

BO (EXODUS 10:1-13:16)

Double Dating

2007 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

A few weeks ago we opened up our new calendars and re-taught ourselves how to write checks. The day after dating our checks 12/31/06, we switched over to 1/1/07.

This shortcut in check writing actually presents us with a religious problem.

It was almost time for the Exodus. Our People had been slaves in Egypt for too long, and it was time to go home. The Egyptians were undergoing plague after plague for their stubborn refusal to release us. We were about to become a Nation.

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

Passover, the commemoration of the Exodus, is celebrated on the 15th of Nissan. Nissan, which is actually its Babylonian name, is referred to by the Torah as simply, "... *the First Month*." None of the months of the year have names in the Torah ... they are simply counted from the beginning. The month following Passover is "*the Second Month*." Ironically, Tishrei, the month in which Rosh Hashanah, the so-called "New Year," occurs, is referred to as "*the Seventh Month*." (See "Nissan Maximum".)

Some Commentaries see this statement of, "This month will be ... to you... *the first month of the year*" as obligatory. Nachmanides explains that the reason the Torah doesn't assign actual names to the months is so that we have an ongoing reminder that G-d took us out of Egypt.

This is similar to our weekly calendar. The six days of work week have no names. What the world calls "Sunday, Monday, Friday, and Saturday," we call "First Day, Second Day, Sixth Day, and Shabbos." We spend the entire week counting the days until Shabbos. The names we use for the days of the week are a fulfillment of the Mitzvah, "*Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy*." Similarly, says Nachmanides, our monthly count from the month of the Exodus keeps us focused on that great miracle all year.

There are authorities who rule, based upon the above explanation, that one is not permitted to abbreviate the secular months of January, February, etc., as 1, 2, etc. To refer to January as the first month would appear to violate the Mitzvah of considering Nissan to be the first. Other authorities (such as the Chasam Sofer) argue against the use of the secular months entirely!

My point here is not to tell you how to write your checks. Many authorities permit the secular number system. Rather, we should use this concept to identify our priorities. Are we “January people”? Are we “April 14 people”? Do we base the priorities of our life around the secular world?

To be sure, we live in a secular world and need to be able to interface with that world. But how do we identify ourselves? Do we let the outside world tell us who and what we are, or do we turn to the Torah and let it guide us in all our decisions, including “secular” ones, such as business ethics and morality?

In Jewish life there are several New Years. Next Shabbos is Tu B'Shevat, the New Year for Trees. No, it's not a Jewish Arbor Day, nor is it a “Go-Hug-a-Tree-and-Protest-Against-Big-Oil-and Nuclear-Energy Day.” It is a day when we acknowledge G-d as the source of livelihood. It is a time to recognize the special status of the Land of Israel and its produce. And yes, it is also a time to express APPROPRIATE concern about the environment.

Nissan is the New Year for our birth as a Nation that follows G-d's Laws. Tishrei, in the fall, is the New Year when G-d judges the entire world to decide what the coming year will bring.

These are all essential priorities that should define how we approach everything else, including January 1, April 14, and July 4.

Let's look at it our way, and let's look at it their way. On our New Year we eat traditional foods such as apples dipped in honey, accompanied by a prayer that the Master of the World will bless us with a sweet and prosperous year. Or, alternatively, we could treat ourselves to that traditional January 1 breakfast.

Aspirin! :-)

Have a great Shabbos.

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