

Taking Notice in our Time Rabbi Shaul Judelman, Parshat Bo

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The original Jewish geography, according to our mystical tradition, has three components- Place, Time and Soul (*Olam, Shanah* and *Nefesh*). These are the basic dimensions in which we exist and interact with our world. Environmental thought often dwells in the realm of place, as clearly the physical world has inherent ecological import. Therefore, when we read the Torah for its environmental wisdom, we usually look for passages relating to land or material goods. In the Torah Portion *Bo*, however, our attention turns to time: “This month will be to you the head of the months.”¹ An exploration of this unique *mitzvah* (Divine commandment) can reveal profound insights into the Jewish nature of time, and unlock the secret of how the realm of time is also of deep environmental significance.

The commandment to mark the month of Nisan is the very first *mitzvah* given to the Jewish people as a whole. While still in Egypt the people are commanded to note the month so that they may prepare to observe the first Passover (*Pesach*) at the time of the Exodus. This *mitzvah* is so significant that Rashi's first question on the entire Torah is: if the Torah is the book of the Jewish people's Divine Law, why doesn't it start with Parshat Bo?² We know that it does not; we go through the whole process of the book of Genesis before arriving to this place of *mitzvah*. But what is so crucial about the awareness of the new month that it holds the significance of being the Torah's first *mitzvah*?

In some of the environmental movement's writings on religion, what has been called the “Judeo-Christian” conception of time as a linear progression comes under attack. In such a view, history moves towards a culmination of G-d's plan—the attainment of an ultimate, eternal good, far beyond that which is accessible in this world. Herein, we find our “end.” The conception of time as cyclical is considered primitive, oblivious to the reality of a final, heavenly Truth. One of the tasks of Jewish environmentalism is to grapple with this version of religious belief and question whether Judaism really sees time and nature this way.

We are free to view time as an unstoppable vector moving towards a pre-determined end. But what are we to make of the events and processes along the way? Are they really just “means to an end?” Certainly not. Subtle changes of weather, daylight, and flora signify complex changes in time. When we pay attention to our actual experience of these changes, we find a dynamic source of connection with our Creator. Far from being conceived as purely linear, our Jewish calendar reflects the cyclical nature of the year with a precise system of holidays and observances connected to each moment and season. The beginning of our year, as proclaimed in the first commandment in Parshat Bo, is the lynch pin of that connection.³ The Torah calls Pesach “*Chag haAviv*,” the holiday of the Spring, and the Talmudic prescription of the Jewish leap year, implanting an extra month in the year, is done in order that Pesach will indeed always occur in the spring. This is a dramatic statement of environmental consequence. The Sages could have declared a purely astronomical, lunar-based calendar, but based on the Torah's prescription, they took steps to ensure that the calendar also reflects the cycles of nature.

This demonstrates Judaism's deep awareness of the Divine character of nature's processes.

The confluence of redemption and springtime is no coincidence. Everyone is aware of the tremendous energy of renewal that occurs in the springtime. The rebirth of flowers and greenery, the new life in the fields— these are all symbols of our redemption. Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Lyadi, in a teaching about Pesach, mentions an anthropocentric view that the renewal of spring actually stems from the redemption of the Jewish people.⁴ The truth, he teaches, is that there is no such primacy or causality— the Divine energy that brings forth the birth of spring in nature is the exact same energy that brought about the redemption of our people in Egypt. And it is precisely the return of spring each year that inspires our personal redemption with each Pesach.

The word we receive with the commandment of time is *chodesh*, month, or more literally, newness. It is extremely instructive that our word for this basic time unit implies renewal and revelation, as opposed to a continuation of the status quo. Even the word for year, *shanah*, is connected to the word for change, *shinui*.

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Although we do view history as a march towards an ultimate Redemption, we are reminded— on Pesach, on Rosh Chodesh, on Shabbat and with the rising of the sun each day— that the renewal possible at every moment is of as much significance as the final goal. As we experience the changes of time, we should be changing and adapting along with them. And as we grow, we cannot afford to ignore the natural world, or to act in ways that suppress or spoil the inherent wisdom of G-d's Creation.

Finding the revelation of G-d through time happens when we connect with the Divinity of natural changes. I was once a Shabbat guest in a very well-to-do synagogue. Many of the people there wore fine watches on their wrists. But as the third meal of Shabbat winded down, the Rabbi walked outside, looked up at the sky to count the three stars that mark the end of Shabbat, and only then gave the call for the evening prayer. There is something beautiful in how our tradition's attention to the natural cycles still impacts us today, how our Jewish practice brings us out of doors to find our connection with G-d. Rabbi Menachem Frumin of the Israeli town of Tekoa once asked, "How can Jews, who are commanded to develop Yirat Shamayim (fear of Heaven), live in a place where they can't even see the Shamayim (skies)?"

The commandment of chodesh teaches us to continually *m'chadesh*, renew, our perspectives and relationships, and to embrace *chiddush*, innovation, as a fundamental value of Jewish being. Our belief in time as a source of newness and opportunity is one of the deep tenets of Judaism that allows for a modern ethos of change like environmentalism to take root in the daily life of Jewish people. Such an awareness can empower us to make the radical changes that sustainable lifestyles demand. Realizing that Jewish theology does not write off the revelation happening within the cycles of time, we are encouraged to engage and celebrate the changing nature of this world and to find profound and simple ways for us as Jews to serve G-d and live responsibly.

Suggested Action Items:

1. Pray with the sunrise: The sunrise is a constant source of inspiration to the day it brings. The tradition of praying at sunrise is a tried and tested way of increasing our awareness and connection to each day.
- 2: Set a regular time to be outdoors. This could be a Shabbat afternoon walk, or an after work stroll that will help you notice the changing seasons.
- 3: Create or join a Rosh Chodesh gathering. This is a great occasion to mark the coming of a new moon/month by gathering with friends to learn about the new month and prepare for the upcoming holidays. Sarah Nadburny's 12 Dimensions of Israel is a wonderful source of inspiration for monthly teachings.
- 4: Eat seasonally. By buying more local produce, we become aware of what foods become available in each season and escape the delusion that food grows in the supermarket. Many point to the inherent health benefits of eating the foods that become naturally available to us in each season, supplying the right nutrients for our bodies at that time.
- 5: Enjoy the seasons. Use journals or art projects— or just a conversation with friends— to explore what a particular season means to you: what you love to do in fall, or the places that really make the summer special.

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1 Exodus 12:2. All translations are from www.chabad.org

2 Rashi on Genesis 1:1.

3 While Rosh Hashanah is considered the Jewish New Year, the "head of months" described in Parshat Bo is the month of Nisan, during which Pesach is celebrated. Nisan is considered the first month of the Jewish calendar and Tishrei, the month of Rosh Hashanah, is the seventh.

4 *Likutei Torah*, Parshat Behar