

MOON WATCH - BE A PART OF IT

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

The first Rashi in the Torah (Ber.1:1) presents the view of Rav Yitzchak who said that the Torah should have begun with the Pasuk in this week's Parsha, "This month (Nisan) should be for you the first month of the year." In preparation for the actual exodus from Egypt, before the plague of the 1st Born, G-d instructed Moshe and Aharon in the ceremony of Kiddush Hachodesh- sanctification of the new month. This was the process through which the Sanhedrin (High Court) in Yerushalayim would declare the start of the new month, based on the lunar cycle.

The Talmud in Rosh Hashanah explains the process of sanctification of the new month. At the start of the lunar month, the moon is hardly apparent in the night sky. As the month proceeds, the crescent of the moon gradually increases until it reaches the status of being "full" on the 15th day of the lunar cycle. It then decreases in size until by the end of the lunar cycle / month it is no longer visible to the naked eye.

The Torah mandates that the Sanhedrin must announce the start of the new lunar cycle / month on the basis of the eyewitness testimonies of two witnesses. This required that two witnesses had seen the very first sliver of the new moon as it began its monthly cycle of appearance in the sky. They would then go to the high court in Yerushalayim who would cross examine the two witnesses to determine if what they claim to have seen was actually the "new moon." If the court was certain that the witnesses had seen was actually the "new moon", they would then declare the start of the new month in a ceremony called Kiddush Hachodesh -sanctification of the new month.

The lunar month is either 29 or 30 days long. In actuality, the lunar month is about 29 and ½ days long; however, for the sake of balancing out the yearly calendar, the months usually alternate between 29 and 30 days in length. Nowadays, because we do not have a Sanhedrin, we rely upon the calendar to inform us when the changes in the months occur. On those occasions that the month is 29 days long, Rosh Chodesh is only one day - celebrating the 1st day of the new month. On those occasions that the month is 30 days long, Rosh Chodesh is two days - celebrating the last day of the previous month and the 1st day of the New month. However, when there was a Sanhedrin, the new month could only be determined on the basis of the eyewitness account. If the witnesses testified in court before the end of the 29th day, then the court would proclaim the start of the new month and Rosh Chodesh would be only that same day. If the witnesses did not appear before the end of the 29th day, then Rosh Chodesh would automatically be declared the next day. The terminology of the

Talmud is that the month can either be Malleh -full, or Chasser - Missing. A "full" month is 30 days long (our two day Rosh Chodesh) and a "missing" month is 29 days long (our one day Rosh Chodesh).

The impact of this process was profound. Depending upon when the Sanhedrin would proclaim the start of the new month would determine when the various holidays would occur. If the month of Adar (the month before Nissan / Pesach) was missing (29 days long) then Pesach would start on the 15th of the month of Nissan - let's say a Tuesday. However, if the month of Adar would end up being Full (30 days long) then Pesach would start on the 15th of Nissan - which would then be Wednesday. This meant that the Korban Pesach - Pascal Lamb, the eating of Matzoh and the prohibition against eating Chametz, would start and end a day earlier or a day later. The same would be true for Tishrei and the fast of Yom Kippur. Depending on when the Sanhedrin would declare the new month of Tishrei would determine whether the previous month of Ellul was 29 or 30 days long. This in turn would determine whether we fasted on Yom Kippur a day earlier or a day later.

Why did Rav Yitzchak say that the Torah should have started from this Mitzvah, rather than the story of creation and the early history of our nation? The Mitzvah of sanctifying the new month, is the first commandment given to the Jewish nation. Until that moment in history all other Mitzvos, such as Brit Milah and Gid Hanashe, (not eating the hind quarter of an animal) were commanded to individuals such as Avraham and Yakov. However, the uniqueness of Judaism is that the Torah was given to a nation, not only to individuals. Therefore, the Torah, which is intended to be a manual of instruction as how the nation is to serve Hashem, rather than a book of stories and personal histories, should have begun from the first Mitzvah commanded to the nation: "This month (Nisan) should be for you the first month of the year."

(Why the Torah began with Creation and the personal histories of our Forefathers and Mothers is not for now).

However, why did Hashem pick the process of declaring the new month as the first Mitzvah to command the nation? Why didn't He choose a different Mitzvah, such as Shabbos or Kashrus, to initiate the nation into their exclusive relationship with G-d?

Starting with Moshe at the Burning Bush, Hashem instituted a system of Rebbi and Talmid - teacher and student. This system was intended to engender within the student a dependency upon his teacher that translates into a need for the teacher. The student's need for his teacher's instruction should then motivate an awareness on the part of the student as to his potential and his limitations. This awareness is the essence of humility. Humility is the single most important Midah - characteristic in developing a relationship with G-d.

The system of Rebbi and Talmid is also the medium of the Torah She'Baal Peh- the Oral Law. The essential factor in guaranteeing the accurate transmission of information from generation to generation is the trust that the Rebbi engenders in his Talmid and the willingness that the student has for accepting his teacher's instructions. Ultimately, those same feelings of trust and acceptance

should be extended to G-d so that each of us will willingly subjugate ourselves to His will. However, the inherent conflict that exists within us, between doing G-d's will or doing as we please, rages on.

The Mitzvah of Kiddush Hachodesh - sanctification of the new month, and the process of the Oral Law are two of the ways that G-d provided to help us overcome our "selves", and become accepting of His Torah. From the moment that Adam and Chava ate from the Tree of Knowledge, we have struggled with our "selves". The process of sanctifying the new month puts us in the drivers seat. We are the ones who determine the calendar. We are the ones who tell G-d when to judge us (Rosh Hashanah); when to forgive us (Yom Kippur); and when to celebrate our freedom (Pesach). It is a process that includes us, rather than only imposing itself upon us. All good administrators know that the best way to overcome opposition is to include the opposition in the planning and the execution of the project. It makes the disenfranchised, the disillusioned, and the indifferent a part of the process, rather than apart from it.

The same is true for the Oral Law. "The only free person is the one who is engaged in the study of Torah." The study of Torah reveals that the Halachik process is dynamic and fluid, rather than static and inflexible. What appears to be set and dogmatic to the outsider, proves to be just the opposite for the Talmid Chacham. Therefore, by immersing oneself in the study of Torah, a person is able to feel a part of the process, rather than feeling restricted by Halacha. This is why G-d gave the sanctification of the new month as the first Mitzvah. G-d wanted to introduce the Bnai Yisroel to the dynamism of Halacha and the active role they will be expected to play in the application and integration of G-d's will. Determining the calendar and setting the dates for the Yomim Tovim immediately made the nation a part of the process, rather than apart from it.

Good Shabbos.

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