay in synagogue much later than usual to hear the laws of Pesach (what has become known as the Shabbos Hagodol D'roshoh). The day seemed longer than usual and became known as HaGodol but this does not answer the grammatical questions.

Avudraham in the name of Machzor Vitry suggests Shabbos Hagodol got its name because this was the first Shabbos upon which B'nei Yisroel became obligated to perform Mitzvos and Chizkuni on Sh'mos 12:3 also says it was because on this day they performed their very first Mitzvah the taking of the lamb for the Korban Pesach. On this Shabbos they were transformed from: "one who is not commanded" to "one who is commanded". This neatly fits in with the fact that in all non-leap years Shabbos Hagodol coincides with Parashas Tzav (command).

Rabbi Menachem Kasher quotes Ri mi-Trani in the name of his father the Mabit that, according to a Midrash, Moshe persuaded Paro that the B'nei Yisroel would work better if they had a day's rest each week and Paroh accepted Moshe's suggestion that this day should be Shabbos. On all other weeks after Shabbos B'nei Yisroel had to return to slavery but on this occasion they did not – hence it was Shabbos Hagodol. Rabbi Kasher adds another ingenious (or far-fetched?) explanation. Before Matan Torah B'nei Yisroel had the status of non-Jews where day starts and ends at midnight. On this Shabbos B'nei Yisroel changed their status and became "Bar Mitzvah" where the day is reckoned from sunset to sunset (or nightfall) but after this Shabbos they reverted to non-Jewish status (temporarily until Matan Torah) so they had Friday night as Jews and Motzo'ei Shabbos as non-Jews i.e. an extra long or "great" Shabbos!

Finally, some commentators suggest that Hagodol refers not to Shabbos but to other objects: Bircas Chayim quotes Kol Bo in the name of the Rosh – there was a custom to bake large Shabbos Challos before Shabbos Hagodol for distribution to the poor. It became known as Shabbos Lechem Hagodol but later the "Lechem" was dropped. He also quotes Rabbi Mordechai Y L Zaks that when B'nei Yisroel took the Korban Pesach in Mitzrayim they sang the Great Hallel (Tehilim 136 which we say at the Seder) so it was known as Shabbos Hallel Hagodol and again shortened to Shabbos Hagodol. A further idea of Rabbi Kasher's: Hash'm said to B'nei Yisroel when they left Mitzrayim: "There is no greater month for you than this" so it was originally called Shabbos Hachodesh Hagodol and shortened later.

So these are ten explanations for the name Shabbos Hagodol (with acknowledgement to Rabbi Joseph Pearlman's "Pearls of Light").