

The First Month of the Year for You

Today is *Shabbat HaChodesh* and *Rosh Chodesh* Nisan/Aviv in the Hebrew Calendar. An additional *Torah* scroll is taken out on this Shabbat and Exodus 12:1-20 is read, announcing the arrival of the month of Nisan/Aviv. *Shabbat Hachodesh* is the last of four special *Shabbatot* that surround the festival of Purim. *Shabbat Shekalim* and *Shabbat Zachor* precede Purim, and *Shabbat Parah* and *Shabbat HaChodesh* follow Purim.

The beginning of the Hebrew calendar is established in Exodus 12, just before the Israelites leave Egypt. There, God commands the Israelites to mark the months of the year: “*The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you*” (Ex 12:1-2). Later on in the Torah, *Rosh Chodesh* is mentioned in the same context as the more important festivals. The people are commanded to be joyous, offer sacrifices, and be reminded of God’s divinity (Nu. 10:10).

Originally, there was not a set calendar for Jewish months. Instead, the Sanhedrin (an ancient court) would declare a new month after receiving the testimony of two reliable witnesses reporting that they had seen the new moon. Then the message was spread throughout Israel and Babylonia via small fires on hilltops. When a new moon was announced, someone would go to the top of the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem with a long pole of wood. He would set the end of his pole on fire and wave it around until he could see someone on another hilltop waving his own pole. The second person waved his pole until he could see a third person waving, and so on until the message reached Babylonia. Eventually the Samaritans began lighting fires on hilltops in order to mislead the Jews, and so instead of fires, messengers were sent out from Jerusalem. By the later Amoraic period, a fixed calendar was set, and there was no longer any need for witnesses or messengers.

The first day of Nisan (or *Aviv*) is a historic day for our Jewish people. It was the day when we received our first commandment as a nation: *sanctify the new moon*. The old monthly new moon declaration ritual had a profound spiritual and historic significance for Jews living all over the world because it sets or establishes when the Biblical Holy Days (*chagim*) fall, how many days they encompass are and when they are celebrated in and out of Israel. By virtue of this commandment, the Jewish people were/are given mastery and privilege over the reckoning of time. From that moment on the calendar with its cycle of *Shabbat*, High Holidays and festivals could exist only when human witnesses declared the new month. This signifies more than control over the determination of time and the everyday events of daily life. It represents the potential for change and renewal, for rebirth and growth, and for the waning and waxing of the moon each month.

The concept of *Rosh Chodesh* is one that connects holiness with time. Sanctifying (setting apart) time and marking time is central to our lives as Messianic Jews. As Abraham Joshua Herschel states: “*Judaism is more concerned with time than space and Judaism is a religion of time aiming at the sanctification of time.*” The *Torah* tells us in Exodus 12:2 how to mark our time so we can keep our appointed times (our times of intimacy with Him). They are not based on the Catholic (Gregorian – Pope Gregory the Great’s) calendar, nor on whenever we feel like it. He gave His Bride Israel instructions on these special dates and we should be persuaded to keep them sacred. Last night’s new moon (usually the first new moon in the springtime) is to be unto us the beginning of months (moons). This is the start of *The Lord’s sacred year* – the first day of *Aviv*. Modern Jewish calendars refer to this month as Nisan the first month of the year (not *Tishrei*, or *Yom Teruah*), but *Aviv* (Nisan). If the sages believe the world was created in *Tishrei*, then why is Nisan considered the first month of the year? *Moshe Maimodenes (Rambam)* understood this in the following way: “*The children of Israel should mark this month as the first, and should count months in relation to this one; the second, the third, to the 12th month. This is to ensure that we remember the great miracle (the Exodus) for whenever we mention the month; we will (effectively) be mentioning the miracle. That is why there are no names of months in the Torah, but the Torah will say (for example): ‘and it came to pass in the third month’ (19:1) or ‘In the second month of the second year’ (Nu. 10:11). This is the same notion as our counting the days of the week in relation to Shabbat. And this is why it says in the verse ‘it shall be the first of the months of the year FOR YOU’. It is the first month for you as it is a remembrance of our redemption.*”

