

# THE TIME OF OUR FREEDOM

Tazria/Ha-Chodesh 5779

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## I.

NINE MONTHS AFTER EXECUTING Louis XVI, a new calendar – the Revolutionary Calendar – was introduced in France in October 1793. The calendar restarted time: year one began in our September 1792, the founding of the Republic. Twelve new months of exactly thirty days were declared. And within each month were three ten-day *décades*, giving everyone one day off in ten rather than one in seven.<sup>1</sup>

It didn't last long. By 1806 – in only its 14th year – the revolutionary calendar was officially abandoned by Napoleon. But, despite its limited success and short life, the example of the revolutionary calendar is instructive. In a bid to throw off the shackles of monarchy and strike a blow to religion's hold on the region, the French created their own system of time. One set by them. One that espoused their own values and not those of an external force. By taking control of time itself, the people stated that they were no longer slaves to anyone. That their time was theirs. That they were free.

But the French were not the only people to mark their freedom in such a way. We did it too. In our special *maftir* for today, *parashat ha-chodesh*, we read of the Jewish people creating their own calendar:

הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לְכֶם רִאשׁ חֳדָשִׁים רִאשׁוֹן הוּא לְכֶם לְחֹדְשֵׁי הַשָּׁנָה:

This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you. (Ex. 12:2)

As captured perfectly by late-15th/early-16th-century Italian rabbi, Ovadiah Sforno,

מכאן ואילך יהיו החדשים שלכם, לעשות בהם כרצונכם. אבל בימי השעבוד לא היו ימיכם שלכם, אבל היו לעבודת אחרים ורצונם. לפיכך ראשון הוא לכם לחדשי השנה. כי בו התחיל מציאותכם הבחירי.

from now on these months will be yours, to do with as you like. Unlike your years of slavery when you did not have your own days – instead, you had to serve others

1. Willian Doyle, *The French Revolution: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 116; Simon Garfield, *Timekeepers*.

and their wishes. Therefore, this shall be your first month, for it begins your journey into freedom.

That we, as Jews, intercalate the calendar – that we are responsible for figuring out when the months begin and end and the festivals fall, is the greatest indication of our freedom. God may tell us to observe Pesach beginning on the 15th Nisan, but we decide when that is.

## II.

This is the customary point where a rabbi starts criticizing his congregants for how they spend their time: that, given that time is the greatest symbol of our freedom – that controlling time is our God-given gift – we should appreciate just how precious it is and not waste it on frivolity. Our freedom comes with a responsibility to use it for positive religious purposes. Indeed, in the Summer of 1964, Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm, one of the great pulpit rabbis of his generation, lamented to his congregants at the Jewish Center in New York that “modern man has too many *holidays* but too few *holy days*.” In the 1970s, R. Soloveitchik wrote:

God endowed man with time-awareness, the ability to sense and feel time and the existential stream of selfhood. Unfortunately, not every human being takes advantage of the unique human endowment to experience time – to *live* time rather than to *live in* time.

How we use our time, how we waste our time, has long been the bugbear of rabbis and clergy. But now I’d argue that there is a more pressing issue to protest, there’s a different message to shout from the pulpit, that a greater tragedy has befallen us than the misuse of our freedom through time-wasting: we are once again slaves.

## III.

Picture the following scenario and tell me if it seems real, perhaps too real: you’re out grocery shopping, or you’re out with family or friends, or you’re sat down to watch a movie, but rather than actually doing those things – the things you chose to do at that moment – you find yourself reaching to your pocket because you just felt a buzz or heard a bing.

Suddenly at this moment, no matter how important the task you are doing is, you feel compelled to address the buzz. Maybe you resist but now your mind dwells on what it could be. Or, you check

it and now your mind is dominated, not by what you are doing in the present, but what you just saw on a screen.

If the challenge of freedom is about figuring out how to use our time best, the problem of slavery is that our time is dictated, not by ourselves, but by someone – or, in this case, some *thing* – else's demands. A free person has obligations, a free person still has things they must do, but they calculate and plan when those obligations will be fulfilled. That's why God gives us power over our calendar. We must fulfil our obligations, but we shape our fulfilment of them. In contrast, a slave drops everything they are doing to answer every whim of their master, regardless of whatever else – however important it may be. And we have adopted the most demanding master of them all: the notification-enabled smartphone.

If, during this past week, you ripped yourself away from whatever you were doing due to the buzz or bing of your phone, then you will easily fulfil the first part of the *mishnah's* (Pes. 10:5) instruction on Seder night:

בְּכָל דּוֹר וָדוֹר חַיֵּיב אָדָם לִרְאוֹת אֶת עַצְמוֹ כְּאִלּוּ הוּא יֵצֵא מִמִּצְרַיִם.

In every generation a person must see him- or herself as though they [personally] had gone out of Egypt.

We have to begin the Seder feeling like slaves in Egypt, and we know what it means to react to a master other than ourselves, because we do so every time our phone beeps. But herein lies the problem: because if we are to feel free by the end of the Seder, how can we, when we know that, right after Yom Tov ends, we will all be reaching for our phones to find out what we missed?

#### IV.

What can we do to become free? One popular solution to our technological servitude is the technology Sabbath – a term coined in 2010. I don't need to explain it. You should all get the idea. But as Cal Newport, a Georgetown computer science professor has argued, the technology Sabbath doesn't solve the problem, it merely offers a reprieve from our servitude. We aren't free from our devices; we just get a day off. But when that day ends the demand for our attention resumes. We must serve once again.

So, what is the solution? We read it this morning. I already quoted it:

הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם רֵאשׁ חֲדָשִׁים רֵאשׁוֹן הוּא לָכֶם לְחֹדֶשׁ הַשָּׁנָה:

Take control of your time.

And I'd like to suggest a few different ways to do so, all of which are inspired by what we read this morning in our special maftir, as well as Cal Newport's book addressing this issue, *Digital Minimalism*.

The first is to restart, to take part in what Cal Newport calls a "digital declutter." Just as the Jewish people abandoned the Egyptian calendar in favor of their own, abandon those websites and apps that make demands of you that aren't necessary to your life. You don't need Facebook and you don't need Twitter. And so, abandon them. Cal Newport recommends doing so for 30 days – and he encourages you to decide after 30 days if you really need the technology you left behind. I'd recommend doing so for just the eight days of Pesach. See what comes of it.

But, you may argue, those things are important for you. And there are definitely other things that are important that make greater demands. Even if you delete Twitter from your phone, your emails will still ping and your texts will still buzz. What to do? The answer was already stated by God:

הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לְכֶם

These months will be *yours*.

Rather than praying for moments of quiet to do serious work amidst the clamor of distraction and demands, set time within your day where you will be distracted. Don't pull yourself away from serious work to answer an email or text, make a time outside of your serious work to do so. Just as we set windows of time in the Jewish calendar to do certain things, do the same with your days.

Just a couple of weeks from now we will celebrate Pesach and, in our davening, refer constantly to the time period as *zeman cheruteinu*, the time of our freedom.

Let's make sure it's more than just lip service.