



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

VAYIKRA > Vayikra

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

March 21, 2015

Vayikra

**Has Your Potential Been
Realized?**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

VAYIKRA > Vayikra > Has Your Potential Been Realized?

March 21, 2015

ABSTRACT

How often do you feel like you can do anything, accomplish everything – but, before you know it, ten years has passed and the reality hasn’t changed? Is there some magic potion, some timeless remedy, some sort of enchanting formula that could help you and us all realize our potential and be the best possible people that we can be in a real way?

The answer, surprising as it is, lies in observing Rosh Hashanah on the first day of Nissan, which just happens to be today.

So *L’Shana Tova U’metuka* – Happy and Sweet New Year!

Today, we read *Parshat HaChodesh*, which describes the first mitzvah given to the Children of Israel, the mitzvah of the new month, of the new moon. This mitzvah is all about innovation – about potential, reality and realization.

For God conceived the world six months before God actually created it. And herein lies the secret to actualizing our very own personal potentials as well.

HAS YOUR POTENTIAL BEEN REALIZED?

1. Potential v. Reality (Joke)

At the quarterly board meeting, when discussing the potential for the synagogue moving forward, the treasurer remarked that there is a big gap between potential and reality.

The president then asked: “Pray tell, Mr. Treasurer, what is the difference between ‘potential’ and ‘reality’?”

The treasurer said he would demonstrate. He turned to the sweet-voiced cantor asking: “Dear cantor, if I were to offer one million dollars to the synagogue contingent on you eating but one slab of bacon, would you do so?” The cantor unhesitatingly answered: “For one million dollars, of course I would eat some bacon! I could never pass up such an opportunity to enrich the coffers of God’s holy house of worship!”

The treasurer then turned to the esteemed rabbi of the congregation. “Dear and beloved rabbi, if I donated two million dollars to the synagogue, would you eat some shrimp scampi and a lobster claw?”

The rabbi stroked his beard, deep in thought, and finally said: “You know, as difficult as it might be, I would make this personal sacrifice for the sake of the congregation. I would eat the shrimp and lobster so that our synagogue could be two million dollars richer!”

Upon hearing this, the synagogue treasurer turned to the synagogue president and said: “You see, Mr. President, *potentially* our cherished synagogue has the three million dollars we need for our capital campaign, but in *reality* our synagogue is led by a bunch of spineless hypocrites.”

2. Happy New Year!

This, of course, is a joke, and would never, ever, happen in a real synagogue – least of all ours – but it does provide a context for a very real quandary that most people face: how best to realize one’s potential.

How often do you feel like you can do anything, accomplish everything – but, before you know it, ten years has passed and the reality hasn’t changed? Is there some magic potion, some timeless remedy, some sort of enchanting formula that could help you and us all realize our potential and be the best possible people that we can be in a real way?

Before I answer this question, and as a prerequisite to revealing the magic formula, I would like to wish you all today a *Shana Tova U’Metuka* – a Happy and Sweet New Year!

I see you all scratching your heads, pondering why your rabbi would wish you a *Shana Tova*, Happy New Year, at the outset of springtime. Your confusion is the first step to realizing and actualizing your potential, to making your innate ability a tangible reality.

Rosh Hashanah celebrates the beginning of the year and the creation of the world. Everybody knows that Rosh Hashanah is celebrated on the first day of the first Jewish month called Tishrei. Even the Jew most uneducated about Judaism, who may think that a shofar is someone who drives a limousine, knows that Rosh Hashanah always falls at the end of summer or beginning of autumn (in our hemisphere), usually somewhere in September.

There is no doubt about that. And even public schools have off on Rosh Hashanah at that time.

Well, I have news for you and for public schools: as with all things Jewish, there is hot debate in the Babylonian Talmud as to when Rosh Hashanah actually is.

And you thought there was a discrepancy between the Torah’s creation narrative and that of science. Well, in Torah scholarship itself there’s a disagreement as to when the universe was created.

Only Jews could sit in a study hall debating when the world was actually created!

