

**Parshat Vayekhel:
On New Months and New Beginnings
Shabbat HaChodesh
Rabbanit Dasi Fruchter**

Class of 2016

The special Maftir of Parshat HaChodesh brings us back to the eve of the redemption from the land of Egypt. Though Chazal teach us that Bnei Yisrael held onto threads of their dignity by keeping their dress, language, and names--in that moment they were a fraction of the people they used to be. They were teetering on the very lowest rung of the ladder of despair and spiritual impurity. It is in this state, mired in their narrow straits, that Bnei Yisrael receive the commandment to sanctify the new month.

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה וְאַלְעָזָר בֶּן-אַהֲרֹן בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם
לֵאמֹר: הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם רֵאשִׁית חֹדְשֵׁי רֵאשֹׁן
הוּא לָכֶם לְחֹדְשֵׁי הַשָּׁנָה: (שמות יב:ב)
God said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you. (Shemot 12:2)

Year after year, as we stand on the threshold of Nissan, we read this passage--ready to greet the month of redemption. What can this commandment teach us as we prepare, just like Bnei Yisrael, for our own Pesach rituals?

This passage of "*HaChodesh HaZeh Lachem*", describing the sanctification of the new month, appears in many places in our rabbinic teachings, including in The Talmud (Shabbat 147b) which relates the story of the Tannaitic sage Rabbi Elazar Ben Arach. The story notes that Rabbi Elazar Ben Arach left his colleagues to visit cities famous for their whimsical rivers and luxurious wine. When he returned from his trip, he was called up to read from the section of sanctifying the new month, but instead of saying "*HaChodesh HaZeh Lachem*" (*this month shall be for you*), he read "*HaCharesh Haya Libbam*" (*their hearts were silent, or unhearing*). This phrase, where each word differs only slightly from the original, carries a completely different meaning, and the Talmud admonishes Rav Elazar Ben Arach for making such a gross error--likely as a result of leaving the company of his colleagues to visit places totally devoid of the Divine presence.

The Sfas Emes¹, however, in his commentary to our Maftir, offers a more charitable read of the story. R' Elazar Ben Arach didn't make a foolish mistake by misreading the passage, he was simply teaching his colleagues a lesson about his experience in these cities. The act of sanctifying the new month, described in the passage he was *supposed* to read, is connected to the activity of the moon. The moon grows to its fullness and wanes to a thin sliver within the span of each month. The moon is a symbol for the possibility of renewal. In fact, says the Sfas Emes, the words for "month" (*chodesh*) and "new" (*chadash*) are closely related. In order to reach the potential of renewal, the

¹ Parshas HaChodesh 5631 Second Ma'amar

moon teaches us that we sometimes dive to our lowest point before we can start to grow and regenerate.

Similarly, he taught, another way to view the waxing and waning moon is by looking at someone whose heart seems to be immune to any spirituality or meaning--*HaCharesh Haya Libbam*. But R' Elazar Ben Arach, known in *Avot DeRabbi Natan* as someone who deeply values the power of the heart ("What is the best thing, the one that a person should cherish most?"...Rabbi Elazar B. Arach says, *the heart*), needed to explain that just like the people of that city, when we feel our farthest from God, we do not need to lose hope--for therein lies the most powerful opportunity for redemption.

Finally, our passage in Shemot could have easily read "the month" but instead it reads "*this* month." The word *zeh*, often used in Tanach for its weight of directness and clarity, should alert us to the power of the month of Nissan to wake up our hearts. It could be that the whole year, our hearts have been sleeping, feeling low, or tired. But no matter how difficult it seems to be to find our spark, or how narrow the world is feeling, Nissan--*HaChodesh HaZeh*---is the moment to wake them. For some, this month will be about going to classes and preparing for Sedarim. For others, there may be a spiritual element to kashering a kitchen or emptying the contents of a cabinet to donate chametz to the needy. Yet, for all of us - Nissan contains the potential for true awakening. It is my blessing and hope that this Nissan we may be able to shift our routine and allow our hearts to become activated.



Rabbanit Dasi Fruchter is the founder and spiritual leader of the South Philadelphia Shtiebel, a new and inclusive Modern Orthodox community in South Philadelphia. Rabbanit Fruchter also holds the position of Halachic Advisor for Niddah and Women's Health at Beth Sholom Congregation. She has served as an Assistant Spiritual Leader at Beth Sholom Congregation and Talmud Torah in Potomac, MD, the largest Modern Orthodox Congregation in the Washington Metropolitan area. Originally from Silver Spring, Maryland, Rabbanit Fruchter was ordained by Yeshivat Maharat in June of 2016 upon completion of the Maharat Semikha Program combining a mastery of the texts of Orthodox Jewish law with pastoral education. She graduated summa cum laude from the Macaulay Honors College at Queens College, and completed an M.P.A. in Non-Profit Administration and an M.A. in Jewish Studies from New York University's Wagner School of Public Service.