

BO (EXODUS 10:1-13:16)

Nissan Maximum

2002 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

You may recall that I mentioned a few weeks back that I don't celebrate December 31/January 1. Everyone knows that for us, the New Year began four months ago. Indeed, if you ask any gentile who has any contact at all with Jews, he will tell you that the Jewish New Year begins in the fall, on Rosh Hashanah. We dress in our holiday best, go to Shul, and wish each other a Happy New Year.

However, the idea of a September New Year seems to be contradicted by this week's Torah Reading.

The Pharaoh had been warned that the tenth and final Plague was coming, and that he himself would soon beg the Israelites to leave. Moses was about to receive several Commandments. The first was the Mitzvah of Rosh Chodesh, the monthly festival of the New Moon.

"This month will be for you the head of the months. It will be the first month of the year." (Exodus, 12:2)

In addition to giving Moses the mitzvah of observing Rosh Chodesh every month, He made it clear that the month of Nissan, the month of the Exodus, was to be the first month of the Jewish calendar. None of the months have names in the Torah. Rather, they are referred to, based upon their order of appearance after Nissan. The Torah tells us that the Passover offering is brought on *"the 14th day OF THE FIRST MONTH."* (Numbers, 27:16) The first of Tishrei, the date that is known to the world as Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, is called *"the first day of THE SEVENTH MONTH!!"* (Ibid, 29:1)

How can we celebrate the first of Tishrei in the fall as the New Year, when the Torah tells us very clearly that year really begins on the first of Nissan in the spring?

The answer is that there are several New Years, commemorating different things. The Talmud, in the beginning of the tractate appropriately named "Rosh Hashanah," tells us that there are four Rosh Hashanahs. (One of them, *Tu B'Shevat*, is coming up soon and will be discussed, G-d willing, next week.)

The Rosh Hashanah that is celebrated in the fall, Tishrei 1, commemorates the creation of Adam and Eve. It is, in reality, THE WORLD'S New Year, our common ancestors' "birthday." It is a day on which G-d assesses the accomplishments of Adam and Eve's "grandchildren."

Nissan 1, on the other hand, is OUR Rosh Hashanah. As G-d said to Moses, *"This month will be FOR YOU the head of the months."* Nissan is the month of our freedom. Nissan is the month in which we acquired our national identity. Nissan is the month in which we became unique. Nissan is the month in

which we first received Mitzvahs.

I read this week of a school in Israel that is bitterly opposed by the neighborhood in which it is opening. The school, which intends to open in the town of Cholon, represents a threat to the values in the local community. This school, may G-d protect us, is A RELIGIOUS SCHOOL!! It is a school for young Russian immigrants, and the secular, anti-religious neighbors see the school as a danger. They are proud of the non-religious culture that has developed in their community, and don't want to risk it by having "them" come to "our" neighborhood.

The local paper says that "... residents fear that real estate prices will plummet and the quality of life in the area will be affected..." One local resident states with pride that his street currently does not have a single "*Chareidi*" (Standard mistranslation -- "ultra-Orthodox") family. He complains "this development negates our identity as secular Jews."

In other words, "There goes the neighborhood."

Replace the word "religious" with "black," "Hispanic," or "Jewish," and in the U.S., you've got a constitutional lawsuit. Replace it with "Arab" or "Palestinian," and in Israel, you've got an international incident.

For two thousand years we were a nation without a homeland. For two thousand years we wandered from place to place, from persecution to persecution. What kept us going?

Before taking us out of Egypt, G-d gave Moses a list of Mitzvahs to fulfill. In order for us to "deserve" to be emancipated, we had to "earn" our freedom. We had to bring the Passover offering. We had to tell our Egyptian neighbors that we were planning to eat roasted lamb, an Egyptian god, for dessert at our Seder. Not a popular concept. We had to smear lamb's blood on our doorposts, (the first "*Mezuzahs*") to demonstrate that this was a religious Jewish home. We were given several divine directives: Matzah, Bris, *Tefillin*, Mezuzah, and *Pidyon HaBen*.

We have survived the millennia by maintaining our unique identities. We celebrate Rosh Hashanah in the fall by joining the brotherhood of Mankind in standing before G-d in Judgment. We celebrate our JEWISH NATIONHOOD on the Rosh Hashanah of Nissan, by engaging in expressions of Jewish identity -- fulfillment of G-d's Torah.

Have a great Shabbos.

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