

**Pardes from Jerusalem - Weekly Parsha Podcast –  
Parshat Vayakhel-Pekudei & Shabbat HaChodesh**

**Cultivating the spiritual practice of התחדשות -  
hitchadshut: inner renewal, revival & redemption  
from the place of disappointment, darkness, and  
despair.**

Based on a teaching from the *Netivot Shalom*, Rabbi Sholom Noach Berezovsky, the Slonimer Rebbe, d. 2000 in Yerushalayim. The *Netivot Shalom* explores the spiritual and deeper meaning of the first two verses in Exodus 12, "HaShem said to Moshe and Aharon in the land of Egypt saying, 'This month shall be for you the beginning of the months, it shall be for you the first of the months of the year.'"

ויאמר ה' אל משה ואל אהרן בארץ מצרים לאמר: החודש הזה לכם ראש חדשים ראשון הוא לכם לחדשי השנה. שמות יב, א-ב

This first commandment – *mitzvah* – to the nation of Yisrael that was spoken to Moshe Rabeinu and Aharon HaCohen introduces the first month of what is referred to as the Torah New Year. From this section in the Torah we also learn that a new Torah based month occurs when witnesses bear testimony to the appearance of a new moon. Hence the origin of Jewish tradition adopting a lunar calendar.

The Torah based New Year is compared with Rosh HaShanah, which is the annual celebration of the creation of Adam and Eve. The first month of the Torah New Year is of historical and religious significance specifically to the nation of Israel. The first month of the New Year celebrating the creation of Adam and Eve is of universal significance.

Based on these two verses in Exodus, the Chumash refers to the various months throughout the Torah calendar by their numerical order of occurrence relative to Nissan being the first month. Centuries later, this first month of the Torah New Year became known as the month of Nissan. In addition to this portion being read as it appears in *Parshat Bo*, this portion is always read on the Shabbat prior to *Rosh Chodesh Nissan*. Hence the tradition arose to refer to this Shabbat as *Shabbat HaChodesh*.

The *Netivot Shalom* begins by raising three questions:

1 – Firstly, he reminds us of the first Rashi commentary in the Torah, in Genesis 1:1, when Rebbe Yitzchak in the *Midrash Tanchuma* raises the issue that logically the Torah should have begun with this commandment of Nissan becoming the first month of the Torah New Year instead of the creation narratives, being that it was the first commandment given to the Nation of Israel. If the Torah is the means by which God has given *Ahm Yisrael* the mitzvot, one could easily conclude that it therefore should have begun with the first of the 613 mitzvot.

Rebbe Yitzchak suggests that it was necessary for the Torah to establish from the very beginning that God is the Creator of the Universe and therefore has sovereignty over which land he allows the various nations to inhabit and for what length of time --- specifically referring to when centuries later the nation of Israel entered what became known as Eretz Yisrael with the Godly commanded intent to conquer it from the existing powers, dispossess them of all ownership and inhabit it as theirs.

In light of this Midrashic response, the *Netivot Shalom* then asks what are we to learn about the unique character of this mitzvah, other than it being the first commandment, from its juxtaposition with the second mitzvah of – *Korban Pesach* - the Pesach offering, followed two weeks later by – *Yitziat Mitzrayim* - the Exodus from Egypt?

2 – Secondly, the *Midrash Mechilta* emphasizes the word in the verse “for you” – לָכֵן - to explain that the commandment establishing that the appearance of the new moon defines a new month is specific only to the nation of Israel. At this point in time all other nations used a solar based calendar as the means to mark time during the year. We now learn in this verse that, aside from the specific meaning of what the command dictates, that as well, this new lunar based calendar was designed solely for the nation of Israel. (Years later other cultures adopted a lunar based calendar as well).

The *Netivot Shalom* asks why does the Torah single out this mitzvah as being “for you”, implying only for *Ahm Yisrael* and not for the other nations? Why would we think otherwise? Would we not say the same about the other mitzvot as well, excluding the Seven Noachide Laws – שבע מצוות בני נח – which were meant for all of humanity?

3 – Thirdly, he asks why does the verse state that this commandment was given to *Ahm Yisrael* in *Eretz Mitzrayim*? The Torah does not usually mention the location of where various mitzvot are conveyed to the nation.

The *Netivot Shalom* begins addressing these three concerns with a short introductory teaching that express the great significance that our Sages attribute to the practice of "*Kiddush HaLevna*." - the Sanctification of the Moon. This ritual is performed outdoors at night, once a month, during the first part of the lunar cycle. This meaningful practice is highlighted by a Hebrew blessing, a selection from Psalms and other prayers, and followed by joyous dancing. In Tractate Sanhedrin 45a, Chazal teach, "One who blesses at the proper time the new month by means of reciting *Kiddush HaLevana*, is considered as if – כאילו – that person is actually encountering the face of Divine Presence Herself." The Sages considered this comparison to be quite unusual and unique. What is the connection between this practice and experiencing an intimate encounter with the *Shechina*?

