

Parshat Bo:

New Moons, and the Renewal of the Soul.

At the opening to the dramatic chapter (12) in which God instructs Israel to take the Paschal lamb, we find a somewhat modest mitzva. It is the concept of Rosh Chodesh or to be more exact, the idea of Kiddush Hachodesh.

Included in these two lines are two commands:

1. The fixing of the beginning of a month with the new moon, just visible.
2. That the order of months of the year should start with Nissan, the month of Redemption.

This technical law might seem a little dwarfed by the drama and cataclysmic events of the night of the killing of the firstborn, but in truth, this law institutes a new calendar, a uniquely Jewish system of time-keeping, a Godly rhythm of time. Let us investigate this law and the concepts which underlie it.

Chavruta Study:

This shiur is based on the questions of Nechama Leibowitz in her Study Sheet of the year 5720 - 1960. She just asks the questions (most of which I have reproduced for you here) and she leaves you to think about the answers!

1. See the verses “inside”. SHEMOT 12:1-2

Look at the language and take note of the irregular phraseology here.

2. See RASHI on verse 2: “Hachodesh hazeh lachem”.

* How does Rashi translate the word “chodesh” according to his FIRST explanation?

* How does Rashi translate the word “chodesh” according to his SECOND explanation?

* Why did Rashi not suffice with his explanation according to “p’shat”? What forces him to add another explanation?

3. See the RAMBAN on verse 2: “Hahodesh hazeh lachem”

a) Read to “ta’am hachodesh hazeh lachem”

* What are the various questions which the RAMBAN is trying to answer in the verses?

b) Read to the end of this section in the Ramban.

* In his opinion why does the Torah give no names to the months of the year?

* What is the parallel between the months of the year and the days of the week?

* How does the Ramban explain the midrash that “They brought new month names with them from Bavel”? What does the Ramban prove from Jeremiah 16:14-15

4. If you have the time, see the lengthy comments of RABBI SAMSON RAPHAEL HIRSCH to this mitzva.

* What is his theory about why we emphasise the “birth” of the moon as a definition of our months?

When you are reading Hirsch - NOTE:

* His polemic with the people who see Rosh Chodesh as a primitive rite of ancient people who were frightened by the “disappearance” of the moon

* His polemic with Reform who argued against the celebration of two days of Yom-Tov in chutz la’aretz

Shiur:

Our parsha describes the first Mitzva that Am Yisrael are given, now as a national collective; our first national law. In a modest, unobtrusive passuk which can be passed over almost unnoticed, we are told of the inauguration of the Jewish calendar.

“ The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you.” (12:1-2)

And that is it! No explanation or elaboration. The first mitzva to the Jewish nation is transmitted in the most concise of forms. What does this compact instruction have to tell us? Indeed, why is this the first mitzva to be demanded of the Jewish people? And is Nissan - the month of Redemption - really the first month? - Rosh Hashanna, the Jewish “New Year”, is in Tishrei!

Looking at the text itself, we can ask further questions. The language of this mitzva is simply begging for further investigation. First, the introductory passuk - Why does it tell us that God commanded Moshe and Aharon “in the land of Egypt”? Why is the Egyptian location given emphasis? This phraseology is found nowhere else in the Egypt story. But there is also the command itself - it is a double barrelled sentence. First “This month shall mark for you the beginning of months..” and then “..it shall be the first of the months of the year for you.” What does one phrase tell us that the other does not?

“THIS MONTH”

Rashi is fully aware of all the problems that we have raised. His comment to v.2 is interesting:

“He showed him the moon at its moment of renewal and told him: ‘When the moon renews itself, it will be Rosh Chodesh - the advent of a new month. However, the verse should not be understood other than in accordance with the words themselves (kipeshuto). As regards the month of Nissan God told him ‘This will be the first of the system of months, Iyar will be called the second month, Sivan the third etc’.

THIS MONTH: Moshe found it difficult to grasp the exact point and size at which one can sanctify the moon. God pointed to the moon with His finger and showed him saying; “look at this! when you see this, call it holy.” And how could he show him by night? Does God not restrict his communication to Moshe to the day? ... He spoke to him at sundown and the visual demonstration was at night.”

This is an intricate Rashi. In essence, Rashi offers two interpretations. The first is the explanation of “peshat” - that which fits best with the context and flow of the words. The passuk reads: “This month (of Nissan) will be the head month, it is the first of the year”. The word “Chodesh” refers to the month of Nissan.

But Rashi has problems with this explanation. First, it means that the second section of the statement becomes a little irrelevant, for if this is the head month, then it is obvious that it is the first month in the year. Secondly, there is the use of the word ZEH which indicates something that one can point to, a concrete object. In many situations where the Torah talks about a specific object using the term “ZEH” Rashi makes a similar comment about a visual display of a concrete form. In each place he talks about being able to point to the object and say “This is it , look at it”. (See Rashi on Shemot 15:2, Bamidbar 8:4.) But you cannot point to a month! What was

God pointing at?

