

Parshat Bo

Evan Pressman

January 12, 2008

Good Shabbas. This morning, I hope to complete the Chapel Minyan's version of a hockey hat trick: a) serving as Minyan coordinator, b) chanting the Haftorah, and c) giving the D'var for Parshat Bo. Well, I cannot skate, handle a puck, or fore-check like Bobby Orr, but I'll give it my best shot.

This Sedrah is resplendent with so many intriguing stories: the balance of the 10 Plagues brought upon Egypt, the on-going and at times tense negotiations between Moses and Pharaoh, the precise discussion of the Pascal offering, and of course, the actual Exodus itself. My focus today, however, centers on the first 2 verses of Exodus Chapter 12, which deals with a less glamorous yet still significant concept that continuously influences not just the Jewish people but all inhabitants on this planet: the management and measurement of time.

Exodus 12, verses 1 – 2, states: “And God spoke to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, saying: This month shall be to you the head of months – the first of the months of the year it will be for you”.

At the surface, God is directing the Jewish people to establish a new calendar based on the lunar cycle, to initiate it with a specific month, and to start its usage immediately from that point forward. This dictate is universally recognized as the first commandment given to Israel in the Torah. But why would the creation of a new calendar be given this designation? One would tend to reason that God's initial commandment to the Jewish people would be much more awe-inspiring and attention getting: something that would directly and firmly relate God with his chosen people.

Many scholars have interpreted this first commandment as the preliminary step of Israel's eventual redemption from bondage. By definition, a slave has nothing to possess, including the management and measurement of their own time. This, too, belongs to their masters. Further, these slaveholders would have probably instituted or more likely forced upon their "property" their own calendars, their counting schemes, and subsequently, their own deity festivals and worship periods. The Eitz Chaim provides a marvelous interpretation: "One of the 1st steps in the process of liberation was for the Israelites to have their own calendar, their own way of keeping track of time and recalling the most important days of their history." Rashi substantiates this opinion as part of his commentary of Genesis 1:1, where he asserts, "It was only necessary to begin the Torah from Exodus 12.2." This is a strong assertion, but it deftly defines this forever life-altering change that was about to occur to the Jewish people. Rabbi Label Lam from *Torah.org* further states that "at this moment the Jewish people are empowered to take back control of their time and participate in creating a calendar. Controlling one's own schedule is the first great step of freedom".

Upon further study of Shemot 12.2, there are 3 distinct characteristics that are of interest for further scrutiny. The first is the concept of "beginning": an initial reference point for measuring time. From the 1st part of the verse, it states *HaChodesh Hazeh Lachem Rosh Chadashim* - this new moon or month shall mark for you the head of the months. A literal interpretation is obvious: through God's commandment, the month of Abib, or Nissan as it is now called, was officially designated as the 1st month in the Jewish calendar. This is further substantiated in Exodus 23:15, "you should observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread . . . at the set time in the month of Abib, for in it you went forth from Egypt". This would also make good agricultural sense: aligning the first month with the advent of spring, the recognized season of renewal. I would like to offer another possibility. In the verse, the word *rosh* – head - is used to signify the first new moon or new month of the year. This is somewhat unusual that a non-numerical term is used to describe an arithmetic enumeration. In addition, the second part of verse 12.2,

rishon hoo lachem l'cha-d'shay hashanah - it shall be the first of the months of the year for you – appears to be a repetition of the first part. As such, I would consider *rosh chadashim* to mean “this is the beginning month for you”, or more likely “this new moon signifies your renewal, both physically and spiritually”. God has provided the Children of Israel, a group who have been oppressed and externally controlled for so many years, the opportunity to begin anew as free individuals and as a liberated nation. In doing so, God also has given us the ability and the will to experience our own specific and distinct beginnings, each in our own place and time.

For every event that is measured in our respective lives, there is always a defined beginning moment, a stake in the ground signifying that point of initiation. Our busy lives are full of these milestones, whether it's your son or daughter hurrying to school for classes that begin at 9:00 AM every weekday, or an office manager notifying his or her department coworkers of a staff meeting planned for 10 AM the next day. Coaches use stop watches to monitor track athletes during running events, as does trainers and owners at thoroughbred racing events. We also have these moments of initiation in our spiritual lives as well, though, I would say, they occur in much less harried situations. We gladly allow Shabbat to begin in our homes through the lighting of candles, and we joyously greet the Shabbat to start to fill our lives through our Kabbalat Shabbat prayers.

