

Explaining the name **HaShabbat HaGadol**
the Shabbat before the Pesach (Passover)
holiday and the Seder evening. By Ari Lipinski

In the Book of **Maleachi**, chapter 3, verse 23, we read: “Hineh anochi sholeach lachem, et eliah hanavi, lifnei boh, yom HaShem **hagadol** vehanora.”

23 Lo, I will send you Elijah	כג הנה אנכי שלח
the prophet before the	לכם את אליה הנביא
coming of the great and	לפני בוא יום יהוה
awesome day of the Lord,	הגדול והנורא:

First of all, we are reminded that the name of the prophet Maleachi, means in English, “My Angel”. The Shabbat (Saturday), before the beginning of the Passover holiday, received the unique name “HaShabbat **HaGadol**”. Since this extraordinary name is well known – also because it is the Shabbat before the major holiday of Passover – people ask where the name came from. Several of the most important scholars provided very different reasons for having this name. The following, is a collection, specially compiled by Ari Lipinski from many different sources of about fifteen different interpretations of the reasons for the name “HaShabbat **HaGadol**”:

1. The original name of “HaShabbat **HaGadol**”, stems from the special verse number 23 in chapter 3 of the Book of Maleachi, since it is read in the synagogue as the Haftara, the additional passage from the prophets, that is read after the reading of the weekly portion from the Torah (the Five Books of Moses).

Since the prophet Maleachi refers to the great day of the arrival of the Messiah, as the “Great Day” (Hayom Hagadol), the Shabbat in which this wonderful prophecy is announced, is named “HaShabbat **HaGadol**”.

The prophet Maleachi, mentions that God will send his beloved prophet Eliah, to announce the imminent arrival of the Messiah.

In the Jewish Bible, Maleachi is chronologically the last prophet. He lived during the time of the prophets Zacharia, and Chagai. It was the era of about 520 BC. That means that we read today, on the Shabbat before Pesach, the two-



Maleachi, Duccio di Buoninsegna, 1310, Siena Cathedral

thousand-year old prophecy, which Maleachi told his fellow Israelites, who had just returned from the Babylonian Exile.

2. A further major reason for naming of the “HaShabbat **HaGadol**”, is that it refers to the great (**Gadol**) miracle, during the night before the Exodus from Egypt took place. In the Book of Exodus, we read that the Children of Israel had to slaughter sheep, deliberately,

despite the fact that sheep were one of the gods in Egypt at that time. The blood of the sheep was required to be used, for marking all the entrances of the housings of the Children of Israel. They dipped the Hyssop in the blood of the sheep as an open demonstration of their belief and trust in the LORD, the God of Israel. It was a demonstration that the Israelites did not believe in idols such as a sheep, but only in God Almighty.

The Great (HaGadol) miracle was that the Egyptians, who worshipped the sheep as an idol, did not attack the Israelites for conducting this demonstrative religious act. Because of this great miracle, the Shabbat is called “HaShabbat **HaGadol**”.

3. Another reason for calling the Shabbat before Passover, “HaShabbat **HaGadol**”, refers

to the Great (“**Gadol**”) miracle of God rescuing the people of Israel, by allowing them to cross the Red Sea (“Yam Suf”, Sea of Reeds). So, the name “HaShabbat **HaGadol**”, is derived from the reference to that great deliverance.

4. The Shabbat before the original Exodus from Egypt, as we read in the Book of Exodus, took place on the tenth of the Hebrew month of Nissan. Another reason for naming the Shabbat before Pesach, “HaShabbat **HaGadol**”, is due to another great (“**Gadol**”) miracle, namely, that the crossing of the Jordan River, as we read in the Book of Joshua, took place exactly on the tenth of the month of Nissan, forty years after the first Pesach night, when the Exodus of the people of Israel began. So, the Shabbat before Pesach is called “HaShabbat **HaGadol**”, also in memory of this miraculous coincidence on the tenth day of Nissan.

5. The famous scholar and expositor **Chatam Sofer**, gave yet another explanation for the name “HaShabbat **HaGadol**”: By marking the entrances with the Hyssop and the blood of the sheep, the Children of Israel manifested demonstratively, their abandonment of idolatry. Since idolatry was a grave sin (“Chet Gadol”), the abandonment of it, presented a great miracle that is referred to by name the of “HaShabbat **HaGadol**”.

6. Rabbi **Jacob Emdin**, the writer of the famous prayer book “**Sidur Beth Yaakov**”, explained the name “HaShabbat **HaGadol**”, based on the fact that on the Shabbat before Pesach, the regulations of the “Mitzvot Ma’asser”, the Tithe, concerning the ten percent voluntary tax of all kinds of harvest, were explained to the People of Israel. The giving of the Tithe, is considered the fulfillment of a Great (“**Gadol**”) Mitzvah (commandment). The calculation of the annual Tithe is based on the year, which begins in spring, in the month of Nissan. Thus, the beginning of the liberation from the slavery in Egypt, corresponds with the freedom to fulfill the commandments of the Tithe. (Details are found in the Mishna, tractate, Rosh HaShanna, chapter 16, verse 71.)