In light of this teaching from the *Gemorah*, we are compelled to seek what is unique to the lunar calendar that we do not find with the solar calendar. The moon experiences times, as it wanes, when it is masked by such total darkness that we are unable to even see a tiny glint of light. Yet, even when the moon is completely hidden in this darkness, we witness, in its cycle, that at the height of its concealment, it once again begins to wax. Its light becomes increasingly visible as it returns to its full illumination in the sky. However, the light of the sun is consistently the same, always a strong bright shining luminary in the sky, never waning nor waxing. However, as with all stars the sun's destiny is to burn out and disappear into oblivion.

This indeed describes the life of the People of Israel, as we are compared to the lunar cycle. Much of our history, especially in the diaspora, has been a recurring theme of suffering, faced with many troubles and anguish, as we seem to be shrouded in darkness and despondency. Yet, as with the moon, our faith and trust, and actual experience, beckons us to remain hopeful and move through the cycle towards a renewal of light and illumination in its fullness, metaphors for revealed joy and gladness. As we say each month in the *Kiddush HaLevana*, whose origin is in Sanhedrin 42a, "And He directed the moon to renew itself as a crown of glory to those who are borne by Him from birth, who likewise are destined to be renewed."

וללבנה אמר שתתחדש, עטרת תפארת לעמוסי בטן, שהם עתידים להתחדש  
כמותה.

This recognizes that the very existence of *Ahm Yisrael*, is of a people whose secret is similar to that of the lunar cycle. At our people's darkest times, we never fully despair and assimilate into the abyss of oblivion, condemned to disappear into eternal invisibility. Our secret, like the moon, is that we are

forever on the trajectory towards greater illumination and visibility. And when we again experience darkness and suffering, we believe that it is part of the cycle, once again renewing and reclaiming our inner light that we are destined to shine out to the world. We are a nation that cultivates faith and trust in our Creator, and just as the moon waxes and wanes but yet is always present, we maintain fidelity to our relationship with the Divine both during times of darkness and light. Just as the moon remains existent during every stage in its cycle, so does *Ahm Yisrael*. Therefore, it is fitting that the first *mitzvah* given to the nation was *Kiddush Ha'Chodesh*, the mirror image that defines who we are as a nation.

Our tradition recognized *Kiddush Ha'Chodesh*, by witnessing the new moon, followed by sanctifying the new month of Nissan, as now the beginning of the new year. We now can understand the importance of the juxtaposition of this *mitzvah* with the second *mitzvah* that immediately follows, the commandment of the *Korban Pesach*. These two *mitzvot* directly precede *Yitziat Mitzrayim* two weeks later. The first *mitzvah* directly empowers and ennobles the nation to fulfill the second *mitzvah*, as they become intertwined with each other.

Realizing that we possess the secret to exist and even thrive in all of sorts of conditions, in all sorts of places around the globe and during all times, both challenging and cause for celebration is in fact what inspired the nation to comply with the command to offer the *Korban Pesach* --- a deity in Egypt and object of idol worship. As a nation, we as well were steeped in idol worship – עבודה זרה. Yet God manifested to us what is referred to in Kabbalah as an “awakening from above” – אתערותא דלעילא. We were awakened by a jolt of sorts from above, inspired from outside of our own selves, to realize that deep inside we always believed in redemption, we always believed in the Divine Presence and we always believed in the integrity of our relationship with our own inner being, our soul. Notwithstanding that we sunk to the lowest level imaginable, beyond which we would have not even been able to be redeemed, from that deep utter place of darkness, we suddenly sensed hope, we beheld the first ray of light. Therefore, to offer the *korban Pesach* expressed our own cycle of waxing out of our waned and dark existence in order to fulfill our destiny --- the promise that God made to our Patriarchs and Matriarchs. The beginning of the Torah New Year, immediately preceding the command to offer the *Korban Pesach*, imbued the new budding nation of Israel with the eternal capacity to renew, with a resilience from the darkest depths of depravity, where we may have seemed to some on the brink of extinction, to once again reclaim the inner light within each one of us to wax and illuminate. Even when a Jew may feel completely cut off and cast away by God, deep inside there remains the power to renew and wax again.

