

Torah Talk—מאמרי תורה



The Parasha Post of the Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital

Parashat Bo
February 4, 2017

פרשת בא
ח' בשבט תשע"ז

Torah Reading: *Shmot* (Exodus) 10:1-13:16

This week's *parasha* tells the story of the last three plagues, the preparations that the Bnei Yisrael needed to make in order to leave Mitzrayim, and the actual exodus itself.

The first *mitzvah* mentioned in *Sefer Shmot*, and in fact, the first *mitzvah* given to the nation, appears in this *parasha* [12:2]: “הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם, ראש חֲדָשִׁים: ראשון הוא – לָכֶם, לְחֹדֶשׁ הַשָּׁנָה הַפְּרִשָׁת, the plain meaning of the text, is clear that Hashem was saying that that month, *Nissan*, was to be considered from that point on to be the first month of the year. However, the rabbis derived from this verse the *mitzvah* of *Rosh Chodesh*, of celebrating the first day of each Jewish month. The latitude of interpretational opportunities affords the rabbis the possibility of deriving the *mitzvah* of celebrating *Rosh Chodesh* from this verse.

In addition, there are others verses in the Torah which validate the concept of celebration the “new moon.” For example, *Bemidbar* 10:10 tells us, “וּבְיָמֵי וַתִּקְעֶתֶם בְּחִצְצֹרֹת עַל עֲלֵיתֵיכֶם, וְעַל זִבְחֵי שְׁלָמֵיכֶם; שְׂמֹחַתְכֶם וּבְמוֹעֲדֵיכֶם, וּבְרֵאשֵׁי חֲדָשֵׁיכֶם וְהָיוּ לָכֶם לְזִכְרוֹן לְפָנַי אֶל-לֵהֲיֶכֶם, אֲנִי ה' אֶל-לֵהֲיֶכֶם – Also in the day of your gladness, and in your appointed seasons, and in your new moons, you shall blow with the trumpets over your burnt-offerings, and over the sacrifices of your peace-offerings; and they shall be to you for a memorial before your God: I am Hashem your God.”

So what exactly is *Rosh Chodesh* and what does its celebration entail?

Rosh Chodesh is the day of a new moon, which in Temple times was determined by an announcement from the *Sanhedrin* (High Court), based on a report of a

sighting of a slice of the moon. Once the Temple was no longer standing, a perpetual calendar was created by Hillel the Elder, around the first century CE. This is the calendar that we still use today to determine the first day of the Jewish month and therefore the days that the various holidays throughout the year will be commemorated.

During *tefilah* (prayer) on *Rosh Chodesh*, the prayer *Ya'a'leh Ve'Yavo* is added to the *Amidah* (the Standing Prayer) and to *Birkat Hamazon* (Grace After Meals), and half *Hallel* [Psalms 113-118] is recited (except on *Rosh Chodesh Tevet*, which is during Chanukah, when full *Hallel* is recited). We read a section of the Torah from *Bemidbar* [Numbers] 28:1-15, which details the offerings made on *Rosh Chodesh*. An additional prayer service called *Musaf* is added, as on other festive days such as Shabbat and *Chagim* (Jewish Holidays). After the service, many congregations recite *Barchi Nafshi*, Psalm 104, which is a poetic rendition of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, the Creation of the World.

According to the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Megilah* 22b, women should not engage in work on *Rosh Chodesh*, and Rashi [11th Century Franco-Germany], in commenting on this passage, delineates the activities from which they should refrain: spinning, weaving, and sewing – the physical skills that women contributed to the building of the *Mishkan* [the Tabernacle in the wilderness]. *Pirkei D'Rebbi Eliezer* [a book of *Midrash* dating to circa 1st Century CE] explores this prohibition in chapter 45, when discussing Aharon's dilemma with the people wanting to construct the Golden Calf:

Aharon argued with himself, saying: "If I say to Yisrael, Give me gold and silver, they will bring it immediately; so therefore I will say to them, Give me the earrings of your wives and of your sons, and then the matter will fail," as it is said, "And Aharon said to them, Break off the golden rings." The women heard, and they were unwilling to give their earrings to their husbands. They said to them: "You desire to make a graven image of a molten image without any power in it to deliver!?"

The Holy One gave the women their reward [for this act] in this world and the world to come. What reward did Hashem give them in this world? That they should observe the new moons more stringently than the men [by refraining from physical labor], and what reward will Hashem give them in the world to come? They are destined to be

renewed like the new moons, as it is said: “Who satisfies your years with good things; so that your youth is renewed like the eagle.”

Based on the sources cited above, many modern Jewish feminists have raised *Rosh Chodesh* to a women’s holiday, with special events, seminars, and prayers surrounding it each month.

However one chooses to commemorate *Rosh Chodesh*, the concept of beginning anew each month is a comforting one. Once per month we have an opportunity to reflect, to renew ourselves, and to redouble our efforts to achieve our personal goals, no matter how good or bad the previous month was. This is a hugely optimistic and positive approach to the world, one that was introduced at the very beginning of our being a distinctive nation.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- What might be some of the reasons for the rabbis in the ancient world for giving women a special day of their own once a month?
- Find the prayer *Ya’a’leh Ve’yavo* in your *siddur* and read it over. What do we ask Hashem for in this prayer? Why do you think we ask for these specific things on *Rosh Chodesh*?
- If you were to create a new *Rosh Chodesh* ritual, what might it be? What would be the meaning associated with this *Rosh Chodesh* ritual?