The second characteristic is the notion of ordering our measurement of time. This can be derived from second part of the verse: “*rishon hoo lachem l'cha-d'shay hashanah* - it shall be the first of the months of the year for you”. In this case, the word *rishon* - the Hebrew ordinal number for “first” - is used, indicating a specific sequence to count the months of the year by, starting with the month of Nissan. And this implies linearity.

We comprehend, witness, and measure time linearly, that is to say, in a precise and countable order along some temporal line that should not be altered. All of our time keeping devices, from the simplest paper calendar to a highly sophisticated atomic clock, implements this notion

of a straight-line progression of time. For example, the month of Nissan shall always occur before the month of Iyar; the 14th of Nissan shall always come before the 15th of Nissan; and that on any given day, 10:00 AM will always arrive before 11:00 AM. Conversely, I can schedule and plan for a vacation to be taken six months from now, but I can't skip ahead those six months and actually start that vacation tomorrow (unless I'm a genius physicist who's discovered approaches for time travel).

An obvious question to be asked is why Nissan is designated as the first month of the Jewish year instead of Tishrei. On the 1st of Tishrei, Jews around the world commemorate Rosh Hashanah, the head of the year. We reaffirm our faith in God as our Creator, our King, and our Judge, and pray that we are inscribed in the Book of Life for the year to come. This day marks God's creation of the universe, as we chant in the Musaf liturgy *Hayom harat olam* - today the world is born. Accordingly, the history of the world and all its inhabitants start on the 1st of Tishrei.

However, the Jewish people are not the only residents in God's universe. We are a recognized subset of all the peoples and other life forms that populate this planet. We have our own distinct collection of facts, figures, stories, and teachings: a fascinating account that commences with the actual outgoing from Egypt during that first month of Nissan. This is the initiation point where the history of the Jewish nation begins: on the 1st of Nissan, we were granted the mitzvah of self-determination, and on the 15th of Nissan, with God's awe-inspiring guidance, we exercised that right. Accordingly, our new calendar began with the month of our liberation as a commemoration of our redemption from bondage. So although we recognize and commemorate all of our treasured holidays and observances, God instructs us in Leviticus Chapter 23 to prescribe each one in terms of this new calendar. Specifically, Leviticus 23:24, as interpreted in the Eitz Chaim, confirms the set time for Rosh Hashanah: "In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe complete rest, a sacred occasion

commemorated with loud blasts.” And in Leviticus in 23:44, the verse adapted to our festival Ma’ariv liturgy, the pact is sealed: “And Moses declared the set times of the Lord”.

The third characteristic that I would like to discuss from verse 12.2 is the notion of a recurring cycle: once the reckoning of the months of the subject year is complete, we circle back and begin a new year from the first month of Nissan. Though the years advance, the established structure of the Jewish calendar remains unchanged, engineered by God’s lunar template as specified in the Torah. We all acknowledge and subsequently observe the Shabbat, the holidays, and the festivals in their appointed times. For instance, Passover always begins on the 15th of Nissan, Shavuot always occurs fifty days later on the 6th of Sivan, and Yom Kippur always takes place on the 10th of Tishrei. We also remember those set dates and times that have personal and/or communal significance, such as birthdays, anniversaries, and Yahrzeits.

But for the multitudes of people on this earth, time measurement is the only real similarity between one year cycle and the next. Though we may each have our own particular day-to-day routines, our respective lives do not repeat year by year, neither should they maintain that consistency. Each New Year brings change: sometimes for the better, sometimes not. These transformations in our lives can be natural or man-made, physical or emotional, short-lived or long-standing, self-imposed through our specific actions or dictated by fate or the designs of others. With each New Year, we continually face an unknown set of opportunities and challenges. Only God knows what will be in store for each of us in the coming year. And the best approach we can take is to embrace our lives to the fullest with each passing year, to appreciate and put into perspective the myriad of highs and lows that may occur, and to make the absolute most of our existence to better ourselves and our fellow human beings.

It’s fitting that the first Chapel Minyan of 2008 happens to fall on the Shabbat of Parshat Bo. Here we are, at the start of a new secular year, studying that section of the Torah in which God instructed us to implement a new calendar. As is the custom, let us resolve to find our own

new beginnings within the immensity of our Jewish heritage, to appreciate the timeless order and beauty of God's creations, and to welcome the cycles of the seasons and embrace the changes in our lives.

Shabbat Shalom.