

THE FIRST MONTH

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

In reviewing the calendar, there are two events that dominate biblical history, Exodus and Mattan Torah. The giving of the Torah was by far the more important of the two. In fact, we were taken out of Egypt in order to receive the Torah. As G-d said to Moshe, "This will be the proof when you bring the people out of Egypt you will serve G-d on this mountain." (Shemos3;12)

In general, calendars begin from some monumental historic event. By doing so, the identified event remains fixed in the conscience of the public. (Think of the secular calendar. 2001 years since what event?) Therefore, it would have made sense if Sivan, the month of Mattan Torah, had been selected as the first month of the year. Why did G-d choose Nissan, the month of the Exodus, as the first month of the year?

The beginning of all viable religions is the belief in an intelligent supreme power that created the universe for a reason. It stands to reason that at some point in history the supreme power would reveal His reasons for having created the universe. In Judaism, Mattan Torah was that moment. The giving of the Torah presented us with G-d's purpose for having created the universe and choosing us to be His kingdom of priests. Therefore, our calendar should have begun from Mattan Torah, not the Exodus!

The beginning of our religion (in contrast to the beginning of our nation) was the giving of the Torah the Ten Commandments. It differed from the beginning of all other religions because it was a national experience rather than an individual experience. (Christianity and Islam began with a single man convincing others that he had experienced a personal revelation of G-d.) The public nature of Revelation required a nation gathered at the foot of Mt. Sinai hearing the words, I am G-d, your G-d

As we have explained in previous issues of the Rabbi's Notebook, the family of Yaakov had to be circumscribed, enslaved, and persecuted so that they could develop into a nation. Had the Bnai Yisroel been left alone and free in Canaan, their chances of remaining apart from the other Canaanite tribes would have been negligible. They would have assimilated into the surrounding societies and lost their identities as the children of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. Had the Bnai Yisroel remained free, but in Egypt, they would have never left Egypt when the time came. (As it was, after all the persecution and affliction, only 1/5 of the Jews followed Moshe into the desert.) Therefore, they had to be circumscribed, enslaved, and afflicted or else they would not have become a nation.

Pesach celebrates our nationality. It commemorates the moment we were separated out from among the other nations of the world to be G-d's Chosen. It was the necessary prerequisite for the giving of the Torah. However, it was still only the prerequisite. Why commemorate the prerequisite as the first month, the beginning of our calendar when it should have been Mattan Torah, the month of Sivan?

The first Rashi in the entire Torah wonders why the Torah began with the limited account of creation and the origins of the Jewish family. It should have begun with Parshas Hachodesh the commandment that Nissan is the first month of the Jewish calendar! (See the summary of Hachodesh in Parsha Summary@Torah.org.) Parshas Hachodesh was the first Mitzvah commanded to the nation and it makes sense that the Torah should have begun with G-d's first commandment to the nation.

The first Rashi does not wonder why the Torah did not start from the commandment to Avraham to perform a Bris - circumcision. The first Rashi does not wonder why the Torah did not start from the commandment to Yaakov not to eat from the Gid Hanashe - the sciatica. The first Rashi only focuses on Parshas Hachodesh, which was the first commandment to the nation. Parshas Hachodesh, the first Mitzvah commanded to the nation, took place on Rosh Chodesh Nissan. Therefore, Nissan earned the right of beginning our calendar.

The significance of Parshas Hachodesh is the association between G-d and the nation, rather than G-d and the individual. Rav Hirsch makes the following comment on this week's Parsha.

If we are not mistaken, these detailed repetitions of facts already set forth in previous chapters are intended to let us know that the craftsman and Moses were constantly mindful of the sacred and symbolic purpose of each object not only during the manufacturing process but also while the finished products were delivered and set up. Their zeal and enthusiasm, in its sum total as well as every detail, had been subordinated completely to the commands of G-d. There had been no attempt on the part of any craftsman to bring his own ideas and his own individuality to bear upon the work by making additions or omissions. (Shemos 36:8 and 39:43)

The correlation between Parshas Hachodesh and Parshios Vayakhel & Pikudei is obvious. Just as the month of Nissan was chosen to begin the calendar because it was the first Mitzvah commanded to the nation rather than to the individual, so too Parshios Vayakhel & Pikudei review the construction of the Mishkan as a product of our national subjugation rather than individual accomplishment. All the craftsman subordinated their individuality in creating G-d's home so that Moshe could proclaim, As G-d had commanded so had they done! (39:43)

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