

PTDT

PhiloTorah D'var Torah

Where's Free Will?

I was going to write on this topic this week, but Rabbi Sacks z"l did such a great job on this same topic last week, that I'm changing mine. The only reason I'm saying this and not just starting with a new topic, is that in the sedra summary I sent people to look at the PTDT.

One Friday evening... when we have a Sanhedrin

It was Friday, the 29th of Adar. Tomorrow, Shabbat, might be Rosh Chodesh... or maybe Sunday. Not sure yet.

Now it is evening. Candles were lit and we're in shul for Kabbalat Shabbat and Maariv. I take the opportunity to get some fresh air outside during the D'var Torah. (I know I should be inside listening, but I was too hot inside. And besides, the guy who gives the DT usually takes it from PhiloTorah, translates it into Hebrew, and thinks no one will notice.)

Anyway, while I am taking delicious deep breaths, I look towards the western horizon - we're on a Galil hilltop and have great views - and see the sky changing from pink to purple as the light of the recently set Sun leaves the sky.

And there, not too much above the horizon itself, I see what might be - I'm not really sure - the first visibility of the lunar crescent. (Our to say it in a simpler way, I think I see the beginning of this month's Moon.)

Being quick-witted, I remember the fact that today was the 29th of the month and the Moon is SOMETIMES visible shortly after sunset after the 29th day of a month. But sometimes not. I'm not sure what I saw.

So, I go back into shul, just in time for BAR'CHI, I daven Maariv and go home. I tell my family that I'll be leaving soon for Yerushalayim. I make Kiddush, HaMotzi and my wife packs me some food for the rode. I get into my car - remember. it's Leil Shabbat - and I drive to Jerusalem. (And no radio or mp3 because of Shabbat.) But I'm driving.

Meanwhile, at the Lishkat HaGazit in Yerushalayim, the committee for Kiddush HaChodesh has gathered, expecting that witnesses will come. They have previously determined that the Moon will be visible and have the details of its location, time frame, size, shape, orientation, height above the horizon - all the details necessary to question and examine me when I arrive.

Now, follow this: With all other testimony, it is the witnesses who

supply the judges with facts they are missing. Except for Kiddush HaChodesh. In this case, the judges are armed with the facts. The witnesses come to testify to what they might have seen, but they are often unsure.

Wait a minute! A possible witness is allowed - more, required - to travel to Jerusalem on Shabbat in order to tell the judges something they already know? For a life-threatening situation, we all know you can violate the Shabbat. Piku'ach Nefesh Docheh et HaShabbat. But this?

Add to all this that there is a reasonable likelihood that plenty of others have seen the L'VANA B'CHIDUSHA (the Moon in its newness).

And add to that, the fact that the committee of Sanhedrin members has the power to declare Rosh Chodesh without witnesses if they determine that it must be done so the calendar doesn't get messed up the following month.

So why am I driving a couple of hours on a Friday night? For what?

The best way to say it is that Kiddush HaChodesh and establishing and maintaining the Jewish Calendar is like National Piku'ach Nefesh.

When the Greeks of old attempted to

tear us away from G-d and His Torah and assimilate us into their culture, they attacked Torah learning and teaching, Shabbat, and Brit Mila. And they also banned Kiddush HaChodesh - they knew that it is a major factor in the existence of Am Yisrael.

G-d Created Time, and He sanctified some of it when He Created the Shabbat.

He then taught us and commanded us - in our infancy as a Nation - while we were still in Egypt - to further sanctify time. Shabbat He did Himself. Our calendar, our Rosh Chodesh and the holidays of the year, were to be sanctified by His junior partners - AM YISRAEL.

Kiddush HaChodesh is the first mitzva we received as a nation - an almost nation, as soon-to-be nation.

If Rosh Chodesh Nisan is not sanctified by a Sanhedrin - G-d forbid - then the 15th of the month is not Pesach. It is not Yom Tov. We don't have to get rid of chameitz, we don't have to eat matza. And so on.

Kiddush HaChodesh does not only give sanctity to the Rosh Chodesh of each month, but to Pesach, Shavuot, Rosh HaShana, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot (Sh'mini Atzeret, included). That's how important this mitzva is.