



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Vayakhel - Pekudei

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

March 9, 2013
Vayakhel-Pekudie/HaChodesh

**Can We Find Balance
in a Chaotic World?**



Meaningful Sermons

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Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

As the world spirals – with Syria coming apart at the seams, with Al Qaeda on the rise, with Iran ever closer to a nuclear bomb, and with the Palestinians threatening a third intifada – the Middle East turmoil is again shaking an already unstable global landscape. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez’s recent death only adds to the confusion. And everyone is groping in the dark for a solution to restore some balance.

Personally as well, many of us are going through challenging times.

Thankfully, we are about to enter (come Monday) the Jewish season of freedom – and it couldn’t have come at a better time. The dark days of the Egyptian exile and the subsequent Exodus offer us deep lessons for dealing with our current upheavals.

As Moses was standing in the streets of ancient Egypt he, too, was wondering how his people would achieve redemption after so much suffering. And the answer he received gives us hope as our universe trembles today. It all began with the new moon...

What life lessons can we learn from the new moon, which we bless this *Shabbat HaChodesh*? How can it – and the Jewish calendar in general – help us make sense of our lives and get ready to enter the new month of Nissan, the month of Passover, the month of Redemption?

Imagine yourself on a speeding train, being thrown from side to side, unable to maintain steady balance. The flow and movement of time and space can upset your equilibrium in a similar way. But the Jewish calendar is like a balancing compass that configures your bearings and synchronizes them with the coordinates of the universe, helping us navigate and align our lives with the cycles of time and space which we occupy and travel through.

This is a two-part sermon:

Part I: “The Balanced Calendar” explains what the Jewish calendar can teach us and the world in times of instability and unrest.

Part II: “The Moon Quandary” explains why Moses balked when he first heard God’s commandment to sanctify the new moon.

CAN WE FIND BALANCE IN A CHAOTIC WORLD?

Lessons from the Moon

PART I: THE BALANCED CALENDAR

1. Moon Jokes

When NASA was preparing for the first walk on the moon, they did some astronaut training on a Navajo Indian reservation. One day, a Navajo elder and his son were herding sheep and came across the space crew. The old man, who only spoke Navajo, asked a question, which the son translated: “What are the guys in the big suits doing?” A member of the crew said they were practicing for their trip to the moon. The old man got really excited and asked if he could send a message to the moon with the astronauts. Recognizing a promotional opportunity for the spin-doctors, the NASA folks found a tape recorder. After the old man recorded his message, they asked the son to translate. He refused. So the NASA reps brought the tape to the reservation, where the rest of the tribe listened and laughed, but refused to translate the elder’s message to the moon.

Finally, NASA called an official government translator. He reported that the moon message said: “Watch out for these guys; they’ve come to steal your land.”

Two boys were sitting in their backyard talking on a moonlit night. The older asked the younger, “What do you think is farther away ... the moon or Florida?”

And the younger replied: “Hellooo, can you *see* Florida?!”

From this you have undoubtedly surmised that our topic today will be ... right ... Florida. No, of course, the moon. But before I talk about the special Jewish attachment to the moon, I’d like to talk a bit about the Jewish calendar in general.

2. Perfect Balance

As the world spirals – with Syria coming apart at the seams, with Al Qaeda on the rise, with Iran ever closer to a nuclear bomb, and with the Palestinians threatening a third intifada – the Middle East turmoil is again shaking an already unstable global landscape. And everyone is groping in the dark for a solution to restore some balance or (at least) some sense of direction.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez’s recent death only adds to the confusion.

Personally as well, many of us are going through challenging and trying times.

In this quest, we can learn much from the Jewish calendar, which is a very special example of perfect balance, for it honors both the lunar and solar cycles and reconciles the differences between them.

As we know, the Christians keep a solar calendar – which, of course, is the universal calendar that the entire Western World goes by. This calendar honors the solar cycle, but ignores the moon cycle.

And, as we also know, the Muslim lunar calendar honors the moon cycle, but ignores the solar cycle. For this reason Muslim holidays fluctuate wildly and are not attached to any season. (For example, in 2000, Ramadan, the month of fasting, fell in January, while in 2013 it falls in July.)

We Jews don't have this problem, because we have found balance. To create this balance, our sages devised a system called "intercalation" which reconciles the lunar calendar with the solar calendar. This keeps the Jewish holidays in the proper season and allows Passover to always arrive in the Spring (avoiding the Ramadan problem).

The Jewish method of intercalation adds an extra (thirteenth) month along a predetermined pattern – every third, sixth, eighth, eleventh, fourteenth and nineteenth years.¹ This pattern – 3 years, 3 years, 2 years, 3 years, 3 years, 3 years, 2 years – is identical to the pattern of the musical scale (or the so-called "major scale"). If there are musicians among you, you know what it is: whole step, whole step, half step, whole step, whole step, whole step, half step. Thus, the Jewish calendar has a cosmic rhythm, not a man-made one.²

The challenge of life is knowing this and aligning ourselves with the inner cycles and cosmic rhythms of existence. It means to know when to cry, when to rejoice, when to mourn and when to dance. Because there is a time for everything.

