

Heshvan, Mar Heshvan, Marheshvan...What to call this new month?!

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It is hard to follow in the footsteps of greatness! Ask me, I became the rabbi of this congregation in the post-Leonard Cahan era! Can you imagine following an intellectual giant, a rabbinic locomotive like Rabbi Cahan, *alav ha'Shalom*? I am happy that I got to tell him many times when he was alive what an honor it was to be his successor here, and that I knew just how big the shoes were I that had to fill. Throughout history this idea of following a leader who was beloved and successful has been documented over and over. Alexander the Great was *so great* that it took not one but four generals to succeed him: Antigonus, Cassander, Ptolemy, and Seleucus. Does anyone remember the king right after the great King Solomon? His name was Rechavam, and almost immediately after he ascended the throne there was a civil war, with the southern kingdom seceding from the north. Winston Churchill's successor, Sir Anthony Eden (bet you didn't know that name), was only in office for 1 year and 279 days, and he is considered to be one of Great Britain's least effective prime ministers. How do you follow Churchill?! In our day and age many of us can remember how President George HW Bush, a brainy, well-qualified successor struggled to follow the charming and charismatic Ronald Reagan.

There are so many examples of this. And it's not just people, you know. In a few days, as we just heard, it will be Rosh Hodesh Marheshvan. Tishrei is 'the King Solomon of months!' Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Shmini Atzeret, Simchat Torah...It's got it all: Soul searching introspection, sincere repentance, unbridled joy and celebration; the hope of new beginnings and reconciled relationships. And then comes...*Heshvan*. Or is it *Mar Heshvan* (two words) or is it *Marheshvan* (one word)?

Before I answer that, and tell you why it even matters, let me digress for a moment because people often ask me where or how I get my sermon ideas. For years, my kids have provided me so much sermon fodder. This topic, however, arose from a congregant this week who asked whether the new month should be referred to as *Heshvan* or *Mar Heshvan* (two words). I got the sense that this congregant wasn't too keen on the idea of **Mar** Heshvan, based on the often-peddled explanation that **Mar** is a word that means "bitter," and bitter is added to Heshvan because this is the only month on the calendar that has no holidays. Who really wants to declare a new month "bitter?" I get it. Now I ought to tell you on behalf of all rabbis and Jewish professionals that coming right after Tishrei, a month with a break in

holidays is anything but bitter. Many would say it's a blessing! A respite. A relief. The truth is, the idea of Mar Heshvan, two words, meaning a 'bitter Heshvan' is a fringe explanation at best. Some have found "bitterness" in the notions that our matriarchs Sarah and Rachel died in Heshvan, or that the Flood began in Heshvan, or that the division of the United Israelite monarchy I referred to earlier happened in Heshvan. Those might all be true, but in nearly 4,000 years of Jewish history you can find plenty of tragedies to accompany every month of the year. And, according to the Talmud, tractate Ta'anit, there used to be holidays in the month of Marheshvan that we no longer celebrate. But here's the real kicker, in our sacred texts, this month is never referred to without the Mar attached to it. It's always **Marheshvan**, one word. The rabbis discuss in the laws of how to write a get, a document that requires serious attention to detail, whether a get is even kosher if it only says Heshvan, and not Marheshvan. Ultimately they rule that, post facto, it is kosher because, well this is "*lashon b'nai adam*," it's just the way people happen to refer to the month. But ideally, they say, it should be written Marheshvan. So if the concept of a bitter month is not a mainstream idea, why is this the name of the 8th month on the Jewish calendar?

If you consult the Torah, the most common way of referring to the months on the calendar is ordinally. Meaning, "the first month," "the second month," "the third month," etc. When the Israelites are given their own calendar as recently freed slaves in Exodus 12, the Torah says that that month is "*rishon hu lachem lechodshei ha'shanah*" the first month of the months of the year. Later that month became known as the month of "Nisan." But biblically, we are meant to count the months in reference to the defining moment of the exodus from Egypt. There were no names, just a numerical reference of what month it is since *Yitziyat Mitzrayim*. So where did these names come from? The answer is, the Babylonian exile. The reason that the correct name of this month is Marheshvan—one word—is that in Akkadian, the language of Bavel, that word means, you guessed it, "the eighth month." The later tradition of ascribing names to the months is all based on the Jewish experience in Babylonia. Now if that seems kind of scandalous, it should! The rabbis in the Talmud suggest (Yerushalmi RH, 1) that they retained the Babylonian names of the months to remember what they endured in exile, and the miracle of having been brought back to Eretz Yisrael in 539 BCE. A more likely explanation, though, is that Jewish life in Babylonia wasn't all that bad. About 7 years ago, a hundred or so cuneiform tablets were discovered in Iraq, describing life under Nebuchadnezzar. While he was no friend of the Jewish people, he did destroy Jerusalem after all, once the Jews were in Bavel he didn't oppress them. He pretty much left them alone. In fact, it is well known that when the Jewish people were offered the opportunity to return to Jerusalem by Cyrus the

Great, many chose to stay right where they were in Babylonia. It didn't take long for them to build a thriving culture in that first Jewish diaspora. A Talmud was eventually codified there, the Jewish calendar was established in Bavel...and the great Hebrew University Second Temple historian Isaiah Gafni writes that the Babylonian exile was the watershed event that transformed biblical religion into the Judaism we observe today. When you think about it some of those Jews stayed in Iraq and the surrounding areas until the year 1,948 of the Common Era, also known as the year that the Modern State of Israel was established. It's not surprising that preserving some of the posterity of the Jewish experience in Babylonia managed to stick.

But wait, there's more! We also know that the pre-fix "Mar" in Aramaic means "Master." Many sages in the Talmud were called Mar just as they were called Rav or Rabbi. The phrase that is used to call up Rabbis for aliyot, *Moreinu ve'Rabbeinu*, or *Moreinu ha'Rav*, our master our teacher, is linguistically related to that word Mar. Quite the opposite of bitter or sad, Mar is a word that connotes strength, power, and authority. When attached to the word Heshvan, perhaps we are declaring something extraordinary about this month, and not at all sorrowful. There are several interpretations to this effect. It is said that King Solomon established the Holy Temple in Heshvan, and the 19th Century Hasidic master Rabbi Tzvi Elimelech Spira of Dinov (a.k.a. B'nai Yissoschar) said that the third Temple will be rebuilt in Marheshvan, dispelling any doubt of the month being bitter. But the explanation that speaks to me most powerfully is that of the Sfat Emet, Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger. Also a 19th century Hasidic rebbe, he said that what is truly remarkable about this new month is that, coming right on the heels of the High Holidays, when we refer to *Ne'ilah*, and the gates of heaven closing, and the *Yamim Nora'im* coming to an end, that God is still close to us. It's not like God switches the sign from Open to Closed, and goes on vacation until the month of Elul comes around again at the end of the year. God is always near to us, even after this incredibly sacred season. What a reassuring and hopeful teaching. Personally speaking, I was flat out exhausted after this marathon of holidays, even more so because of the unwelcome intrusion of Covid. But the Psalmist said, *Hinei lo yanum ve'lo yishan, Shomer Yisrael*. The Guardian of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps. (121:4) God doesn't need a nap, or a break, or a day-off. God is as ready to hear our prayers, and fill our lives with holiness and meaning as God was on the holiest days of the year. So should we call this month Heshvan, Mar Heshvan (two words), or Marheshvan, one word? Clearly the answer is that one word that says it all: *Marheshvan*. A month of strength, a month of blessing, a month of hope for us, and for all the people Israel. Amen!

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