

“The propriety of reading the Haggadah on Shabbat Ha-Gadol”

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It is an Ashkenazi practice to recite a section of the Haggadah to Minchah on *Shabbat Ha-Gadol*, the Shabbat before Pesach. This is quoted by the halachic authority, R. Moses Isserles (*Ramah*: 16th cent. Polish halachist) in his gloss to the *Shulchan Aruch* (*O.H.* sec. 430), in the name of the *Sefer ha-Minhagim*. The fact that the practice was not mentioned by the Sephardi author of the *Shulchan Aruch*, Joseph Karo, indicates that it was confined to Ashkenazi tradition.

The Haggadah itself quotes the Talmudic sources for the notion that we should read the Haggadah in advance of the festival. In the section commencing *Yachol me'rosh chodesh*, it states: ‘I might have thought that the obligation [to relate the Exodus to our children] takes effect from the first day of the month [of Nisan]...’

This premise is based on the analogy with Purim where the entire month takes on a festive character in anticipation of the joyous day that occurs in the middle of the month. The Jerusalem Talmud (*Meg.* 1:1) states that ‘the entire month [of Adar] is appropriate for the reading of the Megillah since it states, *And the month which was transformed from grieving to joy* (Est.9:22). Hence, although the festival may only be celebrated on its appropriate day, the mitzvah of recalling its historical events and rituals becomes operative from the beginning of Adar. And hence the Talmudic

recommendation that – *mishenichnas Adar marbim b'simchah* – ‘from the beginning of Adar we should increase our celebration’ (Tal. *Ta'an*. 29a). Now, following this reasoning, and given that the Torah states, *Observe the month of Spring, and keep the Passover* (Deut. 16:1), we may well have assumed that, in the case of Pesach, likewise, the obligation to speak of the Exodus and read the Haggadah commences at the very outset of the month. Another reason for that assumption is that, according to the view of Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, one should study the laws of Pesach from two weeks before the festival – that is, from the beginning of the month of Nisan – since Moses stood before Israel on that day and taught them the laws of the festival (See Ex. 12:1).

(Jeffrey M.Cohen, *1001 Questions & Answers on Pesach*, pp.126-127)

The *Be'er Heitev* commentary adds that ‘Even if Erev Pesach falls on a Shabbat, we recite the Haggadah,’ to which the leading German authority, R. Yaakov Emden (1697-1776), in his *Mor Uk'tzi'a*, states, “I have always been astonished at this practice since reading the Haggadah fulfils the Seder mitzvah of *Maggid* (‘relating the Exodus’). It consequently contradicts the very text of the Haggadah itself which restricts the Passover ritual to the Seder celebration proper.” Emden supports this with a direct reference to the *Yachol meirosh Chodesh* exposition which deduces from the biblical phraseology that the Haggadah may only be recited – *besha'ah sheyeish matzah umaror munachim lefanecha* – ‘at the time when the ritual foods are before you!’ ‘How then,’ he asks, ‘may we introduce the recitation of the Haggadah on the Shabbat before

Pesach?’ This indeed begs the question how this practice arose and on what halachic basis it was permitted!

R. Shem Tov Gaguine (*Keter Shem Tov*, vol.3, p.104) quotes the *Minhagei Yeshurun* of Avraham Hirshowitz (1887-1941) which attempts to explain the practice as an important learning exercise, to reinforce familiarity with the text as a precaution against those years when Pesach falls on Shabbat. The authorities feared that, in the latter situation, since people were unfamiliar with the Haggadah text, they might augment the oil or adjust the wicks of their oil lamps (prohibited as ‘creating fire’) in order to improve the illumination on their Haggadot (See Mish. *Shab.* 1:3). Hence, for the sake of consistency, on *all other years* it became the custom to recite that section on the Shabbat before Pesach to facilitate memory of the text ahead of the Seder.

Rabbi Gaguine was unimpressed with this explanation, however. Firstly, because Seder night is always celebrated with family and guests, and it may be assumed that there would always be someone among the gathering who, seeing the Seder leader struggling to read the text in a dim light, would have immediately cautioned him against attempting to adjust the light on what was also a Sabbath day. Secondly, the fact that one may have read it once beforehand in synagogue on the previous Shabbat is hardly likely to impress it upon the memory. So that could hardly have been the original objective of the custom.

Thirdly, he argues, given that the Shabbat ha-Gadol recitation commences with *Avadim hayyinu* and ends with *lechapper al kol avonoteinu*, Hirshkowitz' theory makes the unreasonable assumption that the earlier sections of the Haggadah which were not prescribed for recitation on Shabbat ha-Gadol – such as *Ha lachmah* and *Mah Nishtanah* – and the subsequent passages – such as *Rabban Gamliel hayah omer*, *Pesach shehayu avoteinu hayu ochlin*, *matzah zoh*, *Maror zeh*, etc. – would all have been well known by heart to the extent that there would have been no issue of inadvertently adjusting the light in order to read them more easily?

