

A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

(Bo)

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality
From Rav Binny and Yonatan Freedman

What does it mean to truly live in, to truly be in a moment? One day, when we are all up in heaven, perhaps I will have the chance to ask Noam Apter, 22, of Otniel.

Friday night: White tablecloths and china, the light of the Shabbat candles, and the sweet singing of Shalom Aleichem, a song of peace that begins every Shabbat dinner in every Jewish home. No matter where Jews have been, and how unwelcoming and challenging the world around them has been, they are still singing of peace on Friday nights. And this particular Friday night in the Yeshiva at Otniel was no different. Except that while the students of this yeshiva and their families were singing of peace, no one heard the silent click of wire cutters slicing through the security fence.

Smiling faces, Kiddush over wine, and the blessing of the children; every Friday night for thousands of years Jewish parents have taken a moment to appreciate the gift of children sitting at the Shabbat table. It is a moment of dreams and joy, of potential and love. If we can bless the sweet delicious challot, and appreciate how blessed we are have to have bread on our table when so many in the world can only imagine such a luxury, how can we not take a moment to appreciate what a blessing each child is, and how many dreams each of them represent? Except that this Friday night, while parents were blessing their children with light, and seeing in them the majesty of creation, two other 'children', armed with M-16 automatic assault rifles and grenades, were making their way into the same dining hall bringing with them darkness and destruction.

Otniel, a town in the Hebron foothills south of Jerusalem, is also home to a very special Yeshiva, where boys add two years to their army service in order to combine army service with Jewish studies. While students and families sang and danced to traditional Shabbat tunes in the dining hall, Noam, along with Gavriel, age 17, Tzvika, age 19, and Yehuda age 20, were in the kitchen getting the first course onto the serving plates.

In the blink of an eye, light became darkness and the sweet sound of Shabbat melodies was lost in the horrible sounds of gunfire. Two terrorists, members of the Islamic Jihad organization, entered the kitchen wearing IDF army uniforms and began shooting immediately.

Under fire, Noam Apter ran towards the door separating the kitchen from the dining room where over a hundred unsuspecting people, young boys and families, were welcoming Shabbat.

Wounded and bleeding profusely, with his last strength, he managed to lock both locks and throw the key away. He locked himself in with the terrorists, preventing them from entering the dining hall, raining death and destruction on all those inside.

Noam Apter paid for this act of heroism with his life. The terrorists murdered him, and the other three boys with him.

It is difficult to imagine what pure terror such a moment must contain. To be in such close quarters, with no way of defending yourself, facing evil in its purest form, the range of emotions that must inevitably sweep over a person is impossible to describe. Many experience pure fear, the fear of the unknown. Some experience intense sadness, the sadness that comes with the awareness of endings; dreams that will never be realized, loved ones that will be left behind, goals never to be achieved.

And some, those rare few, experience challenge, the challenge that comes with the realization that life always means opportunity, and that we are always here for a purpose. How does a human being rise to such a level? How does one overcome every natural instinct of self-preservation, and see his fellow human beings before him, that he is able to run towards danger, instead of away from it? If I ever get the chance, I will ask Noam Apter that question. There are those who, in a moment, achieve what most people strive an entire lifetime to become.

You may think that this is a terribly sad story, and this is true. But there is also a deep joy hidden here, because in between the lines of this story is the secret power of a given moment, and with it, perhaps, the reason we are still here as a people, after four thousand years of wandering and struggle, pain and suffering. But to explain this, we need to take a closer look at the story of the exodus from Egypt in Parshat Bo.

At long last, after two hundred years of pain and suffering in the darkness of Egyptian servitude, the family of Yaakov finally leaves Egypt, and, amidst the great Exodus from Egypt, the Jewish People is born. Perhaps no less important, we are given our mission as a people, as we receive our first mitzvah, the first commandment given to us as a people on the road to Sinai.

“And Hashem (G-d) spoke to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt saying: This month shall be to you the beginning (Head) of the months, it will be the first for you of the months of the year.” (Shemot 12:1-2)

Incredibly, the first mitzvah given to us as a people is the mitzvah of Kiddush HaChodesh, the sanctification of the new moon. One might have assumed, and maybe even expected a more ‘impressive’ mitzvah to get our journey as a people started: Shabbat, for example, or the mitzvah to believe in one G-d. We might even have understood beginning with one of the special mitzvot associated with Pesach (Passover), like Matzah or the Paschal lamb (which actually does come next). So why is the first mitzvah given the Jewish people, the commandment to have a calendar (and begin it with this month of Nissan)?

Why is our calendar (and which month we begin that calendar with) so important as to merit being the very first mitzvah the Jewish people are ever given as a people?

This is especially challenging when one stops to consider the nature of our ‘lunar’ calendar, which seems to be almost as much a solar calendar as it ever was a lunar one.

