

Parshiot Tazria - HaChodesh 5774, 2014:

Chodesh Nissan: The Chosen Month

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, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the refuah shlaimah of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

The mitzvah of Rosh Chodesh was the first commandment given to *Bnai Yisrael* as a nation. Rashi (1040-1105), basing himself upon various Midrashic sources, formulates this concept in his glosses on the very first verse of the Torah:

“In the beginning” Said Rabbi Isaac: It was not necessary to begin the Torah except from “This month is to you,” (*Sefer Shemot* 12:2) which is the first commandment that the Israelites were commanded, (for the main purpose of the Torah is its commandments, and although several commandments are found in Genesis, e.g., circumcision and the prohibition of eating the thigh sinew, they could have been included together with the other commandments). (This, and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Rosh Chodesh is the topic of this week’s additional Torah reading in *Sefer Shemot* 12:1-2: “The L-rd spoke to Moses and to Aaron in the land of Egypt, saying: ‘This month shall be to you the head of the months; to you it shall be the first of the months of the year.’” Rashi notes that the *p’shat*-level (direct meaning) interpretation of the words “this month” refers to the month of Nissan. Additionally, from this point onward, it will be considered the first of all of the months of the Jewish calendar:

... a biblical verse does not lose its simple meaning (*Talmud Bavli, Shabbat* 63a). Concerning the month of Nissan, He [G-d] said to him [Moshe], “This shall be the first of the order of the number of the months, so Iyar shall be called the second [month], and Sivan the third [month].” (Ibid.)

The Seforno (Rabbi Ovadiah ben Yaakov, 1470-1550), builds upon Rashi's explanation and focuses upon the word "*lachem*" ("to you") that is found two times in our *pasuk* (verse). His explanation of this word emphasizes the newly found freedom that is the hallmark of the month of Nissan:

From this point and onwards, the months shall be yours, to do with them according to your desires. During the days [i.e. years] of your servitude, however, the days did not belong to you. They were, instead, for the purpose of serving others [as slaves] and according to their will. Consequently, [this month has been transformed for you, and has become] "to you the head of the months" of the year. This is the case, for in it [Nissan] you [the Jewish people] have begun your free existence." (Brackets my own)

It is fascinating to note that the Seforno's explanation of "*lachem*" as referring to our nascent freedom was anticipated by the great French Bible commentator, Rabbeinu Yosef ben Yitzhak Bechor Shor (12th century), some 300 years earlier:

"This month shall be to you the head of the months..." **for freedom**. And you [the Jewish people] shall make it the first [month] in the counting of the months. This is the case, in order that you should count [your months] from the incipient moment of **freedom**. In this manner, you will always be reminded of the moment of **freedom** and you will remember the good that I [G-d] did on your behalf. As a result, you will be punctilious in holding Me in awe, in loving Me, and in serving Me. (Emphasis my own)

In sum, the Bechor Shor understands "*lachem*" as a clarion call to the Jewish people to recognize the gift of freedom that Hashem has given us, and demonstrate our eternal thanks to Him (*hakaret hatov*). This, he suggests, should lead to *yirat* (awe), *ahavat* (love), and *avodat* (service) Hashem. Therefore, inherent in Chodesh Nissan are the seeds of these complementary approaches to serving our Creator.

Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yechiel Michel (1809-1879), known as the Malbim, also focuses upon the importance of the word "*lachem*." He notes that this word always connotes exclusivity. This means that Nissan is ours alone. Only the Jewish people have a special relationship with this month, and no other nation is connected to Nissan and the kindness

of Hashem that was manifested therein. In addition, the Malbim notes that the Egyptians, like many other nations, had a solar rather than lunar calendar. Furthermore, the Egyptians went so far as to worship the sun itself as their main deity: “The Egyptians had no connection whatsoever to lunar months. Their system of counting was solar based – since, as is well known, the sun was the head of their pantheon.” In contrast, he notes that the Jewish tradition of counting the months has always been based upon the lunar calendar. This, he opines, goes back to the beginning of Creation: “Regarding the Jewish people, however, their custom, since the time of Adam, has always been to count the months according to the lunar months – as we find in the accounting [of the days and months] of the Flood.” We may well ask the Malbim, however, “If this is the case, what is so special about our having been commanded to view Nissan as the first month of the year? Is this not something we would have naturally done?” Here, too, we find an illuminating answer:

Until this point [*Sefer Shemot* 12:1- 2], however, *Bnai Yisrael* counted Tishrei as the first month of the year, just as we find according to Rabbi Eliezer’s opinion in tractate Rosh Hashanah [page 11]. This was the case, since the world was created in this month and it is/was, therefore, Rosh Hashanah. [Now, however,] the Jewish people were commanded to count the months from the month of Nissan as a commemoration of the Exodus (*zacher l’yitziat Mitzraim*). For at that time [i.e. Nissan], they began to live a higher kind of existence than that determined by the laws of Nature - that are dependent upon the Creation of the Universe. From that point in time, there began an existence [for the Jewish people] based solely upon Divine Providence. This is why the word [*l’chem*] is repeated twice, [i.e. to emphasize the new relationship that obtains between *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* and the Jewish people] (Underlining and brackets my own)

Given the above, we can now see that Chodesh Nissan represents a new and indissoluble connection between Hashem and the Jewish people. It is the “*chodesh mesugal*” (“the chosen month”), wherein G-d chose us and decreed that we would exist directly under

His protection. In short, it is the time wherein we became His *am segulah* (the Chosen People).

This Shabbat we will read Parashat HaChodesh, and this week we will celebrate Rosh Chodesh Nissan. These acts are antecedent to our celebrating *Pesach* (Passover), when Hashem took us to be His people. With the Holy One's help, may the upcoming *Yom Tov* be enriched by both a new understanding of the significance of Chodesh Nissan and a new appreciation of our unique relationship with the Master of the Universe. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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