7. The scholars drew yet another original explanation for the unique name, “HaShabbat

HaGadol”, from the following comparison: The Land of Israel is the Promised Land. The Mediterranean, the sea adjacent to the Holy Land, is called in the Torah, “Hayam **HaGadol**” (The great sea). Therefore, the Shabbat before the Pesach holiday, is called “HaShabbat **HaGadol**”. It is, so to speak, adjacent to the Pesach-holiday.

8. The scholars tell us of another interesting explanation for the name “HaShabbat **HaGadol**”: Since it is obligatory to get rid of all leavened bread and flour (“Chametz”), in the house, it became a traditional custom to collect all the remains of the leavened bread, and to bake with it **large** (“**Gadol**”) loaves of bread. These large loaves were dedicated and offered to the poor, in the week before the Passover holiday. Thus, a family could get rid of the remaining “Chametz” at home, and at the same time, make a charitable donation to the needy (“Tzedakah”). Therefore, the Shabbat before Pesach was associated with the Big (“**Gadol**”) loaves of bread, hence the name “HaShabbat **HaGadol**”.

Since in most traditional families, women are the ones who do the baking, they also obviously deserve a compliment for the wise combination they developed of cleaning their homes from the “Chametz”, by donating the remaining “Chametz” to the needy.

9. Due to the many commandments, and traditions, that one should pay attention to while preparing the festive meal of the “Seder” evening – the meal opening the Passover holiday – the Rabbis hold a “**Big**” explanatory speech (“Drasha **Gdola**”), on the Shabbat before the holiday. People got accustomed to call the Sabbath of this special “Drasha **Gdola**”, “HaShabbat **HaGadol**”.

10. A house in which the Torah is learned and lived by, is called “Bayit **Gadol**”. This is because, on the Shabbat before Pesach, the learning of the Torah portion is especially comprehensive. It makes the place literally and figuratively a “Bayit **Gadol**”. Therefore, the Shabbat making the house a “Bayit **Gadol**”, deserves the name “HaShabbat **HaGadol**”.

11. With a little sense of humor, the Rabbis like to call the Shabbat before Pesach, “HaShabbat **HaGadol**”, especially for the relevant young boy celebrating his “Bar Mitzvah”, by his first time of reading from the Torah scroll, as an accepted grownup. Thus, this day marks a great day for the young man, who by this ceremony becomes a grownup. Therefore, this Shabbat is once again, “HaShabbat **HaGadol**”.

12. The prophecy of Maleachi (in chapter 3), spoke of the arrival of the Messiah. When Cyrus II, in the year 538 BC, gave the Jews the permission, and even his encouragement, to return to Jerusalem, from the Babylonian Exile, in order to rebuild the Jewish temple in Jerusalem, it was conceived by many Jews to be a fulfillment of the announcement of the arrival of the Messiah. The tradition said that the announcement of Cyrus was before the Passover holiday. The miraculous coincidence that the permission to return to Jerusalem, took place ahead of the Pessah holiday, was a great historic event. Hence, it became yet another reason to call the Shabbat before Pessah, “HaShabbat **HaGadol**”.

13. According to the explanation of the famous expositor, *Rashi* (רש"י, **R**Abbi **S**hlomo Itzhaki, from Worms, Germany, 1040-1105), the arrival of the prophet Eliah, according to **Maleachi, chapter 3, verse 23**, will coincide with the day of the **Great Judgement**, as is already indicated in **Maleachi chapter 3, verse 18**. Therefore, the scholars derived the name “HaShabbat **HaGadol**”, from that day of Great Judgement.

¹⁸And you shall return and discern between the righteous and the wicked, between him who serves God and him who has not served Him.

יח וְשַׁבְּתֶם וּרְאִיתֶם
בֵּין צַדִּיק לְרָשָׁע בֵּין
עֹבֵד אֱלֹהִים לְאִשֶׁר
לֹא עֲבָדוּ:

The tradition attributes this great event to be before Pessah. Therefore, it is very suitable that the Shabbat before Pessah is called “HaShabbat **HaGadol**”.

14. A further, very special explanation for the name “HaShabbat **HaGadol**”, was based on yet another quote from the prophet **Maleachi, from chapter 3, verse 1**.

¹ Behold I send My angel, and he will clear a way before **Me**. And suddenly, the Lord Whom you seek will come to His Temple. And behold! **The angel of the covenant**, whom you desire, is coming, says the Lord of Hosts.

