

ARBA PARSHIOT: Special Sabbaths

During the month or so before Passover, five Shabbatot are characterized by special Maftir readings, called the Arba Parshiot [five Torah portions], which relate thematically to Passover or Purim: Shabbat Shekalim (which occurred February 21-22), Shabbat Zakhor, Shabbat Parah, Shabbat HaHodesh, Shabbat HaGadol.

SHABBAT ZAKHOR (MARCH 6 - 7)

Shabbat Zakhor, whose maftir reading, Deuteronomy 25:17-19, is an admonition to remember Amalek, the nation that surprised the Israelites wandering in the desert after the Exodus from Egypt with a rear attack on the stragglers. The Israelites constituted no military threat, leading some Jewish commentators to view Amalek as rebels against God, because they were trying to destroy the Israelites. God commands the Israelites, therefore, that when safely settled in Palestine, “You shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.”

The Torah instructs Jews to “remember Amalek,” a commandment fulfilled each year by publicly reading this passage on the Shabbat before Purim, because Haman, the arch-villain of the Scroll of Esther [megillat Esther], who tries to kill the Jews of Persia, is an Amalekite. The haftarah reading is I Samuel 15:2-34, which describes Saul’s war with Amalek.

SHABBAT PARAH (MARCH 13 - 14)

Shabbat Parah, the Sabbath of the Red Heifer, occurs on the Shabbat prior to Shabbat Hahodesh of the month of Nisan. The maftir reading, Numbers 19:1-22, deals with the red heifer whose ashes were combined with water to ritually purify anyone who had been in contact with a dead person. Because only people who were pure could eat from the Passover sacrifice, a public announcement right before Nisan reminded anyone who had become impure to purify themselves before making the Passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

The haftarah, Ezekiel 36:16-38, also deals with issues of being cleansed from contamination, but the impurity in this case symbolizes human sinfulness. But, like physical impurity, sins can be overcome. As God says in Ezekiel 36:25,26: “I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean: I will cleanse you from all your uncleanness and from all your fetishes [idolatrous practices]. And I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit into you.” This renewal of self and nation reflects Passover’s theme of redemption.

SHABBAT HAHODESH (MARCH 20 - 21)

Shabbat HaHodesh occurs either on the Shabbat before Rosh Hodesh Nisan or on Rosh Hodesh itself. The maftir reading is Exodus 12:1-20, which details eating the Passover sacrifice, with “your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand”; eating bitter herbs and unleavened bread; and putting blood on the door posts; and it lists the Passover laws.

The first day of Nisan is also important as the occasion for God’s first commandment, sanctifying the new moon, which begins the Torah reading, “This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you.” This commandment moved the determination of months from God’s agenda into the hands of the Jewish people, giving them control over time and the theological/liturgical cycle. The haftarah, Ezekiel 45:16-46:18, describes the sacrifices that the Israelites are to bring on the first of Nisan, on Passover, and on other festivals in the future Temple.

SHABBAT HAGADOL (APRIL 3 - 4)

The Shabbat before Pesah is called Shabbat HaGadol, the Great Sabbath. As the Israelites were preparing to leave Egypt, God commanded them to select a lamb that would serve as the Passover sacrifice. This mitzvah, or commandment, required the Israelites to actively participate in the redemption from Egypt. The name Shabbat HaGadol literally comes from a verse in the day’s haftarah, Malachi 3:4-24. “Lo, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before the coming of the awesome, fearful day of the Lord,” which alludes to a messianic future.

The past redemption at Passover is tied to the future messianic redemption, which, according to tradition, will also take place on Passover. Traditional practices on Shabbat HaGadol include reciting special hymns about the laws of Passover, reading the part of the Haggadah that begins with Avadim Hayinu, “We were slaves,” and listening to the community’s outstanding Torah scholar address the congregation on the laws of Passover.