3. A Talmudic Debate

In the Talmudic tractate entitled, appropriately enough, *Rosh Hashanah*,¹ Rabbi Eliezer asserts that the world was created in Tishrei, and thus Rosh Hashanah is celebrated then. (This is the day when we all celebrate Rosh Hashana, when we go to the synagogue to listen to a ram's horn and afterwards go home and dip an apple in honey.)

But the Talmud also cites a different opinion. Rabbi Yehoshua maintains that Rosh Hashanah is to be celebrated not on the first day of Tishrei but on the first day of Nissan, six months earlier.

According to Rabbi Eliezer, the creation of the world² occurred six months ago, on the first of Tishrei. But according to Rabbi Yehoshua, it all began on the first day of the month of Nissan.

What does this argument have to do with us today?

Very simple: Today, ladies and gentlemen, is the first day of Nissan. Thus, according to Rabbi Yehoshua – *Shana Tova*, Happy New Year!

Now we come to the crux of the matter: What does this all mean? What can this two-thousand-year-old Babylonian debate teach us about realizing our potential and maximizing our abilities? And anyway, how is it possible to argue about something existential and empirical? You can argue about understanding and interpretation but not about facts. There is only one fact: either God created the world on the first of Tishrei or on the first of Nissan.

¹ Rosh Hashanah 10b-11a.

² More accurately, the creation of man, on the sixth day of creation. Rabbi Eliezer holds that the world was created on the 25th of Elul, and thus the creation of man, six days later, is on the 1st of Tishrei. Rabbi Yehoshua holds that the world was created on the 25th of Adar, and thus man was created on the 1st of Nissan.

4. Parshat HaChodesh

Today, on the first day of Nissan, we read a special Torah portion, called *Parshat HaChodesh*,³ which discusses the first mitzvah in the Torah, the blessing of the new moon. Every month, Jews bless the new moon and the new month, and this foundational mitzvah determines the Jewish calendar.

When was this mitzvah given? This mitzvah was given on the first of Nissan (3,327 years ago), fourteen days before the first Passover when the Jews left Egypt.⁴

Because this was the first mitzvah, the Midrash states that the Torah should have begun here:⁵

The Torah [as a book of laws] should have begun with “This month is to you,”⁶ which is the first commandment that the Israelites were given.⁷ Why did God commence with *Bereishit*, “In the beginning?” Because of the verse “The strength of His works He related to His people, to give them the inheritance of the nations.”⁸ For if the nations of the world should say to Israel, “You are thieves, for you conquered by force the lands of the seven nations,” they will reply, “The entire earth belongs to the Holy One, blessed be He; He created it and gave it to whomever He deemed proper. When He wished, He gave it to them, and when He wished, He took it away from them and gave it to us.”⁹

This Midrash in and of itself is worthy of a full sermon (or half a dozen sermons) – especially in context of the Israeli elections this week, and the claims of many that Israel is “stealing” land from others – but, for our purposes here today, I’d like to stress one point:

³ Exodus 12:1-20.

⁴ See Rashi’s commentary on Exodus 12:2.

⁵ Quoted in Rashi Genesis 1:1, the first Rashi commentary on the Torah.

⁶ Exodus 12:2.

⁷ The main purpose of the Torah is its commandments, and although several commandments are found in Genesis, e.g., circumcision and the prohibition of eating the thigh sinew, they could have been included together with the other commandments.

⁸ Psalms 111:6.

⁹ Tanchuma (Buber) Genesis 11.

In reality, the Torah should have started with the first mitzvah – the mitzvah of the new month and new moon – and not with the story of the technical creation process. Why? Because the whole purpose of creation in the first place was a spiritual realization of the divine dream and vision, and this is achieved through the mitzvot.¹⁰

5. What the Torah Is and Is Not

The Torah is not a history book, documenting creation, past tales, or genealogical family trees. The most obvious proof for this being that the Torah spends a mere fourteen portions on some 2,448 years of history (from creation to the Exodus) and then spends the remaining thirty-nine portions on a mere forty years! If the Torah were a history book, it would be a very lopsided one.

