

Parashat Bo 5777, 2017:

The Power of Rosh Chodesh

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Rosh Chodesh is one of the many well-known topics found in this week's Torah reading: "The L-rd spoke to Moses and to Aaron in the land of Egypt, saying: 'This month shall be to you (*Hachodesh hazeh lachem*) the head of the months; to you it shall be the first of the months of the year.'" (*Sefer Shemot* 12:2, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) On a certain level, Rosh Chodesh stands apart from other commandments, since it was the first *mitzvah* given to the Jewish people, as a nation, instead of to the families of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Rashi (1040-1105), basing himself upon a variety of Midrashic sources, gives voice to this idea in one of his glosses on the very first verse of the Torah:

In the beginning: Rabbi Isaac said: "It was not necessary to begin the Torah except from 'This month shall be to you...', which is the first commandment that the Jewish people were commanded, [for the main purpose of the Torah is its commandments...]"

Given Rosh Chodesh's historical and legal significance to our people, it is not at all surprising that rabbinic literature is a treasure trove of halachic analyses and aggadic interpretations regarding its remarkable import. In particular, the figure of Rabbi Elazar ben Arach, the greatest of all the students of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai (*Pirkei Avot* II: 9-10), looms large in the list of

famous Torah personalities associated with Rosh Chodesh. The following Talmudic narrative highlights the singular significance of this *mitzvah*:

Rabbi Chelbo said: The wine of Perugitha and the water of Diomsith cut off the Ten Tribes from Israel [due to their powerful hedonistic and anti-Torah influences - Rashi]. Rabbi Elazar ben Arach visited those places. He was attracted to them [the wine and the bath waters] and [in consequence,] his learning was uprooted [i.e. he forgot it – Rashi]. When he returned [to the community of scholars], he arose to read the Torah. He wished to read, “*Hachodesh hazeh lachem*” (“This month shall be to you...”) [instead,] he read “*Hachareish hayah libbam*” (“Their hearts were silent”). But the scholars prayed for him, and his learning returned. (*Talmud Bavli*, Shabbat 147b, translation, *The Soncino Talmud* with my emendations)

The second Bobover Rebbe, HaRav Ben-Zion Halberstam *zatzal* (1874-1941), in his work, “*Kedushat Tzion*,” states the following regarding our Talmudic passage: “We must understand the words of our Sages and the quizzical nature as to why Rabbi Elazar ben Arach was called upon to read the specific *parasha* of ‘*Hachodesh hazeh lachem*.’” Rav Halberstam’s exploration of the connection between Rabbi Elazar and Rosh Chodesh sheds a good deal of light upon the concept of *mitzvah goreret mitzvah* (one commandment brings another in its wake, *Pirkei Avot* 4:2), and the problems associated with *mitzvat anashim m’lumdah* (the automatic performance of a commandment):

The *meforshim* (commentators) ask, “Does the phrase, ‘*mitzvah goreret mitzvah*’ really imply that an individual who performs one commandment will henceforth be like an unceasing river [of *mitzvot* observance], since one commandment brings another in its wake [i.e. *ad infinitum*] so that the entire rest of his life will be, by definition, *mitzvot*-infused?” (*Kedushat Tzion*, Parashat Bo, page 98, this, and the following translations, my own)

Rav Halberstam summarizes the commentators’ response to this question in the following fashion:

The *meforshim* address this difficulty by noting that the uniquely valuable reward inherent in the phrase “*mitzvah goreret mitzvah*” applies solely to a commandment that is performed with deep intention (“*b’kavanat halev*”) and in its proper manner – then, and only then, does it lead one to perform another *mitzvah*. If, however, the commandment is performed as a *mitzvat anashim*

m'lumdah, i.e. without proper intention, then it will not lead one to undertake another commandment.

One of the clearest expositions of the somewhat elusive phrase, “*mitzvat anashim m'lumdah*,” was offered by the Malbim (Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yechiel Michel, 1809-1879). His formulation helps us understand why a commandment performed in this manner fails to engender the performance of another commandment, since the one who acts in this fashion is existentially disconnected from the *mitzvah*-gesture:

There are those who perform the *mitzvot* solely because this is what they have become accustomed to do since their youth and they are used to performing them. They perform them without any cognitive gesture (*kavanah*) and without thought – even though they may know that they are commandments from G-d. They, however, do not perform them in any way because Hashem commanded them to do so. Instead, they perform them because this is what they were dictated to do by their teachers and parents. They [the *mitzvot*] are performed without any understanding and are mere mechanical actions reinforced by past rote behaviors... (*Commentary to Sefer Yeshiyahu 29:13*, translation and underlining my own).

Given the above analysis, Rav Halberstam suggests that Rabbi Elazar ben Arach was frightened after reading “*Hachareish hayah libbam*” in place of our *pasuk*'s phrase, “*Hachodesh hazeh lachem*.” Based upon his abiding humility, Rabbi Elazar believed his error resulted from having “failed to properly concentrate when fulfilling the commandments on prior occasions,” for if this were not the case, the great *mitzvah* of Rosh Chodesh - the subject of his Torah reading - should have come to his aid. After all, as the very first *mitzvah* given to the entire Jewish people, Rosh Chodesh is followed by all the other commandments, and thereby embodies the concept of *mitzvah goreret mitzvah*. Rabbi Elazar, therefore, concluded that his *mitzvot* observance must have been on the low level of *mitzvat anashim m'lumdah*, which resulted in the loss of the reward and protection of *mitzvah goreret mitzvah*, and made him susceptible to the lure of hedonistic pursuits and consequent loss of his Torah knowledge.

According to Rabbi Halberstam, however, Rav Elazar ben Arach's "colleagues knew full well that, in truth, he had performed prior *mitzvot* with the requisite intentionality," and as a result, "prayed for mercy on his behalf and his learning returned."

This poignant episode underscores the great power and holiness of Rosh Chodesh, and its manifest significance in rabbinic thought. May the merit of our heartfelt observance of this *mitzvah* bring us bountiful blessings from Hashem and hasten the coming of the *Mashiach* (Messiah) soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on YUTorah.org using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Megillat Esther*, may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.