

Parashat Pekudei and the **Shabbat Hachodesh Maftir** (Exod. 12:1-20) both refer to the **first month** of the year. In **Pekudei** the **first month** is the month of the Mishkan; in **Hachodesh**, it is the month of the Exodus. **Hachodesh** strangely begins with a reference to the **Land of Egypt**:

ויאמר ה' אל משה ואל אהרן בארץ מצרים לאמר. החדש הזה לכם ראש חדשים ראשון הוא לכם לחדשי השנה. (שמות יב:א-ב)

God said to Moses and to Aaron in the land of Egypt, saying: Let this month be for you the beginning of the months, it shall be first of months for you of the months of the year. (12:1)

Why specify **in the Land of Egypt**? Don't we already know this? The rabbis read the inclusion of this superfluous detail as a reference to **rural Egypt** as opposed to **urban Egypt**.

ומפני מה לא נדבר עמו בתוך הכרד? מפני שהיתה מלאה שקוצים וגלולים. מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל, מסכתא דפסחא א' יח'

Why did God not speak to him in the city? Because it was full of idolatry. Abominations and idols! Mekhilta d.R'Y Pis. 1:8

A good *shtoch*¹ against Egypt, but there is more going on here as far as Egypt and the calendar are concerned. After all, **The Land of Egypt** operates on its own calendar. A solar calendar. An Egyptian year consisted of three 4-month seasons tracking the annual agricultural cycle: **Akhet**, the Season of Inundation; **Peret**, the Season of Growth, and **Shemu**, the Season of Harvest. The Egyptian **first of months** (Thoth) coincides with the annual flooding of the Nile and the rising of the star Sirius, which takes place in early August. The Israelite **first of the months** (which by the end of the biblical period is known as Nisan) takes place sometime now, near the end of March beginning of April. The community of Israelites living in **the Land of Egypt**, would have been stunned to learn that now they were marking time on a different calendar. They would have immediately understood that from this point on, they were no longer going to be connected to the Nile, its mythology, or to the agricultural cycle of Egypt. **We are no longer tied to the seasonal rhythm of the Land of Egypt and of the Nile River. We can ignore the stories of their gods. We are now inexorably tied to our God and the rhythm of seasons in our ancestral land and our story. We will from now on,**

always associate this month with our redemption and our freedom. The phrase **in the Land of Egypt** emphasizes that the newly inaugurated Israelite calendar is actually a rejection of the official Nile-dependent Egyptian calendar in the land of Egypt.² Our takeaway from this text is that **freedom begins with a calendar.**³ **In this first of months, the Israelite slaves will transition from the solar calendar of Egypt to the lunar calendar of Israel; from slave-time to freedom-time; from Pharaoh/Egypt-time to God/Israel-time.** But now, let's look very closely at the second verse. It can be punctuated in two different ways:

Punctuation A:

ראש חדשים!	החדש הזה, לכם!
This month, it's for you!	It's the first of the months!
לחדשי השנה!	ראשון הוא, לכם!
It's the first of the months, for you!	Of all the months of the year!

Paraphrase A: I'm giving you a special gift. I'm giving you this month. This month belongs to you and only you. It's yours. It's the month in which your story begins. This month will shape who you are. And from now on, it will be the first of all the months, because it belongs to you!

Punctuation B:

החדש הזה...	
This month...	
לכם, ראש חדשים!	ראשון, הוא לכם!
For you, it is the first of the months!	First it is, for you!
לחדשי השנה.	
For all the months of the year.	

Paraphrase B: I am showing you this new moon and how to keep a calendar. Here is the very faint sliver of light. And this new moon, marks the first month of the year for you. Other peoples have their calendars. This is the first month of your calendar, of all the months of the year.

Punctuation A ⁴	Punctuation B ⁵
Emphasizes לכם-to you.	Emphasizes חדש-month.
Locates us in a story.	Locates us in a calendar.
Conveys wonder and awe.	Conveys structure and order.
Inspires us.	Commands us.
Aggadic. Imaginative.	Halakhic. Performative.

¹ A jab or insult. An elbow to the ribs, a poke in the eye.

² Did the Israelites in Egypt have their own calendar? Did they take the lunar calendar with them down to Egypt? Or did they, like us, live simultaneously in our own two calendar systems, the Hebrew calendar, which is lunar, and the Gregorian calendar, which is solar? Of course, we don't know. However, for the biblical trivialist here is a question: In which stories in Genesis do we read of **months** (what we assume to be lunar months)? Answer: The Noah story (many times), Jacob and Laban: (Jacob) stayed with Laban **a month's time** (Gen. 29:14) and Judah and Tamar, when it

becomes known that Tamar is pregnant: **Now it was, after almost three months, that Yehuda was told, saying:**

Tamar your daughter-in-law has played-the-whore (Gen. 38:24). All of these stories, located in the sphere of ancient Babylonian culture, would have referenced a lunar calendar.

³ One of the most radical attempts at calendar reform occurred during the French Revolution. Weeks were 10 days, days were 10 hours, hours were 100 minutes, minutes were 100 seconds. The calendar lasted for just over 5 years.

⁴ This punctuation is a form of **parallelism**: A-B//A-B.

⁵ This punctuation is a form of **chiasma**: A-B//B-A.

The amazing poetics of this verse enable us to derive two clusters of complimentary interpretations.