However, the Torah is no history book but a book of divine wisdom, a book in which the secrets and true reality of the universe are imbedded, a book whose primary purpose is not to teach history but to reveal the spirit and soul in all things and to provide us with a blueprint for life (Torah from the word *ho'raah*, instruction). And, this being the case, the Torah should have indeed begun not with the physical description of the world's creation and the people who later inhabited it, but rather with the first mitzvah.

So why didn't the Torah begin that way?

The Midrash says for one simple reason: in order to preempt the cynical nature of the world, which might cause people to assume that there is no landlord to this domain. Thus the Torah begins with Genesis and the creation story, to establish at the outset that there definitely and definitively is a landlord, and this landlord created this world and rules it.¹¹

¹⁰ See Likkutei Sichot vol. 16, p. 481ff at length.

¹¹ A klotz kasha, an obvious question: After describing the creation, to preempt any misplaced claims, why did the Torah not immediately jump to Hachodesh? Why go through an entire book of Genesis (and then some) to describe the history, geology, genealogy, and chronicles conveyed in Genesis and the beginning of Exodus? The obvious answer would be that this part of the tale was also necessary to preempt any unsavory claims from the nations against God's dominion or the Jews' role.

6. Creation: Two Approaches

What emerges from the above is that there are two ways to look at our world –bottom-up (the distorted perspective of earth) or top-down (the true heavenly perspective): as a self-centered world or a world created by G-d.

Bottom-up, earth's perspective, the earth is what the earth is – bacteria, biology, seemingly without a landlord and the goal (if there is one) is survival of the fittest: to be the best, biggest, fittest, most advanced bacteria possible.

Top-down, from heaven's perspective, the world was created with a very specific purpose – to make possible a home for God down below in the physical world.

From the top-down perspective, which focuses on the purpose of the whole creation, the Torah should have begun with the mitzvah of the new month, which implements that purpose. But in order to practically address the bottom-up biological and skeptical realities on the ground, the Torah began with Genesis to establish that the world has a landlord and boss.

7. Explaining the Debate

Now we can address the Talmudic debate between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua, whether to celebrate Rosh Hashanah on the first of Tishrei, or today, the first of Nissan.¹²

Tosafot,¹³ the compendium of Talmudic commentaries from the Middle Ages, reconciles these two seemingly diametrical opinions in a beautiful way, and says that they are not really arguing as to when creation actually happened, but when to celebrate that creation.

¹² See Sefer Hasichot 5749, vol. 1, p. 355ff.

¹³ Rosh Hashanah 27a, titled Kman Matzlinan. See also Shaar Hakavanot, Rosh Hashanah #1; Pri Etz Chaim, Shaar Rosh Hashanah ch. 4 (ch. 6 in select versions).

According to both Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua, the actual implementation of creation, the creation in a physical and material, tangible and empirical form, occurred on the first of Tishrei. But that was not the real beginning of creation. Rather, the beginning of creation was when the idea for the world was conceived and conceptualized, when the thought first entered God's mind (so to speak).

This conceptual idea for creation, the thought and inspiration to create the world, occurred six months before its actual and physical creation – that is on the first of Nissan.

To illustrate with a short example: When a person builds a home, he first conceives the idea of a home, and only after the idea is transformed into an architect's blueprint does it actually get built. As well, when a person starts a business, she first has the concept, and only after the concept is translated into an actionable business plan and implemented does it actually happen. The same is true with the world – God had the idea and concept for the world on the first of Nissan, and only six months later, on the first of Tishrei, God actually created the physical world and realized in empirical reality the preceding idea.

Thus goes the Talmudic debate: Rabbi Eliezer opines that we celebrate Rosh Hashanah on the day that creation *actually* and *tangibly* happened, which is the first of Tishrei. Rabbi Yehoshua, on the other hand, maintains that we celebrate Rosh Hashanah on the day that it “first entered” God's mind, the day that the idea was *conceptualized*, which is the first of Nissan.