א הֲנִי שְׁלַח מַלְאָכִי
וּפְנֵה דֶרֶךְ לִפְנֵי
וּפְתָאֵם יְבוֹא אֵלַי-
הַיְכָלוֹ הָאֲדוֹן אֲשֶׁר-
אַתֶּם מְבַקְשִׁים
וּמַלְאָךְ הַבְּרִית
אֲשֶׁר-אַתֶּם חֹפְצִים
הִנֵּה-בָא אֲמַר יְהוָה
צְבָאוֹת:

Rabbi *Eben Ezra*, and *Don Isaac Abarbanel*, explained that the expression used by Maleachi, “**Malach HaBrit**” (**The Angel of the Covenant**), leads us to the conclusion that this arrival will be the major arrival proclaiming the approaching coming of the Messiah. The unique and rarely applied name, “**Malach HaBrit**” (The Angel of the Covenant), specifically refers to the time when **God Almighty** will fulfill his promises of the covenant with the people of Israel, and the people of all the nations, who will recognize that there is a creator. The day of the fulfillment of the covenant, will be the Great Day (“HaYom HaGadol”). Therefore, the name “HaShabbat **HaGadol**”, is most appropriate.

Interestingly, one may observe a difference between *Eben Ezra* and *Abarbanel*.

Eben Ezra explained that God himself was the Angel of the Covenant. He based it on the word “me” in verse 1.

Abarbanel, on the other hand, tended to see **Cyrus II**, as the Angel of the Covenant. He argued that the permission the Persian king, **Cyrus II**, gave the Jewish people to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, which **King Solomon** built in 960 BC, and the Babylonian **Nebuchadnezzar** destroyed in 586 BC, fit well the role of announcing in advance the Great Day of rebuilding Jerusalem. From the prophet **Zacharia**, we know that in 523 BC, he spoke in Jerusalem, to the Jews who had returned from Babylon, and described to them, the vision of the revival of the great city of Jerusalem. That event,

also further supported the idea of the name HaShabbat **HaGadol**".

15. Rabbi **Saadia Gaon** (Egypt, 882-942), gave his own explanation for "HaShabbat **HaGadol**", based on a quote from **Jeremiah, chapter 3, verse 14**.

¹⁴Return, backsliding children, says the Lord, for I possessed you, and I will take you, one from a city and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion.

יָד שׁוֹבוּ בָנִים
שׁוֹבְרִים נְאֻם יְהוָה
כִּי אֶנְכִי בָעֵלְתִי בְכֶם
וְלִקְחֹתִי אֶתְכֶם אֶחָד
מֵעִיר וּשְׁנַיִם
מִמִּשְׁפָּחָה וְהִבֵּאתִי
אֶתְכֶם צִיּוֹן:

The prophet **Jeremiah**, described the day of return from the Exile to the Land of Israel, as the **Great event** ("Gadol").



Jeremiah (650-586 b.c.), **Michelangelo**, Sistine Chapel

Since the Shabbat before Pessah is the first reference of the great Exodus, **paving the way to the return to the Promised Land of Israel**, the name "HaShabbat **HaGadol**", is perfectly suitable.

16. A further source from which the name "HaShabbat **HaGadol**" is derived, is from the prophet **Ezekiel, chapter 39, verses 27-28**.

²⁷When I return them from the peoples and gather them from the lands of their enemies, I shall be sanctified through them before the eyes of many nations.

כִּז בְּשׁוֹבְרֵי אוֹתָם
מִן־הָעַמִּים וְקִבַּצְתִּי
אֹתָם מֵאַרְצוֹת
אֲבִיָּהֶם וְנִקְדַּשְׁתִּי
בָּם לְעֵינֵי הַגּוֹיִם
רַבִּים:

²⁸And they will know that I am the Lord their God when I exile them to the nations, and I shall gather them to their land, and I shall no longer leave any of them there.

כֹּחַ וַיִּדְעוּ כִּי אֲנִי
יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיהֶם
בְּהַגְלוֹתִי אֹתָם אֶל־
הַגּוֹיִם וְכִנְסֹתִים עַל־
אֲדָמָתָם וְלֹא־אוֹתִיר
עוֹד מֵהֶם שָׁם:



Ezekiel (622-570 b.c.), **Michelangelo**, Sistine Chapel

17. The scholars also refer to the prophet **Hosea**, in order to explain the name "HaShabbat **HaGadol**"

The expositors understand the statement of **Hosea, in chapter 12, verse 10**, and verse **14**, as a basis for the name "HaShabbat **HaGadol**".

The prophecies of the **return to the Promised Land**, the **great** event.

¹⁰ And I am the Lord your God from the land of Egypt; I will yet make you dwell in tents as in the days of the [early] times.

י ואנכי יהוה אלהיך
מארץ מצרים עד
אושבתך באהלים
כימי מועד:

¹⁴ And, through a prophet, the Lord brought up Israel from Egypt, and through a prophet they were guarded.

יד ובנביא העלה
יהוה את ישראל
ממצרים ובנביא
נשמר:



Ezekiel, Peter Paul Rubens (1610), The Louvre



Jeremiah, by Gustav Doré



Jeremiah, Rembrandt van Rijn (1630)



Hosea, by Duccio di Buoninsegna, in the Siena Cathedral (1311)