



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

Bo: Jewish Time!

After Egypt has been afflicted with nine plagues, and before the final most devastating plague that will herald their freedom, the Israelites are given a surprising instruction, described by many as the first *mitzva* to the nascent national collective. It is the inauguration of a new calendar.

This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you. (12:1-2)

And that is it! No explanation or elaboration. From this point on, the month of Israel's redemption, the month we nowadays call Nissan, is designated numerically as "the first month." Similarly, in most of Tanakh until the Babylonian Exile, months have numbers rather than names, always counting back to the Exodus.

What is this peculiar *mitzva*? Why, on the verge of freedom, before the instruction regarding the Paschal Lamb, does God instigate a new Jewish calendar?

The basic criterion that distinguishes a freeman from a slave is the kind of relationship each has with time and its experience. Bondage is identical with passive intuition and reception of an empty, formal time stream. When the Jews were delivered from the Egyptian oppression ...he [Moses] was told by God that the path leading from ... liberation to consummate freedom leads through the medium of time. (Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Sacred and Profane*)

A people newly freed must ...be sustained by its own native resources if it is to achieve true national independence, if it is no longer to be a passive object of history, subservient to an alien culture. A liberated people must evolve and stress its own distinctive autonomous culture ... forge its own institutions. One of its first desiderata is the establishment of a uniform calendar... a powerful instrument of societal, cultural and religious cohesion." (Nahum Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*)

These two modern commentators express the following ideas:

A slave's time is not his own. He has no time-awareness. He is at the beck and call of his master, of the slave-camp routine. Reclaiming control over one's time, staking the right to become master over one's time, to shape and fashion it at will – this is a hallmark of freedom.

Each society has its rest days and work days, its holidays, sacred and solemn times. True independence cannot be established until one is emancipated from the rituals and pace of life of the society from which one has freed oneself. By insisting upon a lunar calendar, Israel were rejecting the Egyptian calendar based upon the Sun (god) and the ebb and flow of the Nile.

By setting their own calendar, Israel were stating when they would be free and when they would rest, when they would celebrate and when they would mourn – on their terms, as a reflection of their own culture.

The first *mitzva* to the Jewish people tells us that we need to be in control of our time. So, let us consider two dimensions of this special *mitzva*:

Are we in control of our time?

We have many “labor-saving devices” that are supposed to free us to have more leisure, but we find ourselves slaves to work via our laptops and cell phones, and we are distracted by our handheld devices even when we are with loved ones.

- How much are we in control of our time? In other words, how much are we free?
- What can we do to regain control?

How much does the tempo of our lives reflect our Jewish identity?

- How conscious are we of “Jewish Time”, periods of celebration and commemoration in the Jewish calendar?
- Do you know that it was “Rosh Chodesh – the celebration of a new Jewish month” this week?
- In two weeks' time the Jewish calendar will mark Tu Bishvat (the “New Year” of the trees.) Will you mark it in some way, by eating fruit or planting a tree?

One of the pleasures of living in Israel is that national holidays are Jewish Holidays. As a child in the UK, the intermediate days of Sukkot were days my father went to work and we attended school. But here in Israel, Sukkot is a national vacation week with families taking trips and hiking the hills and valleys of the land. Hanukah is a national holiday season as reflected on TV, and by school vacation. On Tu Bishvat kids go on tree-planting trips. In a Jewish society, the tempo of the calendar marches to a Jewish drum.

- In your life, what is more prominent, Jewish time, or the calendar of the society around you?
- How does the Jewish calendar impact you?
- Do you ever sense a clash between the Jewish and “general” calendar? And how does that make you feel as a Jew?

Our mitzva this week encourages us to shape special times that are reflective of a Jewish cultural rhythm. How can we make our Jewish calendar more present in our homes?

Shabbat Shalom!