



## THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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# Shabbat HaGadol as Independence Day

I remember well when the age at which one could vote or drink was 21. From my perspective when I was a child, and frankly eager to do these things, it seemed to be an injustice to set the age bar so high. 21 seemed a long way off.

As time progressed, the age for all of these things became lower and lower. By that time, I was well past the age of 21 and was critical of allowing children these privileges prematurely.

That's just one example of how our perspective changes with regard to the age-old question of who is a child and who is an adult. At what age does one pass from the status of a minor into majority?

From the point of view of Jewish religion things seem quite clear. Traditionally, boys become men at age 13. Recognizing that females mature earlier, our rabbis defined age 12 as the age of majority for a girl.

So it is with regard to the performance of *mitzvot* and other religious functions. A girl celebrates her bat mitzvah at age 12, and boys wear *tefillin* and are counted as part of a *minyan* at age 13. Before the age of 13 he is a *katan*, a minor. Afterwards, he is a *gadol*.

*Gadol* can mean adult, or it can mean large or great.

This Shabbat, the last one preceding

Passover, is known as Shabbat HaGadol. How are we to translate it? Is it the adult Shabbat, the large Shabbat, or perhaps the great Shabbat? Or does the word *gadol* mean something entirely different in this context?

Many have a custom to do a preliminary reading of the Passover *Haggadah* on this Shabbat. Those of us who do so, and I count myself among them, will have an opportunity not just to read the ancient words but to study some commentary upon them. Thus, we will have the opportunity to familiarize ourselves with one of the dozens of *haggadot* on the market.

I would like to recommend one in particular, called *The Royal Table*, written by Rabbi Norman Lamm. I recommend this work in its entirety, but I would like to draw your attention to his creative approach to the meaning of the word *gadol*, and not just in the context of Shabbat HaGadol.

Rabbi Lamm points out that in the Talmud, *katan* does not always mean minor, nor does *gadol* invariably connote an adult. In certain contexts, Rabbi Lamm informs us, a person's status is not a question of age but a question of independence. In the words of the Talmud, "A *katan* who does not rely upon his father's table is a *gadol*. A *gadol* who is dependent upon his father

is a *katan*.”

This piece of Talmudic wisdom allows us a definition of *gadol* with entirely new vistas of insight and understanding. A *gadol* is someone who is self-reliant, who can stand on his own two feet, not just intellectually but in every other sense as well.

Thus, Rabbi Lamm teaches us that this Shabbat is called HaGadol because it marks our independence as a people. It was on this day that we were able to demonstrate to our Egyptian slave masters that we no longer feared them and were about to declare ourselves religiously, culturally, and physically independent.

I find myself taking the implications of Rabbi Lamm’s insights much further than he does. Nowadays, we refer to those Torah sages whose authority we revere and to whom we look for guidance as *gedolim*”, the plural of *gadol*.

I have often struggled with the question, as I am sure many of you do, as to what makes a *gadol*. Is it just his piety and erudition? Surely these are the necessary prerequisites for the status of *gadol*.

But reflection upon the great sages of Jewish history reveals that the outstanding Gedolim of the generations had streaks of independence, which they asserted in unique and often courageous ways.

Take Maimonides, the Rambam. His Torah scholarship and personal spirituality were unparalleled. Yet he embarked, quite intentionally, upon many new paths in his life. He undertook significant positions of community leadership, delved into areas of study of which his own teachers never knew, and did not fear to express his independence of thought even when he differed

from some of his predecessors.

Or consider Rabbi Moshe Sofer, known as the Chatam Sofer, who is generally thought to have been an ardent traditionalist. Yet he too demonstrated great independence when he formulated his own approach to combating the heretical movements of his time. He invented new ways to fight old battles.

The Chofetz Chaim and Rav Moshe Feinstein, to take two twentieth century *gedolim*, did not merely mimic their teachers and peers but undertook new approaches, new emphases, and dealt with unprecedented issues relying upon their profound scholarship for sure, but also were confident in their independent judgment. Rav Moshe even committed to writing some of his thoughts about the necessity of a *posek*, a halachic decisor, not to fear to express his independent thoughts when he was confident that they were correct.

Shabbat HaGadol gives us the opportunity to cherish our independence in so many ways. We must never abandon our Torah and tradition, but we must realize that there is a place for independence when it is appropriate.

Passover is the holiday of freedom and independence. Our sages teach us that no one is as free as he who studies Torah deeply. Independence of thought and creativity are values which are cherished by our tradition, and Passover is the time for us to celebrate those values. ■

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