3. Ebb and Flow

This we learn from our calendar, which reflects the vicissitudes of life's ebb and flow. Take, for example, the diametric opposite months of Adar (the month of joy which we are now concluding) and Av (the month of mourning) – these months parallel happiness and pain of our lives.

¹ This compensates for the 11.5-day discrepancy between the lunar year (354 days) and the solar year (365 days).

² *In the Image of God* by Judith S. Antonelli, p. xxxvi.

Indeed, every month manifests another vital dimension of life – love, redemption, light, healing – mirroring, all together, the entire spectrum of life.

Shabbat, concluding the seven-day *weekly* cycle, is perhaps the ultimate testimony to creating balance in our lives ... for the human body, like any hard-working machine, needs time off to rejuvenate itself. To maintain healthy balance between body and soul, both need to be nurtured. When one is nourished more than the other, the disparity will compromise our mental, emotional and even physical well-being. The Jewish calendar insists that we maintain a well oiled-machine ... that after six days of the body's immersion in material life, we let it rest and focus on feeding the soul.

Time's structure is comprised of many levels – the Sabbatical year, the leap year, the complex astronomical calculations around sunrises, sunsets, dawns and dusks, lunar cycles and planetary movements, solar and lunar eclipses, and hundreds of other nuances that make up the Jewish way of counting and measuring time. All are meant to balance the multitude forces driving our lives.

For this reason, the Jews have always been great astrologers and invented or perfected many astrological instruments. And you are undoubtedly familiar with the well-know Jewish ditty:

Star light, star bright
First star I see tonight
I wish I may, I wish I might.
Oh ... it's just a satellite

[But seriously] our Torah-based calendar is much more than a calendar; it is a balancing compass. It is a map and living guide that helps us navigate and align our lives with the cycles of time and space which we occupy and travel through.

Sanctifying time – which is the essence of Shabbat and holidays – is meant to achieve total balance ... between our lives and the dynamics of our universe.

Imagine yourself on a speeding train, being thrown from side to side, unable to maintain steady balance. The flow and movement of time and space can upset our equilibriums in a similar way. But the Jewish calendar directs us to configure our bearings and synchronize them with the coordinates of the universe in which we live.

These coordinates – the interplay of space, time and spirit (called in Hebrew: *olam, shanah, nefesh*) – define all of existence. And the Jewish calendar fuses them into one harmonic unit.

That said, the Jewish calendar does pay a particular attention to the moon.

4. Moon Quiz (Humor)

By the way ...

Q. What was the name of the first satellite to orbit the Earth?

A. The moon.

Q. What do you get when you take green cheese and divide its circumference by its diameter?

A. Moon pi.

Q. How do you know when the moon is going broke?

A. When it's down to its last quarter.

5. Chelm Story (Optional)

This is a story from the annals of the wise men of Chelm, who as we know, managed to apply some truly twisted logic to ordinary problems.

The story begins as the citizens of Chelm assemble in a town meeting to discuss the appealing new notion of installing gas lights to light their dim streets. A white-bearded patriarch calls for silence and speaks up:

“Street lights, my friends, would cost us a great deal of money and where would the money come from? From our fund for the poor? That is forbidden! On the other hand, there are nights when the moon shines and Chelm has enough light. Now, why can’t the moon shine for us every night?”

The people of Chelm look skyward and shake their heads at the simple brilliance of his plan. Why not?

The wise patriarch persuades the people of Chelm to wait for a night when the moon is large and full, shedding light into every nook and cranny of their dark streets. And to simply steal it. Then, they could store it safely until the dark nights of the month, when they could hang it in the skies to light up their streets.

Needless to say, the idea passed unanimously. However, the annals are missing 18 vital pages which purportedly recorded the execution of the plan...

6. The Function of the Moon Cycle

Every month we celebrate *Rosh Chodesh* – the “head of the month” – when the new moon rises. It is a very important moment in the Jewish calendar for the new moon always speaks of renewal, of a new beginning. In the worst of times, in the darkest of nights, we always see a tangible sign that there will be light, there will always be another new moon rising. Thus the moon is a classic Jewish symbol. It returns each night to light up the darkness, changing its shape, waxing and waning, only to rise afresh after a cycle of 29.5 days. It testifies to the cyclical nature of life. And to the secret of renewal after near extinction.

It also teaches us the power of humility. In contrast to the all-powerful sun generating a tremendous amount of light and heat, the moon has no light of its own, only reflecting the light of the sun. But in its “emptiness” the moon has the power of renewal, emitting a light that emerges out of, and illuminates, the dark night – something the sun is incapable of.

