



Parshat Bo: Overview

In this week's Parsha we read about the final three plagues that God inflicted upon Egypt: Locusts, Darkness, and the Plague of the Firstborn Sons. After the final plague, Pharaoh sends the Israelites to their freedom. In the Parsha we also read about two important mitzvot (commandments) that the Israelites accepted while still in Egypt. The first is the command to sanctify the new moon, which invests the Israelites with the power to control their own time and establish the new and independent Hebrew calendar.

The second is the command to bring the Paschal offering, which was established for all generations and has remained the foundation of the Passover Seder until today.



The Hebrew Date: Is it Relevant?

"This month shall be unto you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year to you." (Shemot 12:2)

In our Parsha, Bo, the Hebrew calendar is established. As in every calendar, there is a first month from which all other months are counted (Nissan), and an event from which years are counted (the Exodus from Egypt). In the course of Jewish history, the Hebrew calendar has undergone several changes. For example, years are no longer counted from the Exodus, rather from the creation of the world. Similarly, Tishrei, originally the seventh month, has replaced Nissan as the first month.

Over the years, and especially in recent centuries, the significance of the Hebrew calendar has declined substantially. This is most clearly expressed in the fact that even amongst Jews, and even in Israel, the Hebrew calendar serves mainly liturgical and symbolic functions. Very few people are trying to address this concern, which is the result of a worldview in which the date is no more than a technical means to quantify and characterize time. Those who prefer the Gregorian calendar, which can be represented numerically and has gained near-universal currency, maintain that efficiency should be the primary criterion for choosing a calendar.

It is possible, however, to construct an entirely different view of the Hebrew calendar, which views the date as something with intrinsic significance, even though it ignores issues of functionality. Every calendar begins its count from an epochal event with profound significance for the culture which adopts it. It teaches a particular scale of values and view of life and history. One who arranges his life around the Hebrew calendar reminds himself daily that he is a member of a venerable nation with a glorious tradition, a nation whose past, present, and future are inseparable. By choosing to use the Hebrew date, one connects himself to the Jewish people and marks time with reference to its seminal events. In a broader sense, it can be argued that by celebrating the Jewish holidays, one sets the rhythm of his personal life to something much greater than a technical tool for marking time. He becomes part of a journey which began long ago with a distinct event, and is moving toward a specific destiny. By relating to the Hebrew date, one replaces an apathetic relation to time with one that is substantive. This is the significance of using and relating to the Hebrew calendar.

However, one may still justifiably ask: What of practical considerations? Without a doubt, it would be silly to ignore or erase the business world's need for a conventional, universal calendar. Though we remain principled, we cannot expect the business world to quixotically ignore a complex reality. Nevertheless, while acknowledging reality,

businesspeople can relate to the Hebrew calendar in a serious and dignified manner. Below are three suggestions, by no means a comprehensive list, for raising consciousness of Hebrew dates:

a) By writing the Hebrew date alongside the Gregorian date on letters and contracts, and even next to signatures. Even though this measure is symbolic and cosmetic, ceremonial elements can be influential and significant.

b) By marking company events that do not relate directly to business according to their Hebrew date. For example, an employer can decide to celebrate the Hebrew birthday of his employees, and not the secular date. This will give the event a more festive character, and will also connect the business and its employees to the rhythm of Jewish life. Unlike the first suggestion, this one is more than ceremonial, and actually affects the timing of events.

c) By acknowledging Jewish and Israeli holidays which are fixed according to the Hebrew calendar. In Israel, it is commonplace for a toast to be raised before Rosh Hashana or for employers to grant pre-Pesach bonuses, but what of all other Jewish holidays? Next week, with the holiday of Tu B'Shvat, there will already be an opportunity to employ this suggestion!

Recovering the Hebrew date is the first step toward making our time more meaningful, transforming it from something which marks temporal quantity into something with a profound, symbolic quality, and thereby connecting us to the rich collective history of Israel.

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Sanctifying the New Moon

The commandment to sanctify the new moon, beyond being the first commandment that the Israelites received (it was commanded while they were still in Egypt), constitutes the basis of the Hebrew calendar, which in turn determines the time to celebrate every Jewish holiday. The crux of this commandment is the obligation of the Sanhedrin (in ancient times, the Supreme Court of the Jewish people) to determine, based upon eyewitness accounts of seeing the new moon, when the new month is to begin. With the deterioration of the Sanhedrin's power, Hillel, the Patriarch of Israel, initiated the establishment of a fixed, perennial Jewish calendar. Nevertheless, we preserve the way the commandment was originally performed by reciting the 'Blessing on the New Month' in synagogues on the Shabbat before each new month. This Shabbat is called "Shabbat Mevarchim", meaning "the Shabbat of Blessing".