

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Metsorah

The Torah's discussion of Passover (Pesach) brings with it a curious detail. With respect to Pesach, the Torah repeatedly focuses on the fact the holiday falls out in the month it does. Firstly, before describing the details of the mitzvah of bringing the Paschal Lamb G-d says "this month will be for you the first of months" (12:2), and only after this does He say to take a lamb on the tenth of "this month" (12:3). Then, He says to examine the lamb for four days until the fourteenth day "of this month" (12:6). Later, in Chapter 13, the Torah states "Remember the day you left Egypt" (verse 3), and then adds a seemingly irrelevant statement, "Today you are leaving in the month of the spring." The next verse follows with the command to "do this service in this month," not even mentioning which day of the month to perform this service.

The Haggadah picks up on the emphasis on the month of Nissan, and even entertains that perhaps we are commanded to tell the story of the Exodus to our children on the first of the month of Nissan. The Haggadah only eliminates this possibility because the Torah specifies, albeit in an ambiguous way, "You shall tell your son on that day." Even though the mitzvah to tell the story to our children only applies on the night of the fourteenth, it seems abundantly clear that there is something significant to this month, and that this ties in to the mitzvot of bringing the Paschal Lamb and telling the story to our children. Why does the Torah focus so much on the month of Nissan, while it does not make much mention of the months in which the other holidays fall?

Rashi tells us the first mitzvah given to the Jewish people as a whole was to sanctify the new months, and he even suggests that the Torah should begin with this mitzvah (Genesis 1:1). With the Exodus and the Jewish people receiving the first instructions as a nation, history changes in a dramatic way. Now there is a nation responsible for bringing holiness and spiritual living to the world, and there are specific instructions as to how to accomplish these ends. The first step in this development is the mitzvah to proclaim the first of the month holy (see Rashi, Exodus 12:2).

What is the significance of proclaiming the day the first of the month, especially since this procedure was carried out only by a Jewish court and not by individuals? The mitzvah of sanctifying the first day of the month shows us that we have the ability and the responsibility to bring holiness not only into space, but also into time. As opposed to the holiness of Shabbat, which comes automatically on the seventh day of the week, the holiness of the first of the month comes through human involvement. The holiness of the festivals, the dates of which are all counted from the first of the month, also stems from the efforts of human beings. The holiness of the new month and the ensuing holidays only kicks in when two witnesses see the new month and report it to the court. The mitzvah of sanctifying the new moon teaches us the awesome power and responsibility we have to sanctify time throughout the year.



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While the mitzvot of matza and maror (bitter herbs) commemorate the particular way in which the Exodus occurred and the slavery that preceded it, the mitzvah of sanctifying the new moon shows us the ongoing ability we have, every month of the year, to bring more holiness into the world. This onus of bringing holiness into the world by determining the calendar and its holy times was only placed on the Jewish people once they became a nation. Rashi (Exodus 13:8) says that the purpose of the Exodus was so that the Jews would fulfill the commandments, such as matza and maror. The mitzvah of sanctifying the new moon every month shows us that this mission of keeping commandments must be constantly renewed, just as the mitzvah of sanctifying the moon applies not just once a year, but twelve times a year. Since this aspect of the mission statement of the Jewish people is linked to the Exodus, the time they were taken to be a nation, one may have thought that the mitzvah of telling the children about the redemption should be fulfilled on the the first of the month. For this mitzvah stands out not simply as the first one, but also as the one charging us with the responsibility for sanctifying all the holidays throughout the year.

There is another layer of significance in the nation's first mitzvah being the sanctification of the moon. Just as the moon waxes and wanes, disappearing and then appearing, a Jew must know that while the nation may have its trials and tribulations, he must renew his faith and his mission, just like the moon renews itself every month. The Jewish calendar is determined through the moon which shrinks but always renews itself, not through the sun which rises and sets consistently every day and does not diminish, to teach us about perseverance and renewal.

The month of Nissan has begun and the Pesach preparations are well underway. At this time we have the opportunity to ponder the fact that the formation of the nation started from the beginning of this month, when the Jewish people received the instruction to sanctify time. It is also important to realize that although we have our ups and downs, both as a nation and as individuals, we can always renew ourselves like the moon. The redemption from Egypt is prefaced with the mitzvah of sanctifying the moon as a way of hinting to us that although that redemption was not permanent and we are once again in exile, there will be another redemption. The Jewish people may be thrust into exile but, like the moon, they will ultimately return to their fullness.

Shabbat Shalom

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