Rashi's tells us that God was pointing to the moon. He had to show Moshe what he meant by the "renewing" moon. When exactly does the moon become the signal for the commencement of the new month? God gives Moshe a practical demonstration and shows him how it all works. Textually, this solves a problem too. We can now read the verse as; "This moon is the signal for you for a Rosh Chodesh. This (month) will now be for you the first of all the months". Here we have two statements saying very different things!

This is not the "pshat" explanation because it pushes the words too much. Chodesh cannot really mean moon in Hebrew. But since this explanation has an edge over the p'shat explanation, Rashi chooses to quote both.

A DIVINE PEDAGOGUE

What is interesting here is Moshe's response to this first mitzva. Rashi tells us that he did not understand it - "Nitkashe Moshe". Moshe found a particular point difficult to grasp. He cannot see what God is trying to tell him. What does Moshe do? Does he give up? Does he just let it go? No! He asks God, he questions him. We can easily conjure up images of a patient teacher and a student who is finding it difficult to grasp the point. We can picture God explaining the point a second time - but still Moshe doesn't understand.

How does God respond to such a challenge? How might we expect God to react? God's response that is remarkable. Moshe is having some difficulty in understanding the concept when it is described to him in words. In response, God chooses to teach him "out of the classroom". They go on a "field trip". They leave the walls of the Beit Midrash and choose to look up at the moon.

Moshe has an educational need and "*lo habayshan lamed* - the bashful will not be a successful student." He is not afraid to challenge God when he fails to understand a particular detail. And God in turn, is prepared to invent new modes of learning, new pedagogic frameworks, in order to teach his student. Rashi tells us that usually God did not appear to Moshe at night. This time he did. Why? Because Moshe is his student and Moshe needs to learn. Rashi teaches us here, a profound message. That in the teaching of Torah, we must be creative. We must use new methods. God could have told Moshe the Halakha that is quoted in other contexts that even a prophet will not receive Nevuah at night. Yes, this "field trip" breaks all the rules! But God doesn't allow anything to get in the way of this "master class". God invents a new framework in which Moshe can understand.

And we too may learn a lesson. A teacher must always try to find new, more successful methods to teach Torah and a student must always be determined and unashamed when learning. (I heard this idea many years back from Rav Shimon Felix - a former Rebbi at Yeshivat Hamivtar.)

COUNTING FROM THE EXODUS

The Ramban understands the rationale of this law in the following way:

"The children of Israel should mark this month as the first, and should count months in relation to this one; the second, the third, to the twelfth month. This is to ensure that we remember the great miracle (of Yetziat Mitzrayim - the Exodus) for whenever we mention the month, we will (effectively) be mentioning the miracle. That is why there are no names of

months in the Torah, but the Torah will say (for example) : "And it came to pass in the third month"(19:1) or "In the second month of the second year"(Bamidbar 10:11). This is the same notion as our counting the days of the week in relation to Shabbat. And this is why it says in the verse 'it shall be the first of the months of the year FOR YOU'. In truth it is not the first month of the year (as the world was created in Tishrei), but it is the first month for you as it is a remembrance of our redemption."

The Ramban sees this Mitzva as marking the centrality of the exodus experience in the Jewish mindset. In the same way as the days of the week have no names in Judaism (and in modern Hebrew) - just yom rishon, yom sheni - to emphasise the prominence of Shabbat, similarly the months are simply a pointer to the month of miracles and redemption. (This will fit in with the theory that the Ramban presented in our Shiur last week where he sees the exodus experience as an important factor in building a framework of emuna in God.)

Indeed, the establishment of a calendar should be seen as a significant step in our march to freedom. A slave is not master of his own time. When I create a calendar, I am implicitly stating that I DO control my time, my rest days and holidays, my work days and solemn times. I am in control of my life. In this sense , the establishment of a Jewish month system at the verge of national freedom is most significant in all senses and the Ramban's comment that our calendar begin at , and point to, our month of release and redemption is most appropriate.

It is interesting how the Ramban explains the development of the month names from the numerical (chodesh harishon, chodesh hashevi'i) to the names that we have today. He doesn't view this as a product of assimilation or Persian influence. Instead he has a rather fascinating theory which is totally consistent with his explanation until now. This is his approach:

"...The Talmud Yerushalmi states that "They brought new (month) names back from Babylon". This is because originally we had no names for the months because the months were a memorial to yetziat mitzrayim. But when we returned from Bavel (Babylon) and the prophetic verse was fulfilled "It shall no longer be said 'As the Lord lives who brought the Israelites out of Egypt' but rather 'As the Lord lives who brought the Israelites out of the Northland and out of all the lands to which he had banished them'" (Jeremiah 16:14-15) then we began to use the names as they are called in Bavel so that we would remind ourselves of our stay there and that God brought us out. For these names; Nissan, Iyar, Sivan etc. are all Persian names .."

The Persian names remind us of our redemption from Babylon in the same way that the numerical identification was a pointer to the exodus from Egypt.