The origins of the Jewish lunar calendar are found in the Book of Exodus where God issues the very first commandment to the Israelites through Moses: “This new moon shall be the head of the month (*rosh chodesh*) to you.”³

This week we read this section – called *Parshat HaChodesh* – as we herald the advent of the month of Nissan. This is the month in the middle of which – when the moon is full – we will observe Passover.

As Moses was standing in the streets of ancient Egypt, some 3,300 years ago, he was wondering how his people will achieve redemption after so much suffering. Then, on the first day of Nissan, God showed him the new moon and said “Behold, here is the new moon. This new moon shall be the head of the month to you.” And with this God provided the answer Moses was seeking: “Just as this moon is being renewed, so too will your people experience renewal in the coming redemption.”

God instructed Moses to establish, from then on, the calendar that would guide our lives. In two weeks, God told Moses, you will lead the children of Israel out of Egypt. And from here on you will always be a free, transcendent nation.

And thus, every year on this day we celebrate the new moon and the new month – the month of Nissan, the month of Redemption – and we align ourselves to the lunar cycle of renewal, and to the Passover message of balance. Balance between our bodies and souls, between humility and freedom, between celebrating individuality and union.

³ Exodus 12:1-2.

For Passover, the Festival of Redemption, teaches us how to redeem ourselves from our confusing, distorted surroundings, to free ourselves of the inhibitions and fears (the constraints of *Mitzrayim*, as Egypt is known in Hebrew) ... constraints imposed upon us by an oppressive material life. Only when we are free, we can realign ourselves to the configuration of our uninhibited and unfettered souls.

7. The Jewish People and the Moon

All this is reflected in the history and story of the Jewish people, who are compared to the moon.

“The people of Israel,” say the sages, “are like the moon. They count by the moon, and are destined to be renewed like the moon.”⁴

Unlike the unwavering sun, the Jews have always fluctuated from a quarter moon, to a three quarter moon, to a full moon, and back again – waxing and waning. And just as the moon seems to die each month, the Jews too have seemed to almost disappear, only to be reborn, always remaining an eternal nation⁵ – as God promised. More obituaries have been written about the Jews than any people, but they were always reborn, like the new moon.

So it was when they left Egypt, and so it was after the Holocaust. (Who could have imagined the Jewish renaissance of today after the decimation of one-third of the Jewish nation, many of our finest and our best?)

8. Profound Intimacy

The renaissance begins right here, every month, as the new moon is first spotted in the night sky.

So let's look up and see the new moon...

⁴ Talmud, *Sukkah* 29a and *Sanhedrin* 42a; Zohar, part I, 236b.

⁵ Genesis 17:7.

We, the Jews, can tell this to the entire world today – to Egypt, to Syria, to Iran, and to all others caught in the throes of upheaval – look up into the heavens, the new moon is being born.

We, the Jews, can tell this to every suffering individual: Don't despair. It is darkest just before the dawn. The new moon is rising ... and with it new fortunes, new possibilities, new opportunities, new blessings. [Amen.]

PART II: THE MOON QUANDARY

9. Moses' Problem

[The Book of Exodus relates that the very first commandment which God issued to the Israelites through Moses was this: "This new moon shall be the head of the month (*rosh chodesh*) to you."⁶]

Commenting on the commandment to observe *Rosh Chodesh*, the Midrash reveals that Moses was troubled by it. As the Midrash reports:

Moses found difficulty with the renewal of the moon ... God therefore showed him with His finger the moon in the sky and said to him, "You will see a moon like this and you will then sanctify [the new month]." Now when did God show it to Moses? ... This was said to Moses just before sunset, and God showed him [the moon] when it became dark.⁷

Why did Moses have a problem with the moon's renewal? And what did God show him?

If there was a moon in the sky, Moses could have looked up and seen it on his own. And if there was no moon yet – which is more likely because the new moon was just being born – there was nothing to see. For how can a new moon be seen with the naked eye?

⁶ Exodus 12:1-2.

⁷ Rashi, from Midrash Mechilta. Talmud Menachot 29a.

Various reasons for Moses' difficulty are posited by the sages. Some explain that Moses was unclear as to the exact criteria necessary to determine when we must sanctify the new moon. Others suggest that Moses was unsure how to determine whether he was actually seeing the new moon or perhaps the final stages of the old moon. But all these explanations seem inadequate for several reasons: Moses, who was an educated man, could have figured out, like any astronomer, the factors that constitute a new moon. Why did he need God to show it to him?

Clearly, Moses was disturbed by something that only God could resolve. Additionally, as mentioned, the new moon does not yet have any shape and form, so what exactly did Moses see?

The mystics explain that Moses was struggling with some of the fundamental dilemmas of existence as they are reflected in the birth of the new moon.⁸ In particular how to deal with pain and loss.