It is interesting to note that following the Greek conquest of the land of Israel, three observances of the Jewish people were forbidden: (1) Circumcision, (2) Sabbath observance, and (3) The sanctification of the New Moon. Evidently our enemies always understood that these three observances, all time related (circumcision on the 8th day, Sabbath observance on the 7th day), were/are fundamental to the existence of Israel as a nation. Forbidding these three *Mitzvot* contributed to the revolt of the *Hasmoneans* and the victory of *Chanukah*.

Maimonides/Rambam sees this commandment in Exodus 12:2 as marking the centrality of the Exodus experience in the overall Jewish frame of mind. In the same way, the days of the week have no names in Modern Hebrew. Sunday is called *Yom Rishon*, Monday *Yom Sheni*, etc., leading up to Shabbat and emphasizing the prominence of *Shabbat* in our week. Similarly in the *Torah*, the months are pointing straight to the month of the *Aviv* (Nisan) and to the month of *Tishrei*. *Aviv* is a month of miracles and redemption. This is the month when we celebrate Pesach, freedom, ridding ourselves of *chametz* and eating a lot of *matzah*!

In fact, the establishment of the calendar can be seen as a vital step in the pursuit of freedom – all sorts of freedoms, both collective and personal. A slave is not a master of his or her own time. When I create my own weekly calendar, I am stating without reservation that I control my time. I can control my work times, my quiet times, my holidays, my family and friend times, and my work/life balance. It enables me to honor time and mark it. I am in control of my life. The establishment of a Jewish month system is most significant especially if our calendar begins at, and points to, a month of release and redemption.

The verse states: “*this month is for you.*” It is our very own personal gift of time. Maybe it is implying that something new can happen during this month/year: a new discovery, a new release, a new learning, a new opportunity for relationships, a renewed sense of ourselves and our understanding of time. *Aviv/Nisan* is a month ‘for you, and for me’ and for us in KS and for Jews all over the world.

So often, the pursuit of *making a living* becomes the purpose of our lives. We forget that making a living is the MEANS to the end. *Shabbat Hachodesh* reminds us that the mastery over time that the Almighty has given us can be accentuated by bringing into our lives the sanctity and intent of all time related events. We must experience Pesach, the holiday of redemption in such a way that we, too, are redeemed. The *Haggadah* says: in every generation it is one's duty to regard himself as though he PERSONALLY had gone out from Egypt. The same is true of the holiday of *Shavu'ot*, when WE (individually) too must receive the *Torah* and the *Holy Spirit*, and also the holiday of *Sukkot*, when WE (individually) must rejoice over The Almighty's many blessings.

In marking Shabbat *Hachodesh* in our calendars, we are not only reminded of the coming Passover season, we are reminded that it is within our power to sanctify (bless) and become sanctified (blessed) by becoming closer to Our God. We have the power, through our words (*b'rachot*), to connect to Him. All *b'rachot* (blessings) can be divided into three categories: blessings of pleasure; blessings of *Mitzvot*; and blessings of praise, thanksgiving, and supplication, so that one can be ever cognizant of our Creator and be in awe of Him.

Our divine gift of speech gives us the ability to sanctify and bring into reality both objective and subjective principles. Time, holidays and historical events can be observed in both word and deed. By blessing the New Moon and establishing a calendar we are connecting the past to the present. Just as the new moon starts off small and gets visibly stronger each night, then slowly wanes only to renew itself again, so, too, do the Children of Israel have their cycles. It is one of the manifestations of our longevity and vitality.

Is there freedom in your life? Do you live with a great sense of gratitude for the deliverance that you have received? May the joy and freedom of knowing the *Yeshua* the Lamb of God, strengthen you this Passover Season. Remember, it is “for you” and it is to be the beginning of months/year! *Shabbat Shalom!*