THE MOON AND MONTHLY RENEWAL

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch has a fascinating image of the spiritual power latent in this mitzva. He raises a popular critique of this mitzva. There are those who see the practice of following the renewal of the moon as a primitive practice. Ancient tribes would be scared when the moon "disappeared" fearing that it was lost, gone, and they rejoiced when the moon became visible once more. Is that what this is all about?

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch points to the Halakhic side of

this law: that there must be two witnesses, they must be received in Beit Din by a full panel of the Judiciary. The month is not Rosh Chodesh unless it is formally proclaimed by the Beit Din. Sometimes the BeitDin can proclaim the New Moon without even a sighting (if the month is already 30 days). It is a formal process, not a spontaneous primitive rite. But what is its significance? Rav Hirsch explains:

“Were the beginning of our months and consequently the dates of our Moadim to be fixed exactly by the astronomical phases of the planets so that the... moon automatically made Rosh Chodesh and the moadim, then we and our God too, would appear to be bound by the blind and unalterable laws of nature and our Moed of a new moon ...would give impetus to the idolatry of the cult of Nature....

It is not the conjunction of the moon with the sun, not the moon receiving the rays of illumination afresh ...but each time the moon finds the sun again, each time it receives its rays of light ... God wants His people to find Him again and to be illuminated with fresh rays of His light wherever and however, in running their course, they have had to pass through periods of darkness and obscurity. ...The moon finding itself again in conjunction with the sun is only to be a model for our finding ourselves again with God. The rejuvenation of the moon, a picture of, and incentive to, our own rejuvenation. Moed is literally a conjunction (meeting)... we have to MAKE our Chodesh and to FIX the day of our Moed.

...Hachodesh hazeh LACHEM Rosh Chodashim - “This renewal of the moon shall be a beginning of renewals to YOU.” i.e. noticing the fresh birth of the moon shall induce you to achieve a similar rejuvenation. You are to fix your moons, your periods of time by taking note of this ever fresh recurring rejuvenation...It is not a question of actual months but of OUR months - LACHEM...

Without this regularly bringing ourselves back to a commitment with our God, ...we should always slide farther and farther from Him, always be getting more and more estranged from Him; quite unconsciously and without noticing it, our natures would become less and less responsive to the light of his spirit , our natures would become darker and darker until - like Pharaoh- our hearts would be hard and heavy and even the most startling signs and the most affecting wonders would not achieve rebirth.”

Rosh Chodesh is described as a time of atonement - Kappara. It is a time of “kappara” because it is a time ripe for return to God. It is a monthly time of teshuva because the rebirth of the moon beckons us to become born again, to renew our ways. The moon invites us to become different and were it not for this constant message, we might find ourselves on a constant downward slope. **The new moon tells us that even if we have become eclipsed from God, we can and must find him again and become connected to the rays of His light.**

In life, we too wax and wane. Our spirituality and Halakhic observance intensify and fade periodically. The moon is a constant message. We celebrate rebirth and renewal on a monthly basis. We hope that we too can re-experience the excitement of finding the rays of God touching our lives. But in the end WE fix Rosh Chodesh. It cannot happen without the human court proclaiming that it will be. God affects the light of the moon, but we humans fix Rosh Chodesh and in the same

way, we can control the spirituality in our lives.

This is the message that precedes Yetziat Mitzrayim. It is a message which precedes the birth of Israel as a nation. It is a magnificent message of hope and growth. A message of ongoing connection with our God. For a people in the making, there is nothing more important than knowing that we can transform and renew ourselves; as individuals, and, as a nation.

Shabbat Shalom!

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FOR FURTHER STUDY

A Halachik Application :

Writing The Jewish Date.

There are those who have applied this law to the usage of the English month names. “Hachodesh Hazeh Lachem ... rishon hu lechodshei hashanna” - “This should be the first month for you”, therefore one should not write 1 for January and 2 for February because this indicates that our first month is not Nissan but rather January. So to write 29/1/98 is problematic. Rav Ovadia Yoseph is of this opinion so he recommends tat one writes January in words rather than 1 (See Yabia Omer Vol.3. Yoreh Deah #9).

Others have pointed out that the months which have Roman origins are no better because they are named after pagan Gods. The Rabbis in Hungary 200 years ago came out against this practice and said that one was forbidden to use the “Roman” names of the month because of the prohibition (Shemot 23:11) “You must not mention the name of other gods” (Responsa - Maharam Shick. Yoreh Deah #171, also the Chtam Sofer in his drashot on our parsha insists that we use only Jewish dating systems.)

Most modern poskim have discounted these problems for one of the following reasons:

1. That many great poskim have been known to write the secular date in one form or another (eg. The Rama - Responsa #51 Ig Moshe Y.D. vol.3 #38,39).
2. If one does not intend towards pagan gods but uses them as a regular popular mode of reference, then it is OK. The Tzitz Eliezer (8:8) is of this opinion and he therefore allows one to write the secular date but he will NOT allow one under any conditions to use a date denoting the year as A.D.
3. The law of “Hachodesh hazeh lachem” applies to kiddush hachodesh and not to written dates.