

A Thought on Parashas Bo

By Jeremy Richards

In Memory of my Dear Parents, a"h

L'ilui Nishmos Yitzchok Ben Nachman Halevi a"h and Yenta Bas Yisroel a"h

לעלוי נשמת יצחק בן נחמן הלוי ע"ה ולעלוי נשמת יענטע בת ישראל ע"ה



In this week's sidroh we see Hashem give the mitzvoh of Kiddush HaChodesh to the Jewish People (Shemos 12:2) before they left Mitzrayim. The Sefer HaChinuch lists this as mitzvoh number 4, and begins explaining it as follows: "To sanctify the months and to calculate the leap years...and to fix the festivals of the year according to that sanctification, as it says:

"הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם רֹאשׁ חֳדָשִׁים רִאשׁוֹן הוּא לָכֶם לְחֹדְשֵׁי הַשָּׁנָה"

This was the first mitzvoh given to the Jewish People as a nation. Let us ask, then: why, indeed, did Hashem choose this to be the first mitzvoh to give us as a new-born nation? Particularly in light of what was going at that time, was Rosh Chodesh really the most appropriate issue to be presented to us during our frantic post-plagues preparation for leaving Egypt and transitioning from deep servitude to freedom and Divine service?

We shall offer two answers to this question. First, an approach in the writings of Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, in his commentary on Shemos (pp.121-127). Rav Hirsch writes that Rosh Chodesh is a regular, periodically recurring sign to summon the nation to ever-fresh rejuvenation and ensure a constant rebirth to truth and purity. This regular reconnection with Hashem would protect Israel from spiritual and moral insensibility and decline.

Hashem saw that only dread and terror could lead Paroh, force him into submission to the will of G-d; but once released from this dread, "his heart remained in its old hard unimpressionable state." It was to ensure that erroneous and depraved ideas would not root themselves in the heart of the Jewish People, as they had in Paroh, that Hashem chose at this time to institute an אֹת, a sign, that would be guaranteed "always to draw the looks and the thoughts of the people up to Him."

It was in this way, writes Rav Hirsch, that Hashem decided that it was most appropriate at this particular time to begin "the construction of the inner life of His people." (Adapted from p.121) "So," writes Rav Hirsch, "the Jewish consecration of the New Moon is an institution for the periodical fresh spiritual and moral rejuvenation of Israel by finding itself again in conjunction with its G-d." (p.127) Rav Hirsch continues:

"...Without this regularly bringing ourselves back into communion with our G-d, without this regular monthly being radiated afresh by the light and warmth of His spirit, we should always slide farther and farther from Him, always be getting more and more estranged from Him; quite unconsciously and before our 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 become so חזק (strong) and כבד (heavy) that even the most startling אֹתוֹת (signs) and the most affecting מִוִּפְתִּים (wonders) would not achieve the rebirth, the rejuvenation of our inner selves." (p.127)

This, then, is the first answer to our question. Hashem chose this moment to give Rosh Chodesh to the Jewish People as a safeguard that they would never become irreversibly entrenched in wrong ideas and bad ways as had Paroh.

Our second answer to the question, why did Hashem choose this particular time to give us the mitzvoh of Rosh Chodesh, relates to the fact that this moment of our birth as a nation took place as we emerged from slavery to freedom, when our perception of and relationship with time was to go through a radical change. Generally speaking, any mitzvoh we do takes place in a particular moment in time. However, the mitzvoh of 'Kiddush HaChodesh' (sanctification of the new month) represents the sanctification of

time itself, for, as the Lubavitcher Rebbe זצ"ל writes in his Likutei Sichos: "every moment within a given month is dependent on the exact time at which that month begins." (Likutei Sichos vol.26 p.5ff, Chumash Kol Menachem, Rabbi Chaim Miller, p.407) As we left slavery and became a free people Hashem felt it necessary to give us a mitzvah to bolster our new awareness of time.

Explaining this idea, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik writes that, "A slave is relieved of the requirement to observe time-related mitzvos because he lacks time-consciousness...Time-awareness is the singular faculty of the free man, who can use or abuse it. To a slave, it is a curse or a matter of indifference. It is not an instrument which he can harness to his purposes." (Reflections of the Rav, Volume One pp.200-202)

For this reason, the first mitzvah given to the Jewish People in Egypt was the setting up of the Jewish calendar. Giving the Jews a mitzvah that would heighten their awareness of time was a necessity just before they left Egypt; it was an important gift that would help them transform smoothly from slaves with a slave mentality, with little hope and anticipation for the future, to free people with an awareness of their place in time and their new ability to use it and to look forward to the new life that awaited them. (See also the Jewish Encyclopedia of Moral and Ethical Issues, Nachum Amsel, pp.282-283)

The concept of time is fundamental to innumerable aspects of Torah life, such that 'time-awareness' and observant Jewish living are inseparable. There is a beautiful passage in Rabbi Soloveitchik's famous 'Halakhic Man' that conveys perfectly the relationship between Halachah and time:

"When halakhic man looks to the western horizon and sees the fading rays of the setting sun or to the eastern horizon and sees the first light of dawn and the glowing rays of the rising sun, he knows that this sunset or sunrise imposes upon him anew obligations and commandments. Dawn and sunrise obligate him to fulfil those commandments that are performed during the day: the recitation of the morning Shema, tzitzit, tefillin, the morning prayer, etrog, shofar, Hallel, and the like. They make the time fit for the carrying out of certain halakhic practices: Temple service, acceptance of testimony, conversion, chalitzah, etc., etc. Sunset imposes upon him those obligations and commandments that are performed during the night: the recitation of the evening Shema, matza, the counting of the omer, etc. Halakhic man...knows that it is the moon that determines the times of the months and thus of all the Jewish seasons and festivals, and this determination must rely upon astronomical calculations." (Halakhic Man, Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik pp.20-21)

There is a footnote to this last point in Rav Hirsch's commentary on Shemos (albeit Rabbi S. R. Hirsch died in 1888, 15 years before Rav Soloveitchik was born in 1903). Rabbi Hirsch writes that it is not the "objective astronomical certainty" of the phases of the moon that is desired as much as our "subjective taking note of it." "The moon," writes Rav Hirsch, "finding itself again in conjunction with the sun is only to be a model for our finding ourselves with G-d, the rejuvenation of the moon a picture of, and an incentive to, our own rejuvenation." (Rabbi S.R. Hirsch, Commentary on Shemos, p.125)

"...each time the moon finds the sun again, each time it receives its rays of light afresh, G-d 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." (Ibid.)

We have seen, then, that Rosh Chodesh is a protection from a slow but steady descent into paths of sin and immorality, and a monthly opportunity to reconnect with Hashem. Perhaps, with this new appreciation of the special importance of Rosh Chodesh, we shall now approach it each month with increased anticipation and excitement, of a kind that is the special privilege of free people.



Wishing everyone a Good Shabbos,

Jeremy