8. The Lesson

Today – Rosh Chodesh Nissan – we celebrate the new year of potential.

On the first day of Tishrei we honor the new year of actualization, when God actualized the universe. But today we recognize the power of the concept and idea of creation – its infinite potential.

This answers our original question: How can we best realize and actualize our potential?

The answer is: By emulating God, for He is our first and best example.

We see that when God created the world, He did so in two stages. And herein lies the secret formula for self-actualization. For these two stages apply whether one is engaged in creating the world or starting a business, doing a mitzvah or building a family. First there has to be an idea or a dream – this is the potential, conceptual stage. And then there has to be the actual, practical and tangible stage, where the dream becomes reality.

In truth, the Torah should have started with the mitzvah of the new month, *HaChodesh*, but because of the hostile, self-absorbed earthly attitude, God began the Torah with Genesis, to declare that the world has an architect and engineer, preempting any opposition to His divine dream.

In our own lives we must remember that we have infinite potential because we were created in the divine image. Just knowing that we can do anything is a huge blessing in its own right. And this is what we remember today, on the first of Nissan, the month of new beginnings.

But the only way to ensure that the dream is realized, the only way to guarantee that the potential becomes reality, is by making sure that it is aligned with the purpose for the world. For knowing the idea that drives the reality of creation itself guarantees that we will realize our potential.

9. How Close Is The Moon? (Joke)

A Jewish couple on a date in New York City are sitting one night on a bench in Central Park. The lady turns to the gentleman and asks: “Which do you think is farther away, Jerusalem or the moon?”

To which the gentleman replies: “Well, tell me, can you see Jerusalem?”

10. HaChodesh – Innovation (Conclusion)

HaChodesh literally means “the month,” but this word is rooted in another word – *chiddush*, meaning “innovation.” The obvious connection between *chodesh* (month) and *chiddush* (innovation) is that every month is new, it begins with a new moon, and it brings about an innovative experience.

So why do we read this portion, *HaChodesh*, the portion of innovation, this week in the beginning of Nissan, and not in six months in the beginning of Tishrei when the physical world was actually created?

Because the deepest innovation, the truest newness is the idea, the concept,¹⁴ more than the actual implementation of that innovation.

In other words: building a house is less innovative than conceiving and conceptualizing the house in the first place.

That’s why today, this Shabbat, is called *HaChodesh*, and not Rosh Hashanah proper.

Once you have the idea, the concept, the thought, all you have to do is act on it.

What has always made the Jew unique – and by the Jew I mean us – has not been the creation story; after all Adam was not Jewish and all nations stem from that first human.

What makes the Jew unique, inimitable, a standout, is the way the Jew innovates, the way the Jew reflects his/her Creator. The way he or she recognizes the Divine infinite power in creation.

Existence is no *chiddush*, no innovation for the Jew. After all, the Creator can create anything He so chooses.

The true *chiddush*, the true innovation, is to discover – and make the world aware -- why the world was created, *why* the Creator chose to create the world, and why the Creator put us here.

¹⁴ See Sefer Hasichot ibid.

Why? The answer is simple: To realize the world's potential, to make it divine, to innovate through the fulfillment of the mitzvot and the study of Torah.

We must always remember that the Torah really should begin at *HaChodesh*, and we must always add that element of newness to all things – especially creation itself.

Simply put: As we honor the new moon of this new month of liberation – the same moon shown to Moses over three millennia back – we ought to recommit ourselves to our collective and personal life mission: To bring new and fresh energy into our loves and into everything that we come in contact with.

We do that by recognizing the enormous potential in ourselves, in our family members and friends and in everyone we meet and everything we encounter.

Yes, my dear friends, this day reminds us that we each have the ability to discover our great potential, to actualize it – and to reinvigorate every aspect of our lives in the process.

To see infinity in every detail of our lives, and to celebrate the immortal in every aspect of our mundane realities.

Shabbat Shalom!