Fourthly, he expresses surprise that the originators of the practice seem to have been ignorant of the clear statement in the *Shulchan Aruch* (O.H. 275:9) that, 'It is permitted to read out of a Haggadah on Pesach eve when it corresponds with the Sabbath [and we do not fear that one might adjust the wick] since there is no one so ignorant that the Haggadah is not well-known to him' (Methinks, Karo was thinking of his scholarly Safed circle!: JMC). Hence, the pedagogical reason suggested by Hirshkowitz for the recitation of this section of the Haggadah on the Shabbat before Pesach can hardly be justified.

This leads Rabbi Gaguine to offer a different rationale for its recital by Ashkenazim on Shabbat Ha-Gadol, namely that it represents a form of public announcement to the community that the festival is almost upon us, and that we should be sure to complete its numerous preparations. It was already an ancient institution to make such announcements in synagogue in a period when people didn't have calendars and might

think they had more time before the on-set of the festival. For the same reason it became the practice to offer public announcements of the forthcoming new moon on the Shabbat before Rosh Chodesh (*Shabbat m'varchin*), or even pre-Amidah announcements of individual prayers to be inserted, such as *Mashiv haruach* in the *Geshem* ('Prayer for Rain' on *Shemini Atzeret*), or *Ya'aleh v'yavo* or *Al ha-nisim* on festival days.

For the same reason, and before weekly sermons became the norm (In the UK they were not introduced before the beginning of the 19th century. See Appendix A, below), an exception was made on *Shabbat ha-Gadol* and *Shabbat Shuvah* when it was felt important to alert congregants to the manifold laws of Pesach and to inspire them to atonement in time for Yom Kippur.

The antiquity of the practice of reading biblical texts related to a particular festival is attested to by the late Talmudic tractate, *Masechet Sofrim* (8th cent. CE), from where we learn that it was an age-old custom in the land of Israel to read Megillat Esther in synagogue on the Shabbat afternoon before Purim, as well as the other Megillot – *Shir Hashirim*, *Ruth*, *Kohelet*, and *Eichah* – on the Shabbat afternoons before the festivals (Pesach, Shavuot, Succot, and Tisha B'Av, respectively). In the case of Purim, it was the practice to read half of the book of Esther – up until *Balayla ha-hu* (chap.6) – on the first Shabbat of Adar, and the second half of the book on the second Shabbat, just prior to the festival.

In the course of time that custom vanished almost without trace, *except* for Mincha on the Shabbat before Pesach when the remnant of it was retained in the form of a reading of some of the Haggadah.

We may now understand why they commenced with *Avadim Hayyinu* – omitting the earlier passages which refer specifically to the ritual foods – and concluded with *lechapper al kol avonoteinu* before Rabban Gamliel's explanations of the Paschal lamb, the matzah and maror and the blessings over, and eating of, the latter two foods. It was to avoid any suggestion that the Shabbat ha-Gadol Haggadah reading was pre-empting the Seder service.

Shabbat shalom v'chag same'ach,
Rabbi Jeffrey

Appendix A

One point that had been insisted upon by the Reformers was the necessity for regular sermons in English. In the eighteenth century, the pulpit addresses had been on the whole instructional rather than hortatory, and (so far as the Great Synagogue was concerned) always in Yiddish. Solomon Hirschell had naturally continued this tradition, his most important appearances in the pulpit - though not, as has sometimes been stated, the only ones - being on the conventional Sabbaths before the Day of Atonement and the Passover, when he expounded the regulations of those solemn occasions on the basis of Talmudic teaching. Sometimes, on special occasions, he spoke in English. English sermons from other qualified persons - mainly laymen - were not unknown. It is stated that an address delivered by Tobias Goodman at the Denmark Court Synagogue on the

occasion of the death of Princess Charlotte, on November 19th, 1817, was the earliest delivered in English in any synagogue in the country, though the same claim is made for a series begun at Liverpool as early as 1806. The exact date when English preaching began at the Great Synagogue is not recorded, but about the year 1830, Dr. Joshua van Oven and Arthur Lumley Davids (the precocious Orientalist) and in 1832-4 Henry Naphtali Solomon (who kept a once-famous school at Edmonton) were among those who gave occasional vernacular sermons in London.³ In 1841, when the Reform controversy was entering upon its most embittered phase, it was resolved to meet one of the criticisms of the Reformers by making arrangements for pulpit instruction in English at the Great Synagogue, and advertisements were published inviting applications from competent persons. The most likely candidate was David Myer Isaacs, who had already given proof of his ability at Liverpool and elsewhere and who, on March 13th, 1841, delivered the sermon at the special service on the triumphant return of Sir Moses Montefiore from his Damascus Mission.³ He was, however, foreign-born, and perhaps because of this no election was made. Not long after, a new Chief Rabbi belonging to the younger generation took it as a matter of course that an important part of his duties was the delivery of regular sermons (in the vernacular, as soon as he could master it), and this old-standing complaint was satisfied.