

שבת הגדול

The שבת before פסח is known as שבת הגדול. Why is it called שבת הגדול? The answer that most of us learned is that it is based on a miracle that happened in Egypt on the tenth of ניסן which was a שבת when the Jews brought a sheep into their home to slaughter as the קרבן פסח. Although the sheep were the deity of the Egyptians, the רבוננו של עולם performed a miracle and the Egyptians did not harm the Jews who were about to slaughter their deity. The day then became known as שבת הגדול. Do we find any references to שבת הגדול in the גמרא? A CD-ROM search of those words brought no results from the תלמוד ירושלמי or the תלמוד בבלי.

Professors Shmuel and Ze'ev Safrai of Bar-Ilan University in their book "הגדת חז"ל" note that the first reference to שבת הגדול in any Rabbinic literature is from the סידור רש"י סימן שנב'—אמר רבי: שבת שלפני הפסח נהגו העם לקרותו שבת הגדול, ואינן יודעים על מה, שאינו גדול יותר משאר שבתות השנה, אלא לפי שבניסן שבו יצאו ישראל ממצרים חמישי בשבת היה, כדאמר בסדר עולם, ומקחו של פסח שבעשר היה בשבת שלפני הפסח, אמרו ישראל הן נזבה את תועבת מצרים לעיניהם ולא יסקלונו (שמות ח' כ"ב), אמר להם הקב"ה לישראל עתה תראו הפלא אשר אעשה לכם, הלכו ולקחו איש את פסחיהם. להיות להם למשמרת עד ארבעה עשר יום לחדש, כשראו מצרים היו רוצים להנקם מהם, והיו מיעיהם מרותכין ובאש נדעכין, ונידונו ביסורין ובחולאים גדולים ורעים ומרים, ולא הזיקו מאומה לישראל, ועל שם שנעשו בו ניסים לישראל באותה שבת שלפני הפסח לפיכך נקרא שבת הגדול שבת שלפני הפסח, מפי ר' אברהם נ"ע:

רש"י admits that he does not know the origin of the term "שבת הגדול". Professors Safrai report that they found a reference to a "Great Sabbath" in the New Testament. It appears that the Christians called the Saturday before Easter, the Great Sabbath. That does not mean that the Christians coined the term "Great Sabbath." It is the opinion of many scholars that the New Testament is an excellent source for uncovering how Jews lived in the first and second century of the Common Era because the early Christians were Jews. Professors Safrai conclude from the language in the New Testament that in the First and Second Centuries, Jews were already calling the שבת before פסח, שבת הגדול.

Professors Safrai present a second possible source for the term שבת הגדול. It is based on the הנה אנכי שלח לכם את אליה הנביא לפני בוא יום ה' הגדול: הפטרה in the פסוק in the תרגומים. The first night of פסח is called "ליל שימורים". והנורא

כלילה השמור לגאולה בעבר ולגאולה interpret those words to mean: ארצישראלים יום. Since the פסוק in the הפטרה promises that אליהו הנביא will come before the שבת הגדול, it is expected that אליהו הנביא will come on the שבת before פסח. That שבת then became known as the day that אליהו הנביא will announce the שבת הגדול.

Professors Safrai suggest a third explanation. In their review of ספרי חכמי איטליה beginning in the 11th Century, they found that the authors called every שבת before a holiday, שבת הגדול. They also found a statement supporting that theory in the ספר ועל שנעשו נסים לישראל באותו שבת אשר לפני-שבולי הלקט סדר פסח סימן רה הפסח לפיכך נקרא שבת הגדול שבת שלפני הפסח. וכן נהגו לקרות שבתות לשלש רגלים.

Professors Safrai did not consider the פיוטים for שבת הגדול, which were written before רש"י lived, as a source. The פיוטים we recite do not make any reference to the miracle of the tenth of ניסן. It can be argued that the פיוטים support the position that the שבת before פסח was named שבת הגדול for reasons other than the miracle of the tenth of ניסן.

The first פיוט, פיוט אלקים בצערך, concerns itself with the fact that the רבונו של עולם humbled mighty Egypt and raised the esteem of בני ישראל. The second פיוט, ממסגר אסיר, relates how after defeating the Egyptians, the רבונו של עולם presented to בני ישראל the מצוה of שבת to strengthen them spiritually. A similar theme runs through the third פיוט, ישעי בני ישראל אברהם אבינו כרם חמד, פיוט, tells that in honor of בני ישראל left Egypt with great wealth and then inherited ארץ ישראל. The fifth פיוט, ירדת להציל, פיוט, relates how the רבונו של עולם sent משה and אהרון to notify בני ישראל about the גאולה and then struck the Egyptians מדה כנגד מדה. The sixth פיוט, אמנה גדולה, פיוט, tells how the רבונו של עולם left Egypt without food, having faith that the רבונו של עולם would provide for them in the desert. The seventh פיוט, אז רוב נסים, פיוט, which also appears in the הגדה, tells of the miracles that happened to the Jews on the first night of פסח throughout history and contains a prayer for the ultimate גאולה. The last פיוט, אלקי הרוחות, פיוט, contains a summary of the הלכות of פסח.

The פיוטים for שבת הגדול in contrast to the פיוטים of the ארבע פרשיות cover such a broad spectrum of subjects that they do not provide us with any clues as to why the שבת before פסח is called שבת הגדול. חג כשר ושמח!

TRANSLATION OF SOURCES

י"י-סידור רש"י-The Shabbat before Pesach was customarily called the Great Shabbat. But we do not know why it received that name. It is not greater than any other Shabbat that occurs during the year. There are those who explain that the name is based on the fact that the day the Jews came out of Egypt was a Thursday. The Jews had brought a sheep into their homes on the tenth of the month which was on the Shabbat before Pesach. The Jews said: How can we slaughter the sheep which is the deity of the Egyptians in front of the Egyptians? They will stone us. G-d then said to the Jews: You will now see the great miracles that I will perform on your behalf. The Jews then went and brought a sheep into their homes to be watched until the 14th day of the month. When the Egyptians saw what the Jews did, the Egyptians wanted to avenge the honor of their deities. But before they could do anything their intestines closed and burned with fire. The Egyptians were punished with horrible afflictions and caused no harm to the Jews. Because on that day miracles happened to the Jews, the Shabbat before Pesach became known as the Great Shabbat, the Shabbat before Pesach.

רה-ספר שבולי הלקט סדר פסח סימן רה-Because miracles happened to the Jews on the Shabbat before Pesach; therefore that Shabbat became known as the Great Shabbat. Similarly, they called every Shabbat before one of the three holidays by the name the Great Shabbat.