

**Parshat Bo:
On Managing Time
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Time is one of the most valuable gifts we have. It is fitting then, that the very first mitzvah God gives to B'nai Yisrael as they are about to depart from *Mitzrayim* (Egypt) is the gift of time; of *rosh chodesh*:

his month shall be for you the beginning of the months. It shall be for you the first of the months of the year (Shemot 12:2) הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֵם רֵאשִׁית חֹדָשִׁים רֵאשׁוֹן הוּא לָכֵם לְחֹדְשֵׁי הַשָּׁנָה. (שְׁמוֹת יב:ב)

The renewal of the moon becomes a marker of time by which we establish the Jewish calendar with all its festivals and celebrations.

Time is exactly what a nation of slaves needed. Slaves have very little autonomy, especially with respect to their time. They are told when and where to go and what to do. They do not have the luxury of leisure or the choice to be productive, self sufficient individuals. Slaves are not free agents.

If God intended to give a gift of time, one would expect Shabbat to be the very first mitzvah. Shabbat, literally rest from work, is the exact opposite to slavery. God created for six days and on the seventh day God rested. So too, the Jewish people labored for 400 years, surely now they should be able to luxuriate in rest?

Why then, is Rosh Chodesh the first Mitzvah and not Shabbat?

I would like to propose that time celebrated on Shabbat is very different from time celebrated on Rosh Chodesh. On Shabbat, the mitzvah is to refrain from melakha, not to engage in any creative processes. To have menucha, physical rest and relaxation. Rosh Chodesh is the opposite of shabbat—it is a day of activity. The mitzvah of sanctifying the moon is an involved process. The Gemara (Rosh Hashana) explains: when someone saw the sliver of a new moon they would run to the Sanhedrin (high court) in Jerusalem to testify. The Sanhedrin would then convene a court to corroborate what the two witnesses saw, declare the new month and send messengers with torches running across the land to alert everyone the new month had begun. The determination of the Jewish calendar is placed squarely in human activity.

There's another key difference between Shabbat and rosh chodesh. Shabbat is given to us. Not only did God create the earth and the heavens, God also created the first Shabbat. Rosh Chodesh however, is a mitzvah that we have to sanctify for ourselves. It requires human initiative and productivity. In pasuk Shemoth 12:1, the word lachem (to you) is repeated twice: "This month shall be the first month for you." Lachem. That is, we, Israel, and only Israel, are the ones with the ability to make the new moon holy. We consecrate the new moon by declaring "mekudash, mekudash." (Mishna Rosh Hashana 2:7). Therefore, we, not God, are the ones who make the holidays holy.

Rosh Chodesh, sanctifying the moon, and setting the Jewish calendar had to be the first mitzvah given to the Jews as they are about to leave Egypt. It would have been easier for B'nei Yisrael to rest after years of hard work and labor. But, before they could learn about Shabbat and rest, they had to relearn how to work. B'nai Yisrael is about to enter a new phase of life, where they are independent—free to choose how to spend their time. They had to learn to be masters of our own time and shape our own destiny. Therefore, Rosh Chodesh represents a religious reframing of how to engage in productive, meaningful work.

In Hebrew, the word for year, which is established by the solar system is shana—which has the same root as meshaneh (to repeat). The year is the same, day after day after day. However, it is the moon that sets the months, the chodesh, from the Hebrew word chadash (new). Just as the moon has the power of renewal, we too struggle against the steady and repetitive unchanging march of time and nature.

This is the message that God intends to impart to the Jewish people as they leave Mitzrayim. When they are at their lowest point, destitute and distraught from enslavement God reminds them —you have the ability to change, to rejuvenate. You have the ability to choose how to spend time and grow big again after being diminished.

Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, the 19th-century German scholar, noted that since we would soon be liberated from slavery, we could appreciate the moon's emergence from darkness to light. Through the moon's renewal, God tells the people of Israel (Shemot 12:2): "This is to be the model for your own conduct! Even as the moon renews itself by the law of nature, so too, you should renew yourselves, but of your own free will."

How we shape and use our time, in a religious context, at work, or socially, is up to each of us. The key, however, is not become a slave, once again, to time.



Rabba Sara Hurwitz, Co-Founder and President of Maharat, the first institution to ordain Orthodox women as clergy, also serves on the Rabbinic staff at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. Rabba Hurwitz completed Drisha's three-year Scholars Circle Program, an advanced intensive program of study for Jewish women training to become scholars, educators and community leaders. After another five years of study under the auspices of Rabbi Avi Weiss, she was ordained by Rabbi Weiss and Rabbi Daniel Sperber in 2009. In 2013 Rabba Hurwitz was awarded the Hadassah Foundation Bernice S. Tannenbaum prize, and the Myrtle Wreath Award from the Southern New Jersey Region of Hadassah in 2014. In 2016 she was the Trailblazer Award Recipient at UJA Federation of New York. She was named as one of Jewish Week's 36 Under 36, the Forward50 most influential Jewish leaders, and Newsweek's 50 most influential rabbis. In 2017 Rabba Hurwitz was chosen to be a member of the inaugural class of Wexner Foundation Field Fellows.