



The Parsha in Practice

Your Moonshot

This week we read the last of the special four seasonal parshiot, Parshat HaChodesh. This final entry describes the very first mitzvah the Jewish people received as they were being told of the forthcoming redemption from Egypt. It was the eve of a new moon and G-d "buries the lede" in his message to Moshe. Yes, in just a few days there would be a Korban Pesach and a redemption from Egypt, but first, be it known that there is a mitzvah of Rosh Chodesh.



Of course, understanding why this is the first mitzvah presented to the people - even before the Korban Pesach - is important, but I think there is another significant question that needs to be addressed. Not only is G-d explaining that counting time begins now, but He is specifically instructing how to count that time: by watching the moon. Celestial objects have always been used to track time, because their predictable cycles and their universal visibility allows for wide coordination. Most cultures use the Earth's revolution around the Sun to create their year and then arbitrarily create months. Here, we are being told that we are to count by the moon, so that months are our starting point, and the formation of years follows (other than the occasional seasonal adjustment).

Why does this matter? Why is it so important that our very first mitzvah expresses this Moon-interest and rejects the Sun?

R' Hirsch beautifully suggests that:

...Hachodesh hazeh LACHEM Rosh Chadashim - "This renewal of the moon shall be a beginning of renewals to YOU." i.e. noticing the fresh birth of the moon shall induce you to achieve a similar rejuvenation. You are to fix your moons, your periods of time by taking note of this ever fresh recurring rejuvenation...It is not a question of actual months but of OUR months - LACHEM...

Without this regularly bringing ourselves back to a commitment with our God, ...we should always slide farther and farther from Him, always be getting more and more estranged from Him; quite unconsciously and without noticing it, our natures would

become less and less responsive to the light of his spirit, our natures would become darker and darker until - like Pharaoh - our hearts would be hard and heavy and even the most startling signs and the most affecting wonders would not achieve rebirth."

The Sun remains the same, unchanging as it makes its daily journey through the sky. It's perfectly consistent and perpetual. Following the Moon is more complex. Early in the month we can barely find it, it grows in strength and then begins to diminish over time. This cycle repeats, again and again. To R' Hirsch, in tracking the waxing and waning of the moon, we get to observe a monthly celestial display of rejuvenation. This is to be a lesson for us. We all have good days and bad days. Our drive and motivation waxes and wanes. We begin the new diet on Sunday and by Thursday have figured out every excuse why our "real" start would have made more sense for the next Sunday. We begin the new course of Torah study and then after missing a week, figure we'll never be able to make up the time, and give up.

Our inconsistency frustrates us. We wonder if we really "meant it" or if we are just phonies. All those great ideas that never landed or those projects that never got off the ground can swell into a sense of inadequacy and despair. When we feel this way, R' Hirsch suggests we look up and watch how the very body by which we count time tells the same story. Every month, ever hopeful growth begins but reaches its zenith. Then it even declines. We are complex people in a multivariable world. We can be expected to rise and fall and to make progress and be forced to retreat.

The great ideas we have are meant to propel us further, to have us reach the edge of our atmosphere to touch what is beyond. Whether we reach it and how long we are able to hold on will not always be up to us, but we always know that we will receive another chance.

Hachodesh Hazeh Lachem - "these months are ours." Indeed. The lunar months tell our story and through them we track our lives. We orbit through hope and aspiration and rotate towards frustration and exasperation. We wonder whether the inspiration was real, and if our goals are even possible. Remember though, that behind the shadow, the moon remains in its fullness. As do we. Behind the shine lies our fundamental selves, just waiting for the next opportunity to reflect greatness. This is the first message the Jews receive from G-d and it is the one that we constantly need to remember.

Your plans were foiled? It's ok. Try again. The only thing failure says about us is that we haven't yet reached the month in which we'll succeed. When things get dark, it's ok. We're still there. And as the moon, we'll be back, maybe even brighter than before.

Shabbat Shalom,

Shmuel Ismach