

A MATTER OF TIME

by Rabbi Naftali Reich

Egypt reels under a barrage of plagues. Pharaoh's stubborn resistance is finally crumbling. The Jewish people sense the long-awaited end of their enslavement. Hashem is about to take them out of bondage and forge them into His chosen people, the recipients of His holy Torah. Indeed, even before the final plague is administered to the Egyptians, Hashem already gives them their very first mitzvah as a nation.

So what is this first mitzvah that will cement the nascent relationship between Hashem and our emancipated ancestors whom He has chosen as His own special people? One might have expected an exalted ideal, such as the mitzvah of emunah, faith in Hashem. Or perhaps a mitzvah of personal refinement, such as loving other Jews as oneself. But no. It was the very practical mitzvah of establishing a lunar calendar to regulate the annual cycle of festivals and observances. This is really quite baffling. Why this particular mitzvah? Would it not have been more appropriate perhaps to initiate the Jewish people with a mitzvah that represents transcendent spiritual concepts?

Let us reflect for a moment on one of the more notorious features of our society - the mad rush that characterizes our daily existence. The rhythm of our lives is driven by the ticktocking of the clock. Our jobs, our schedules, our appointments, rush hour traffic, all the aspects of our contemporary lifestyles are measured and regulated by the inexorable clock. But this is not really a new phenomenon. The accelerated pace of society has simply highlighted one of the fundamental truths of the world - that the most precious commodity by far is time.

"Time is money!" we are told, but a wise man once turned this adage on its ear and said, "Money is time!" Time, not money, is the fundamental currency by which the value of all things is measured.

Coming out of bondage, the Jewish people were presented with a sudden wealth of time. As slaves, their time had been stripped away from them, but now they got it back. What would they do with this great treasure that was about to fall into their laps?

This crucial question was answered by the mitzvah of establishing the calendar. When designating the new month, the Beth Din declares, "Mekudash, mekudash! Sanctified, sanctified!" Hashem gave the Jewish people the power to sanctify time by what they say and do, not only to give it worth but to imbue it with holiness. Rosh Chodesh, the first day of the new month, has the status of a minor festival, reminding us that we can consecrate all the moments of our lives. By living in a way consistent with Torah values and ideals, we consecrate our time and preserve it for all eternity. This

mitzvah, therefore, does indeed represent some of the most transcendent spiritual concepts in the Torah. This mitzvah, delivered with the gift of time, was indeed a most fitting beginning for the special relationship between Hashem and the people He had chosen as His own.

The mitzvah of establishing the calendar also highlights another aspect of time - its cyclical nature. Life, as we know all too well, is an endless procession of ups and downs, with no guarantees as to the outcome. But the eternal existence of the Jewish nation is unconditionally guaranteed by our Creator. The symbol of this guarantee is the lunar cycle which our calendar follows. The Jewish people are compared to the moon. Just as the moon wanes to the point of oblivion but always returns to its fullness, so will the Jewish people always return to their greatness, no matter how far they are driven down by the pressures of exile.

Therefore, the mitzvah of the calendar was doubly appropriate for the time it was given. The Jews were slaves deprived of spirituality and even basic human dignity, a people on the verge of extinction, yet they would once again glow with the brightness of the full moon. They had been mired for centuries at the nadir of human existence, but now Hashem had lifted them up and placed them on the pinnacle of Creation.

A man once visited a great sage.

"How is your life going?" asked the sage, "Spiritually? Materially?"

"Splendid!" said the man. "Everything is excellent. It's been great for years and years. Couldn't be better."

"Life without ups and downs? You are living in a dream world. If you do not know you are down, how do you expect to get up?"

In our own lives, we can also take comfort in the metaphor of the lunar cycle. The flow of time is a harbinger of hope, both for ourselves as individuals and for all of us as a people. But even as we wait for the future, it is within our power to sanctify the present, to give meaning and value to our time by the manner in which we live. We can mold our time into a bridge to an illuminated future. Text Copyright © 2008 by Rabbi Naftali Reich and [Torah.org](https://torah.org).

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