

SHABBOS HAGADOL

Greatness Lies Within

There are a number of enormously popular questions which have been addressed throughout the ages by just about everyone who has ever lifted a pen to write commentary on the Torah and Judaism. Among these is the rationale for the name we traditionally give to the Shabbos before Pesach - Shabbos Hagadol, the Great Shabbos. Why is this Shabbos different from every other Shabbos of the whole year? What gives it such particular greatness?

Let us consider for a moment the mystical power of a Shabbos. It is well-known that many people who return to Judaism are drawn initially by the mystical experience of spending Shabbos in an observant home. What did they see there? They saw people dressed in their finest clothes, sitting around a table covered with a white tablecloth and laid out with gleaming dishes and steaming platters of food, candles glowing softly, songs in the air and smiles on the faces. Certainly a very pleasant tableau. But wherein lies its power to transform the observer, to make him rethink his entire system of values and beliefs?

There is a famous story about Valentin Potocki, a young Polish count who lived in the beginning of the eighteenth century. One Friday, the count and his friends were out hunting on his estates when a sudden snowstorm drove them to seek shelter in an inn owned by the count and leased by a Jew.

The count and his friends were soon staggering drunk. "Moshke, bring more vodka!" the count shouted to the Jewish innkeeper, using the derogatory name given to Jewish concessionaires. "Moshke, bring more food! Moshke, dance for me the way Jews dance on their holidays!"

Fearing the loss of his position, the innkeeper obediently obeyed every demand for the entire afternoon, but as soon as darkness fell, he was nowhere to be found. Roaring with frustration, the intoxicated count went searching through the inn - until he found the Jewish innkeeper.

The laughingstock whom he and his friends had taunted all afternoon was standing in front of glowing candelabra, wearing a clean, dignified frock and surrounded by his family. He was holding a silver goblet of wine in his hand and reciting the Kiddush. The count was literally stunned. How could this be? How could that obsequious Jew who had scurried about to fulfill each of his drunken demands have been transformed into this royal figure that stood before him?

The count decided to investigate Judaism. He traveled incognito to Vienna, where he studied intensely and eventually converted to Judaism. He returned to Vilna in disguise to live as a Jew, but he was discovered by the authorities, arrested and burned at the stake. His ashes were gathered by Jews who buried them, and put up the monument reading: "Count Potocki - Ger Tzedek - Righteous Convert."

What had the count seen that so transformed him? He saw the Jew in his true state, defined by his spiritual status rather than his mundane condition. He saw the Jew transcend the darkness of the corrupt world by enveloping himself in the sanctified mantle called Shabbos. He saw the Jew illuminated with the inner light of his *neshamah* and revealed as the prince he truly is. He saw a supernatural spectacle, but one so familiar to those who experience it every week that they sometimes forget how supernatural it really is. For someone who experiences it for the first time, however, it is a revelation.

In Egypt, the enslavement of the Jews had not only deprived them of their liberty. It had demeaned them, contaminated them, robbed them of their self-esteem, of their exalted self-image as Hashem's chosen people and the descendants of the Patriarchs. But on the Shabbos before Pesach they were already emerging from this condition. And when, in full public view, they obeyed Hashem's command and tied up the sacrificial lambs, which the Egyptians worshipped as gods, they finally broke free of the yoke of spiritual bondage. In this condition, the experience of the Shabbos once again brought out their inner essence and revealed their true identity as great princes of the spirit.

In our own lives, we can use this awareness of this supernatural phenomenon to enhance our appreciation of the Shabbos. Let us remember that when we celebrate the Shabbos in the glow of the candles and the sacred melodies, the wine and the food, in the company of our friends and family, we illuminate ourselves with the inner glow of our spiritual essence, and we are uplifted to the status of great princes and princesses - which we indeed are.