

Bnei Akiva Sivot 5780: Choveret Chinuchit

There's an exciting moment coming up in this week's parasha: God gives Bnei Yisrael their very first mitzvah! Sefer Bereishit told the stories of the creation of the world and the lives of the Avot, but the Jewish people began our existence as a nation in Sefer Shemot. The Torah that we then received wasn't just a list of laws. It shaped our very identity as a people.

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WEEK 12: Once in a new moon

New beginnings

If you could choose one mitzva to be the first one given to Bnei Yisrael, what would it be?

Nine deadly plagues have struck Egypt. The people are suffering and the country is on its knees, but rather than end the madness and let Bnei Yisrael go, Pharaoh chooses to remain stubborn. One last plague remains, and this one is by far the worst. Unlike the other plagues, which occurred as part of a drama between Moshe, Aharon, Pharaoh and the Egyptians, this time Bnei Yisrael will have to prepare themselves to protect themselves from Makkat Bechorot, the Plague of the Firstborn. But before God commands them to slaughter the Pesach offering and paint its blood on their doorposts, He gives them a rather different mitzvah:

הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם רֵאשִׁית חֳדָשִׁים רֵאשִׁוֹן הוּא לָכֶם לְחֹדְשֵׁי הַשָּׁנָה:

"This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you." (Shemot 12:2)



At this crucial point in history, Hashem has commanded the laws of Rosh Chodesh! This was not a one-off commandment, but something to be observed for generations to come (as we did on Monday, which was Rosh Chodesh Shvat). But why is it important to mark the beginning of each month? And what relevance could it have for a group of slaves who still could not imagine an end to their persecution?

Time is freedom

With the commandment of Rosh Chodesh, God is giving the Jewish people an empowering message. As slaves, their time was not their own. The difference between a free person and a slave is that a slave achieves nothing for themselves by their work, and their time is therefore not their own. If they finish their work early, there is no point in starting another task, because they achieve nothing for themselves by doing so, and when they are finished their master might simply order them to do something else. A free person should manage their time carefully and efficiently; every second is an opportunity to do good and become a better and more developed person.



Bnei Yisrael were not yet free, but the moment would arrive imminently. The commandment to observe Rosh Chodesh was an indication that they should prepare themselves for freedom. Upon receiving the mitzvah, they also received a message that the time they would soon have available was a gift from God, not to be wasted.

Power to the people



Rosh Chodesh presents us with a powerful idea: the determination of the calendar is placed fully in human hands. Thus, if the moon were to appear in fact, on a Monday, but no one saw it until Tuesday, we follow the idea that "seeing is believing", and the Bet Din would decide that the first of the month was on a Tuesday. As a result, God, as it were, follows the decision of the court and acts accordingly, so that for example in the case of Rosh Hashana, He would push off His judgment of the entire world by one day! Another crazy ramification of the calendar being in human hands is that when the Rabbis decided to institute leap years in order to balance the lunar and solar calendars, they determined that in a leap year, Pesach gets delayed by a month (due to the extra Adar). So just think that when you're sitting down to your Purim Seuda that if the Rabbis hadn't really had the power to institute leap years, you'd be eating chametz when it's forbidden on 14th Nissan!

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The power of the Sanhedrin is illustrated in the Mishna in Masechet Rosh Hashana, which describes an occasion whereby there was a debate within the Sanhedrin regarding when the new month should begin.

"...On another occasion two witnesses came and said, "We saw it at its proper time, but on the night which should have been the new moon it was not seen," and Rabban Gamliel accepted their evidence. Rabbi Dosa ben Harkinas said: "they are lying witnesses"...Rabbi Yehoshua said to him: "I see your argument."

Rabban Gamliel sent to him (Rabbi Yehoshua): "I order you to appear before me with your staff and your money on the day which according to your count should be Yom Hakippurim." ...He (Rabbi Yehoshua) then went to Rabbi Dosa ben Harkinas. He said to him: if we call in question the court of Rabban Gamliel we must

call in question the decisions of every court which has existed since the days of Moses until now...He (Rabbi Yehoshua) took his staff and his money and went to Yavneh to Rabban Gamliel on the day which according to his count should be Yom Hakippurim. Rabban Gamliel rose and kissed him on his head and said to him: "Come in peace, my teacher and my student: my teacher in wisdom and my student because you have accepted my decision." (Mishna Rosh Hashana 2:7-8)

Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabban Gamliel had a debate over when Rosh Chodesh would fall, resulting in a different calculation for when Yom Kippur would be. Rabban Gamliel was the Nasi (the head of the Sanhedrin) and he demanded that his opinion be accepted. In order to demonstrate that his view was correct he demanded that Rabbi Yehoshua appear in the Bet Midrash with his wallet and stick on the day which according to him was Yom Kippur! Rabbi Yehoshua accepted the decision despite the fact that it contradicted his calculations.

Looking forward

Rosh Chodesh symbolises renewal, the ability of the Jewish People to rise up from oblivion and restore itself to its past greatness. Just as the moon disappears at the end of each month, but returns and grows to fullness, so Israel may suffer exile and decline, but it always renews itself. Perhaps the most dramatic example of this was indeed the exodus from Egypt. Bnei Yisrael had started off in Egypt as an exalted and wealthy family, were subsequently enslaved and downtrodden for two hundred years or so, and then plucked from their oppression by the revealed hand of God.



In renewing the pride of Am Yisrael, God gave us a national identity. A nation should have its own calendar and its own way of doing things. In the same way that we have a national law (the Torah) and a national homeland (Eretz Yisrael), we have a national calendar.

The mitzvah of Rosh Chodesh demands that not only do we declare the new moon, but we sanctify it, meaning that we designate it and set it aside as part of our religious and spiritual life. The journey of the Jewish people begins with this commandment because it teaches us that we have the potential to sanctify and elevate this world through the various mitzvot.

Questions to ponder

- Why did the Torah include stories of Creation and the Avot, instead of just beginning with the mitzvot commanded to Am Yisrael?
- Why was the first mitzvah given before Bnei Yisrael left Egypt?

Peula Ideas

Games about Rosh Chodesh

- What's the time Mr Wolf?

- Oreo moon phases
- Pass an object around the circle – each person has to say an idea of what the object is without repeating what someone else said.

For more game ideas head to:

<https://www.bneiakiva.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/ShabbatGames.pdf>

Discussions

- Why do you think that Rosh Chodesh is the first commandment that Bnei Yisrael receive? What other commandments might have been suitable for this?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages to a halachic system that is in the hands of the people?