The Netivot Shalom now addresses the connection between this first mitzvah of *Kiddush Ha'Chodesh* and the word in the verse "for you" – לָכֵן – to explain that the commandment establishing that the appearance of the new moon defines a new month is specific only to the nation of Israel. He believes that this defines the unique character of Ahm Yisrael. Not only is this mitzvah of adopting a lunar calendar the first mitzvah, and yes, as with all mitzvot it's of course, "for you" to the exclusion of the other nations, but additionally this actually defines who we are in our most unique way. Unlike all other nations, the ever-constant inner strength to reclaim, to renew, to blossom once again is the unique gift that God bestowed to the nation of Israel. While each nation possesses a unique culture, language and values that characterize it as a particular nation, no other nation possesses this mysterious trait that mirrors the cycle of the moon. Hence, HaShem gifted the Ahm Yisrael with this uncanny and mysterious trait by referring to the mitzvah as "for you," emphasizing that while other nations may share values similar to some of our own, the everlasting quality to wax and wane and wax again belongs uniquely to the Jewish people.

Now we can understand why the verse, unlike other verses that include the various *mitzvot*, specifically mentions where in fact the mitzvah of *Kiddush HaChodesh* was given to the nation --- in *Eretz Mitzrayim*. The Netivot Shalom believes that again there is an innate connection between the implications of this first mitzvah with it being commanded *davkah* in *Mitzrayim*. In *Mitzrayim*, God decided to reveal to not only Ahm Yisrael, but to the Egyptians as well, that while logically we were positioned to become extinct and forgotten forever, from this depraved place, in utter darkness, we would be redeemed. Actually, it was in *Mitzrayim*, and not at *Har Sinai*, that God first chose to assign a unique mandate to the Hebrew slaves that were about to be the first people to be redeemed from Egyptian enslavement. The time had come for God to keep His promise that He made to Avraham at the *Brit Ha'Betarim*, the Covenant of the Pieces. The relationship between the assigning of the lunar calendar to *Ahm Yisrael* and the time of the redemption – the *geulah* – from Egyptian enslavement was one of perfect synchronicity. To the casual onlooker one had nothing to do with the other. Therefore, that this mitzvah was conveyed *davkah* in *Mitzrayim* may seem not to bear any significance. However, nothing could be further from the truth. The origin of this first *mitzvah* being commanded *davkah* in *Mitzrayim* became the first step in God keeping His promise to Avraham four hundred years earlier.

God said to Avraham in *Bereishit* 15:13-14:

And He said unto Abram: Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years; and also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge; and afterward shall they come out with great substance.

וַיֹּאמֶר לְאַבְרָם, יָדַע תְּדַע כִּי-גֵר יִהְיֶה זְרַעְךָ בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא לָהֶם, וְעַבְדוּם, וְעָנּוּ אֹתָם אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת, שָׁנָה. וְגַם אֶת-הַגּוֹי אֲשֶׁר יַעֲבֹדוּ, דָּן אֲנִי; וְאַחֲרֵי-כֵן יֵצְאוּ, בְּרַכְשׁ גָּדוֹל.

Isaiah succinctly captured one possible understanding of the “great substance” when he explained that our universal role with humankind is to be a light unto the nations. In Isaiah 49:6 we read:

I will make you a light for the nations, so that My salvation may extend to the ends of the earth.

וַיִּתְּתִיךָ לְאוֹר גּוֹיִם, לְהִיּוֹת יְשׁוּעָתִי עַד-קְצֵה הָאָרֶץ.

And this is the light of the moon – ever constant in its cyclical movements through time, from darkness to light as it waxes, and from light to darkness as it wanes, once again renewing itself --- and so the cycle continues. And this is the light of redemption for all of humanity. *Ken yehi ratzon!*

In light of this inspiring teaching, I invite each of you to consider cultivating the spiritual practice of inner self renewal by contemplating on the following:

1 – The light of the sun appears the same every day. However, the light of the moon appears different each day. This means that each day our Creator is asking of us to not merely repeat what we did yesterday; do something different, something special each day. Ask yourselves what it is you need to know in order to do something new today, at this very moment. What is needed right now???

2 – What is the first sign that I am a renewed person? When everyone else looks new – in a way that you have never seen them before.

3 – The *Ohr Gedalyahu*, Rav Gedalyahu HaLevi Schoor, d. 1979 in NY, explains that all forms of life that we see are the manifestations of the Divine Plenty – *shefa*. All forms of life are constantly being renewed at the celestial spiritual root of life. Hence, the appearance of the New Moon signifies that real new life energy continuously emanates from above. This is the deeper meaning of *Rosh Chodesh*. Whomever wishes renew him or herself can do so, and receive help from above as the new moon begins to illuminate. To receive this energy of renewal we simply need to unite with the Divine within us --- the Infinite Source of Infinite Renewal.