

A TIMELY MITZVAH

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

In Parshas Bo, the Jews receive their very first mitzvah - Rosh Chodesh: Beis Din (the Jewish court of law) must determine Rosh Chodesh (the first day of the month) by sanctifying the new moon. This month shall be to you the first of months. (12:1)

The beginning of the new month is determined by witnesses who testify to having seen the new moon. After Beis Din verifies their testimony, the court formally establishes that day and sanctifies it as Rosh Chodesh.

Rashi, at the beginning of parshas Bereishis (1:1), explicitly refers to this mitzvah as the Torah's very first. But the Rambam (Sefer Ha-Mitzvos) does not count Rosh Chodesh as the Torah's first mitzvah, opting instead for the first of the Ten Commandments - "to know that there is a G-d."

Clearly, Rashi focuses on the chronological order, in which Rosh Chodesh was given first, while Rambam apparently prefers to count the mitzvos fundamentally, and thus considers believing in G-d - without which all other mitzvos are meaningless - as the primary mitzvah.

While both approaches are clearly viable, and aren't mutually exclusive, it is interesting to consider why the mitzvah of Rosh Chodesh was chosen to be the very first of all mitzvos. What is so special about sanctifying the new moon? And what, if any, is the relationship between it and the mitzvah to believe in Hashem, which, as the Rambam writes, is "the basis of all beliefs and the pillar of all wisdom"?

According to chassidus, the performance of mitzvos affect not only the person doing the mitzvah, but the object or vessel through which he performs the mitzvah, which becomes holy through its use in doing G-d's will. To wit, there is nothing inherently holy about challah (the bread we eat on Shabbos, not the small piece that's separated and given to the Kohen which is also called challah) and wine. But when used to honor Shabbos, they are co-opted as vessels to demonstrate the sanctity of the Day of Rest - and become holy.

In aggregate, when we perform mitzvos, we elevate the material world - the lowliest of all spheres - and imbue it with G-dliness.

The mitzvah of Rosh Chodesh is unique in that instead of physical objects, it relates to time. Through this mitzvah, we transform a regular day into one with special sanctity. (This is not true of Shabbos. Shabbos does not depend on the Jewish Court to declare it holy; it is holy in and of itself. By

guarding the laws of Shabbos, we attune ourselves with the day's sanctity, but we don't bring any additional holiness to the day itself.)

In this respect, the mitzvah of establishing Rosh Chodesh - which in turn determines the entire Jewish calendar - has an impact not found in other mitzvos. In general, our ability to sanctify the physical world through performing mitzvos is limited to the specific tools we use to perform them. When we do many mitzvos, we elevate the material world on multiple levels. Still, that kedusha (sanctity) is confined to the specific object(s) we use in doing those mitzvos.

But the "tool" used to perform the mitzvah of Rosh Chodesh is time itself. Beis Din, after verifying that the new moon has appeared, declares the day holy. So while time is one of the few aspects of physical existence over which we have no apparent control (we can neither speed it up or slow it down), the mitzvah of Rosh Chodesh gives us control over time - to sanctify it and imbue it with holiness.

Ibn Ezra is puzzled by the Torah's brief treatment of Rosh Chodesh:

Moshe doesn't spell out how years and months are established or what we're supposed to do if the calendar gets out of sync. How is it possible that he goes to great lengths to explain the laws of the Metzora (leper) - which affects just one man at one time - but is so vague about the laws of Rosh Chodesh, which affect every Jew at every moment?

He answers that the Torah is intentionally vague about the details of Rosh Chodesh in order to establish that the final ruling depends on the judgment of Beis Din. In other words, by leaving out the fine details, the Torah is stressing that while Hashem established the framework of Rosh Chodesh, it is up to the Sages of each generation to decide and implement its laws. Indeed, Chazal, our Sages say, that even if Beis Din mistakenly establishes the wrong day as Rosh Chodesh (which could potentially mean we also observe Pesach or Rosh Hashana etc. on the wrong day), their ruling stands.

Kedushas Levi explains that our ability to determine the calendar is so powerful that, to the extent that we can express it, it gives us veto power over Hashem:

It shall be for you the first of the months of the year.

The First, he says, is an allusion to the Holy One, Blessed is He - who precedes time and creation. Through the mitzvah of Rosh Chodesh, The First - that is Hashem, is yours - i.e. the Torah has made you the arbiters of Hashem's will in this world.

A couple months after leaving Egypt, Hashem told Moshe he wanted to give the Jews the Torah. Chazal say Hashem intended to give the Torah on the sixth day of Sivan, but Moshe added another day to give them more time to prepare, and the Torah was ultimately given on the seventh.

Mefarshim explain that this is why Shavuos, which coincides with Mattan Torah, is referred to as Zeman Mattan Toraseinu - the time the Torah became ours. When Hashem gave us the Torah, he

didn't just share His blueprint for the world with us; He also put us in control of its interpretation forever more (within the guidelines taught by Moshe). Indeed, we find at times in the Talmud that laws are established according to the understanding of our Sages, even when their interpretation potentially clashes with Hashem's original intent.

So while it's true that the mitzvah to believe in G-d is the basis of all mitzvos, it's also true that the understanding and interpretation of G-d's will - through studying and expounding on the holy Torah - has been transferred to His nation. And thus both mitzvos - belief in G-d and Rosh Chodesh, which establishes our ability to dictate the hows and whens of G-d's will - rightly deserve a dual billing atop the mitzvah count. Have a good Shabbos. Text Copyright © 2011 by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann and **Torah.org**