

Walk through the Parsha

with Rabbi David Walk



BO

This is Your Month!

In this week's Torah reading we read the Mitzva to set up the Jewish calendar through sanctifying the months: This month shall be for you the first of all months (Sh'mot 12:2). This week we also celebrated the Rosh Chodesh for our antipenultimate month; Sh'vat. Before we talk about Sh'vat, let's discuss the importance of the Mitzva of Kiddush HaChodesh, or the injunction to set up a Jewish calendar.

Rashi's first comment in his well-loved commentary on the Torah is: The Torah should have begun with 'This month shall be to you...', which is the first Mitzva given to Yisrael. So, there's clearly something exceptional about this Mitzva. But what is it?

Well, being the first Mitzva is significant, because the Mitzvot do establish our national unity and character, while simultaneously cementing our relationship with God. So, the first precept to do this is significant.

This demand that we have our calendar sets us apart from other nations, especially Egypt. The Egyptians had a solar calendar based upon the annual cycles of the Nile.

We would depart from our former taskmasters by having our own lunar calendar, based upon the cycles of the Moon.

The S'foro points out an even more significant idea expressed in the idea of a national calendar: From now on these months will be yours, to do with as you like. This is by way of contrast to the years when you were enslaved when you had no control over your time at all. While you were enslaved, your days, hours, minutes, were always at the beck and call of your taskmasters.

I am only free when my time is mine to control. One of the greatest advantages of freedom is the power over the clock and calendar. Certain, more Kabbalistic and Chassidic, authorities add another significant concept, that of 'newness' or renewal. The S'fat Emet explains:

This idea is for the redemption from Egypt. Because in exile, this ability to renew ourselves is missing... And at the time of redemption, which is when it was made clear that everything derives from the life force of Hashem. And from this comes renewal. Because the life force of Hashem has constant renewal, as it says, "renews every day, constantly" (Morning Prayers)... But the aspect of 'month' (CHODESH also means 'new') is by way of faith. And sometimes it has to be by way of faith in order to awaken this renewal.

However, that's only the first clause of our very famous verse. It continues: It (this month) shall be to you the RISHON of the months of the year. The Netziv explains that this first month, which has been called Nissan since the Babylonian Exile, is ROSH and RISHON. These terms which mean 'head' and 'first', respectively, really are a declaration that: This month is the 'best' for 'you', as opposed to the rest of the world for whom Tishrei is the best month, because that's when the world was created... However, in Nissan the special nature (SEGULA) of Yisrael was created, therefore this month is critical for developing our worship of God through the retelling of the Exodus which develops our belief and faith.

Some commentaries point out that this month is LACHEM ('for you' as opposed to others) the first of months. The use of the term LACHEM is significant, because it has the letters of the word MELECH. In other words, this month is the 'King of Months'.

So, we're also being taught by God through this declaration that not all months are created equally. Some months are more significant than others. The mystics or Kabbalists amongst us express this idea a bit differently. They claim that each month has its own character and that character is expressed through

certain symbols which help us to better understand the true nature of each month.

This week we begin the month of Sh'vat. So, what is the special significance of this new month? The great mystical work Sefer Yetzira (traditionally attributed to Avraham Avinu) claims that the letter TZADI rules over the month of Sh'vat. Sefer Yetzira further claims that the constellation D'LI (bucket, also called Aquarius) reigns over the month. Even though we say that no MAZAL (Zodiac sign) rules over Yisrael (Shabbat 156a), most mystics believe that these 'signs' do have influence.

The significant influence of the D'LI is that it is meant to draw water, and 'there is no water other than Torah' (Bava Kama 17a). So, the month of Sh'vat has a special place in the study and 'serving' of Torah.

However, there's another significant mystical idea connected to Sh'vat. The letter TZADI is connected to eating and digestion. The month of Sh'vat is understood to be a special time for rectifying our eating habits. This is truly significant because the original human sin was, of course, the illicit eating of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. In Sh'vat we endeavor to rectify that initial sin.

How do we repent for a sin committed by someone else and so very

long ago? First of all, we do have traditions that offspring can help rectify behavior of ancestors (the source for reciting Kaddish). Adam and Eve are our primordial parents.

And, that's what Tu BiShvat is about! We eat fruit with KEDUSHAH (holiness) and TAHARA (purity) on our Rosh HaShana LA-ILANOT (New Year for Trees)! There are many customs to help us in this endeavor, like eating 15 fruits or conducting a Tu BiShvat Seder. But the biggest factor is awareness and care in our eating of fruit.

While we're at it, why don't we just eat more mindfully overall? If the first sin was performed through eating, then can't eating be a dangerous endeavor if not done well? I would think that's a big YES! Let's use this month to eat with more KEDUSHAH and care! Bon Appetit! 