As an example, the calendar we employ utilizes a rather odd system of leap years (which occur seven out of every nineteen years) to ensure that the three major festivals always fall in the appropriate seasons. Pesach, after all, is meant to fall in the springtime, as it represents the newness of planting and springtime and is the birth or planting of the

Jewish people. Indeed, G-d Himself says: “Today you are leaving, “Be’Chodesh Ha’Aviv”, in the month of spring. (Shemot, 13:4)

Shavuot, the festival of the giving of the Torah, is known as the festival of the first fruits (called “*Chag Ha’Bikkurim*”, in early summer, just as Sukkot is the festival of the harvest (“*Chag He’Asif*”). The entire Jewish calendar revolves around making sure that these festivals fall during the solar seasons we are meant to experience with them. So why then, do we have a lunar calendar? Again, why is it the first mitzvah we are given as a people?

It is interesting to note that there seems to be an extra word used here in communicating the nature of this mitzvah, which is the word “*Lachem*” (“*for you*” (Shemot 12: 2) The first month which is meant to begin the Jewish New Year is “*for you*”, and the word is plural, meaning perhaps: ‘*for all of you*’.

(This month shall be to you (“Lachem”) the beginning (Head) of the months (Shemot 12:1-2))

The Torah need only have said that this month (Nissan), the month in which we finally left Egypt behind, would be forever the first month of the year. Why the necessity to stress that the month was and is for us?

Further, why does G-d need to present this commandment to both Moshe and Aaron? It would certainly have been enough for Hashem to speak with Moshe, as was normally done; why must Aaron be included here?

Lastly, how does all this relate to the exodus from Egypt, which is clearly the central theme of this particular parsha?

Perhaps before we explore the difference between solar and lunar calendars, we need to first understand what a calendar is all about. When you stop to think about it, a calendar is all about time. This was really the first gift Hashem gave us as a people. Just prior to leaving Egypt, on the eve of the tenth and last plague, Hashem gave us the gift of time.

A slave really has no need for a calendar, because a slave really has no use for time. His time is not his own; he is essentially at the mercy of his master. He cannot plan, because his future is not his to determine. Tomorrow will be no different from today, which, is indistinguishable from yesterday. His is a life of toil, with no set hours, and no end in sight, merely a tool in someone else’s plan, without rhyme or reason, as much an object to his overseers as an ox or a plough, he is merely one more object to be utilized as long as practical, and eventually discarded when no longer useful.

Indeed, many historians believe our numerical system of counting was originally devised in ancient Egypt as a method of numbering slaves. Slavery inevitably reduced human beings to mere numbers, indistinguishable from one another, which is why the Torah prohibits counting human beings; in Judaism, especially after our experience in the horrors of Egyptian slavery, a human being is never a number, he is always a world.

One needn’t go all the way back to the Egypt of 3,000 years ago to understand this message; it is no accident that the Nazis were tattooing numbers onto human arms in an effort to turn human beings into numbers. Because once a human being is reduced to a

number, he is no longer a person; he is no different from a lampshade or a bar of soap, just one more item on a shelf, to be used until no longer useful and then discarded. And that is how human beings can be tossed into pits, or baby boys tossed into the Nile River.

When you are a number in a vast sea of slave labor, what difference does it make what day or even what month it is? Tomorrow and today are one and the same, and we are all discardable items in a physical world. In the end, we cannot change the world around us, nor is there any value to any attempt to change who we are, because after all, we will all wither away and die anyway.

Only with freedom did we rediscover the value and the power of time. Because all of a sudden what we did today could make all the difference in who and how we would be tomorrow.

This is the essential difference between a lunar and a solar calendar. Every day, everywhere in the known world, the sun will rise in the East and set in the West. This will happen every day, of every week, of every year, forever. The sun represents the idea that in the end, nothing ever really changes. From our human perspective, we see the sun remaining the same every day; rising and setting today just as it did yesterday, and as it will continue to do every day, forever. And if the world does not change, then who are we to assume that we can be any better? In the end, there is no point to change and growth, because it all turns out the same anyhow.

When one looks up at the sun, one is reminded of the inexorable pattern of nature. One cannot, in truth, even look at the sun. We are, before the mighty majesty of the heavens, small indeed. And like all things natural, we too, small that we are, will one day fade away into the oblivion of time. Here today, gone tomorrow, we might as well enjoy our short time on this earth, for it will be gone before we know it, and nothing we do really makes that much of a difference, when viewed against the magnitude and unchanging pattern of the sun.

But Judaism has a very different approach: Our calendar is a calendar of the moon. Although our calendar is linked to the seasons, which suggests that there is a time for all things, and that life is a process of growth and harvesting, it is also a lunar calendar. One of the things that distinguishes the moon from the sun is that, unlike the sun, even to the naked eye the moon appears different every night. The moon waxes and wanes, and just when you think it is gone forever, it comes back, stronger than ever, kind of like the Jewish people.