Fast forward to our parasha, *Pekudei*. It is exactly one year after the Exodus. Israel has been instructed to collect all the materials for the Mishkan and to create it *on the first day of the first month*:

בַּיּוֹם הַחֹדֶשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן בְּאַחַד לַחֹדֶשׁ תָּקִים אֶת מִשְׁכַּן אֱהֵל מוֹעֵד. (שמות מ:ב)

On the first day of the first month you shall set up the Tabernacle of the Tent of Meeting. (Exod. 40:2)

15 verses later we are told that it is completed on that day:

וַיְהִי בַחֹדֶשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן בַּשָּׁנָה הַשֵּׁנִית בְּאַחַד לַחֹדֶשׁ הֻקָּם הַמִּשְׁכָּן. (שמות מ:יב)

And so it was in the first month in the second year, on the first [day] of the month: the Dwelling was erected. (40:12)

They have had a tumultuous first year (which included the Exodus, the splitting of the sea, the manna, the war with Amalek, the revelation on Mount Sinai, the Golden Calf and more). The completion of the Mishkan on the one-year anniversary of Exodus gives it added meaning: *God has redeemed the people from slavery and now will sustain his presence among them. Freedom requires God's guidance. The people will demonstrate their freedom through a highly organized system of sacrifice and worship.* Following our dual readings above, what better month could there be for the Mishkan to be completed! The first month is *their* month, and this is *their* Mishkan! Alternatively, the *calendar* began with the Exodus and now the *calendar* begins again with the Mishkan!

Unsurprisingly, there are other key moments in the Bible that take place in the first month. For example, the crossing of the Jordan River early on in the Book of Joshua:

וְהָעָם עָלוּ מִן הַיַּרְדֵּן בַּעֲשׂוֹר לַחֹדֶשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּגִלְגָל בְּקֶדֶם מִזְרַח יְרִיחוֹ. (יהושע ד:ט)

The people came up from the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month and encamped at Gilgal on the eastern border of Jericho. (Josh 4:19)

It has been 40 years since the Exodus. In the exact same month of the Exodus from Egypt, the people of Israel cross the Jordan and leave the desert behind them. Now the first month has even greater meaning: *It is the month of the Exodus and redemption. It is the month of the Mishkan. It is the month of new beginnings. It is the month of arrival into the Promised Land!*

The 1st Month vs. the 7th Month: A Revealing Rivalry

480 years after the Exodus, Solomon dedicates the Temple in Jerusalem. Following our understanding of the deep significance of the first month, we would expect that to happen also in the first month. But instead, he dedicates it in the seventh month! As it is written:

וַיִּקְהֲלוּ אֶל הַמֶּלֶךְ שְׁלֹמֹה כָּל אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּנֵי חַוָּה הָאֲתָנִים בְּחָג הוּא הַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי. (מ"א ח:ב)

The entire body of Israel gathered before King Solomon at the Feast [of Booths], in the month of Ethanim—that is, the seventh month. (1 Kings 8:2)

Solomon chose the 7th month for political and religious reasons. The Temple centralized his power, and gave Israel a new way to structure its religious life through pilgrimage.

A comparison of between the Mishkan and the Mikdash (Temple) will help us understand this shift.

THE MISHKAN	THE MIKDASH
Erected when Israel wandered in the desert.	Established when Israel was settled in the land.
Mobile. Portable. A tent.	Stationary. Permanent. A building.
A private place where God speaks to Moses in private.	A public place where Solomon speaks to God in public convocation.
A tent of "meeting".	A place of "pilgrimage".
The 1st month is Israel's founding month.	The 7th month is God's holiest month. (RH, YK, SUK., and Sh.Atz.)
In the land, during the 1st month, the people are in a rush to get back to their villages and fields in order to tend to their crops and prepare for the first harvest.	In the land, during the 7th month, the people are rested and can rejoice from a completed harvest. They are able to linger a while and stay for feasting and a great convocation.
Passover is Israel's.	Sukkot is God's.
The Mishkan is particular to Israel, intimate and private. Its dedication belongs in Israel's liberation month.	The Temple has universal significance for all humanity. It has grandeur and public squares. Its dedication belongs in a month that has universal significance, after God has judged the world.
The Mishkan dedication is suited for a month that is important to Israel.	The Temple dedication belongs in suited for a month that is important to God.
Moses constituted the people around the Mishkan in the desert in the 1st month to conclude their first Act as a nation and prepare for their journey.	Solomon re-constituted the people around the Temple in their land in the 7th month to solidify the Davidic monarchy and demarcate a new era in Israel's history.

First Month Supremacy. Freedom, redemption, beginnings and renewals are the animating themes of the *First Month*. Even though Solomon tried to usurp its importance, it was, is, and always will be, Israel's most important month. It is the month of Israel's founding story therefore, *it continues to shape Israel's identity and inspire Jewish resilience to this very day.* This month, the *First of Months*, anchors Israel in an annual calendar of ordered rituals and obligations, of mitzvot and halakha. It is the month in which Israel becomes God's people, and God becomes our God. *Shabbat Shalom!*

Today is Day 540. 59 hostages remain in Gaza, 24 are believed to be still alive. We pray for their speedy return to Israel. May God comfort the bereaved, protect the IDF, heal the wounded and shield Israel from continued terror. Amen!

This Parasha Sheet is sponsored by Devora and David Schiff to commemorate the yahrzeit of Devora's father, Robert Siegel, z'l.