10. Dilemmas of Existence

And this brings us to why the first commandment given to the Jews – who were about to be freed from 210 years of bondage in Egypt – is to mark the moon's renewal each month.

The waxing and waning moon reflects the ups and downs of life and history. The waning moon represents difficult times, periods that get darker and darker, like the fading moon. But just as the moon disappears, when all seems bleak and lost, we experience rebirth, newfound life – a new moon is born.

The long Egyptian exile was among the worst instances of institutionalized oppression perpetrated by one nation against another. Multitudes of Jews were killed, tortured or worked to death in forced labor. The moon was dark indeed.

⁹ See Ohr HaTorah on this chapter, vol. 8 pp. 2902.

By commanding Moses to sanctify the new moon, God was (in effect) imparting to Moses the power of renewal. Just as the moon is reborn right after it disappears so, too, will the Jewish people experience a renaissance following their darkest moments.

Moses, however, was disturbed. He was happy to hear that the time of redemption – the birth of the new moon – had arrived. But he was bothered by the concern that we mortal human beings may not be able to hold on when things get completely dark, when the moon emits no light at all. How do we gather strength when we don't see any glimmer of hope? If we don't have the energy to see it through, we can be consumed and destroyed by the darkness, and then never reach the new light.

Philosophically, Moses understood that a mortal human being will never fully fathom the mystery of pain and suffering. He also understood and believed that, at the end story, we will endure and prevail over all our adversaries. Indeed, the Egyptian oppression forged a nation with enormous power – an eternal nation.

But Moses was disturbed because he knew that this was not enough. In effect, Moses was saying: "If You, God, want man to grow through the dark challenges, You must give us the power of hope – the strength to forge ahead despite the inability to see the light at the end of the tunnel."

11. God's Response

God agreed. In response, God "pointed His finger" and showed Moses something that is otherwise impossible to see – the birthing itself. The point when the darkness turns into light, the exact moment when the seeds of suffering yield the fruits of greatness.

God said: "This new moon shall be the head of month for you."⁹

⁹ Exodus 12:2.

When we cry over a disappointment or loss, we feel pain and sorrow. Yes, we may understand that – as the Psalm says – “those that sow in tears will reap in joy.”¹⁰ But while we weep and taste our bitter tears, we cannot at that time see the joy that will come. The seed by its very nature conceals its future fruit.

God, therefore, divulged to Moses the mystery of transformation, how darkness turns into light. And He revealed it as the sun was setting in order to show Moses that even darkness yields light. He showed him the moon as darkness was falling.

This vision of Moses has a perpetual effect for all generations to come, giving us the power to make it through any challenge, no matter how difficult.

All birth in this world comes only after a moment of darkness. Growth is always preceded by a void. Creativity is a child of frustration. But when things seem bleak we get demoralized, and that in turn makes things far worse. If only we were able to see the birthing to come, we would be able to endure the hardest times. The problem is that, beneath the rubble, we cannot see the light outside.

So, once in history, a man was shown the moment of rebirth. Once in history, the invisible became visible.

That one vision has given us strength even as our lives have waxed and waned like the moon. Even as we have stood at the abyss, at the brink of extinction, something deep inside us reminded us that all was not lost.

Where does such conviction come from? How is it possible that against all odds, in situations that were absolutely hopeless, the Nation of Israel has not just survived but thrived?

¹⁰ Psalms 126:5.

12. Moses' Vision

Such enormous, superhuman power to triumph over adversity is rooted in Moses' vision one lonely night in Egypt. As he looked up into the skies, Moses saw nothing. The moon had completely disappeared. But then God pointed his finger and directed Moses to look closer: "Here, look at the secret of rebirth, here I show you the moment that no man has ever seen and no man will ever see – the moment of transition, when one state is about to end only to open up a new state. Here is the invisible intersection where dark meets light, pain meets joy and exile meets redemption."

Birth means something new. Therefore, we can never see the exact moment when the old becomes new. But Moses did see – once for all times. God showed Moses the new moon at its moment of rebirth, and said to him: "When the moon is reborn, mark the beginning of a new month."

As we study the story of Israel's journey from darkness to light, the story of its process of loss and renewal, suffering and growth, death and birth – we can gather in our own lives much fortitude from the events that took place more than 3,300 years ago.

The moon carries volumes of memories and stories. The moon is a witness to the tragedy and the glory of our people.

So, this coming week, when the new moon arrives, go outside and look up into the sky. If you look hard enough perhaps you may get a glimpse of what Moses saw. But even if you can't, your very gaze into the dark heavens, looking, searching, yearning, for the sliver of the new moon's birthing, carries immense power – strength that can help you through any challenge ... as well as instill you with hope and confidence that can help you navigate the unpredictable waters of this shuddering world. Amen.

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