From the outset, Hashem wanted to teach us, that we always have the power to change, and that we are never doomed to stay where we think we are stuck. We can always rise above where and even who we are, just like the moon, which is constantly changing and never 'gives up', waxing again just when it appears to be gone forever.

But there is more. Time is meaningless unless it is imbued with purpose. Like freedom, now that for the first time in 200 years we had 'time on our hands', the question was, what was all that time for?

Ever wonder why the Jews have such a strange way to celebrate freedom?

I can remember the magnificent celebrations in 1976 to commemorate America's bicentennial. An armada of navy ships, including battleships, destroyers, and even an aircraft carrier, sailed down the Hudson River, culminating in an incredible fireworks display above the statue of Liberty in New York's Harbor. And the next night, over Central Park in New York City, they gave out free beer to over a 100,000 people with an even bigger fireworks display. Imagine, 100,000 New Yorkers in Central Park at midnight, with free beer; now that's a party!

But what do we do to celebrate our freedom? Every year, on the anniversary of the exodus from Egypt, we have the most structured night of the year! And there are so many details...you have to have four cups of wine, not three, and each one has to be at least 4.4 fluid ounces, and you must be sure to lean when you drink, not to mention how much effort has to go into the matzah, and the need to eat a minimum of two matzot at different parts of the seder. In fact, there are fourteen different components to the Seder, beginning with the Kiddush, and culminating in the Hallel and Nirtzah prayers after the meal. And heaven forbid there be any Chametz (unleavened bread) at the Seder!

In fact, the very name Seder, means order! So where's the party? Why doesn't the Torah loosen up a bit?

See, the message of the Seder is that we don't celebrate freedom, because we don't view freedom as the end of a struggle, it is merely another stepping-stone. The question in life is not whether you are free; the question is what that freedom is for. If your freedom is only to drink and get high, then in the end, you are still a slave. We all serve something, and the challenge of 'freedom' is what we choose to serve.

What was the purpose of leaving Egypt? Where were we meant to go, and who were we meant to be? That is the hidden message of the moon, and the reason it is the beginning of the journey of the Jewish people. We are given a world that is very much incomplete, and our challenge is whether we can be partners in changing it, and making it better.

So how do we do this?

Perhaps the ritual of sanctifying the new moon is a clue. Every month, the Sanhedrin (the high Jewish court) would convene in the courtyard of the Temple, the Beit HaMikdash, in Jerusalem, on the nights when the New Moon was meant to appear. Having waned away into nothingness, the new month would begin as soon as the barest sliver of the New Moon would be seen in the sky.

Interestingly, however, the Sanhedrin itself could not witness this sliver of moon and declare the new month. They had to wait until two individuals came forth and claimed to have seen the sliver of moon in the sky. Only when they were both questioned separately, and the facts ascertained to match reality (i.e. that they saw the sliver of moon in the part of the sky it was expected to appear in, etc.) was the new month declared. Perhaps the calendar and this ritual were not meant to be a ritual of the leadership alone; it was meant to connect the greatest of rabbis with the simplest of fellows, on whom they depended to set the calendar. And if we are going to make a difference in the world as a people, we can only do it if we are together.

This may be the meaning of the verse:

*“Ha’Chodesh Ha’Zeh **Lachem...**” “This month shall be for you”.*

This month is for all of you, and together, it is a gift I give you, says G-d, to change the world.

Indeed, this is alluded to as well by the fact that this very special mitzvah is first given to Moses and Aaron together. The **Torah Temimah** (Rav Baruch Epstein, 1857-1940) points out that it is two witnesses who determine the New Moon, and not a Jewish court of three judges, because when a decision is made by three individuals there will always be a majority opinion. But when there are two witnesses, in order to make a decision, everyone needs to agree. So the witnesses represent a unity of purpose. When we declare a new month we are dependent on coming together, and learning to be able to agree with each other.

We are never really ‘stuck’ in the moment, and we can always change who we are, and rise to who we can become. And the recipe for all this is the ability, even in the darkest of moments, to always be together, and see everyone around us, even when every instinct screams out to think only of ourselves.

In Otniel, Noam Apter seized such a moment. Faced with a reality where there was no way out, and a foregone conclusion, he chose to see everyone else rather than himself, and in so doing grabbed on to a window, a fleeting moment of Jewish history, and brought us all a little bit closer together. And as much as that moment was full of tragedy, it was, as well, a celebration of who we really are.

Rudyard Kipling’s famous poem “*If*”, comes to mind:

*“If you can fill the given minute, with sixty seconds of long distance run,
Yours is the earth and everything in it, and you’ll be a man my son.”*

Sometimes, a person comes along who truly succeeds in filling the given minute with sixty seconds of long distance run.

Three thousand years ago, a people, enslaved for two hundred years, discovered that every minute can be such a moment. And in the town of Otniel, a young man, may his memory be blessed, reminded us that such moments begin by seeing everyone else even before you see yourself.

Shabbat Shalom,

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