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Parshat HaShavua
Yeshivat Har Etzion

PARASHAT BO

"This Month Shall Be For You..." – Jewish Dates

By Rav Yaakov Medan

A. "REMEMBER THE SHABBAT DAY TO SANCTIFY IT"

How are we to fulfill the commandment of "remembering the Shabbat day?" The *Gemara* (*Beitza* 16a) tells of Shammai the Elder, who would go out every day to buy delicacies for Shabbat, but this appears to be a trait of special piety; it is difficult to imagine that this is the way in which the commandment must be fulfilled. Elsewhere (*Pesachim* 106a) the *Gemara* deduces from the commandment to "Remember..." the requirement to recite *Kiddush* – "'Remember' Shabbat over wine"; but it would seem that the main task of "remembering" the Shabbat day must take place before Shabbat, not during the course of it.

Perhaps we may propose that this commandment is fulfilled by the way in which we count the days of the week. The gentile world refers to the days of the week by names derived from celestial bodies: "Sunday" is, of course, the "day of the sun"; "Monday" honors the moon; "Saturday" is named after the planet Saturn. If we want to calculate how many days there are between Monday and Saturday, we must count them on our fingers – or otherwise convert the English names into their Hebrew equivalents. From "*yom sheni*" (the "second day" – Monday) until Shabbat – a person knows right away that there are five days. The simple calculation of the difference between seven and two produces an immediate result in our head.

This is the Torah's intention. On every day of the week a person should remember how many days are left to prepare for Shabbat. Shabbat is the only day that is not counted towards something else, and therefore has its own name. The auxiliary benefit of this system is the convenience of knowing "where we're up to" in the week. Not only Shabbat 'benefits,' as it were, but we ourselves know immediately how many days there are between "*yom sheni*" (Monday) and "*yom chamishi*" (Thursday), without having to calculate [1].

In summary - there are three advantages to the Jewish system of counting the days of the week:

- i. It avoids the taint of idolatry that is inherent in a system that names after the sun, the moon, and the stars, thereby memorializing ancient paganism.

ii. It makes it easier to calculate the space between different days of the same week.

iii. Most importantly – we are constantly reminded of Shabbat, and how many days remain until Shabbat comes. We thereby fulfill one of the Ten Commandments.

B. "REMEMBER THIS DAY, WHEN YOU CAME OUT OF EGYPT"

In the same way that we count the days of the week, we also count the months of the year. Here we encounter the same problems – perhaps even more severe ones - but surprisingly enough, the situation is reversed.

The original Gregorian (Christian) system for counting months is certainly to be ruled out; it offers no advantage. The names of these months commemorate such anti-Semitic Caesars as Julius and Augustus – whom we have no wish to honor – as well as clearly idolatrous allusions (March = Mars, the Greek god of war). But in truth, the accepted Jewish names for the months do not appear to be much better: in what way is Mars, the Greek god of war, any worse than Tammuz – the Babylonian god of fertility (see, for example, *Yechezkel* 8:14)? We may assume that other names of months in the Hebrew calendar are similarly associated with idolatry.

Admittedly, *chassidic* tradition has made valiant attempts to "Judaize" the accepted names of the months. "Elul" represents various acronyms, such as "*ani le-dodi ve-dodi li*" ("I am my Beloved's, and my Beloved is mine" – from *Shir Ha-shirim*); "Nissan" is called so because of the miracle ("*nes*") that took place during that month (the Exodus from Egypt); "Adar" is interpreted as arising from the expression, "Give me a ladle and I shall dwell (*adur*) among you," as the *Midrash* teaches on *Parashat Teruma*, which is read at the beginning of the month of Adar; etc. But these interpretations seem far-fetched, and anyway do not cancel the literal meanings of the Babylonian names, which – as stated – commemorate forms of idolatry.

The Ramban (in his sermon on *Rosh Ha-shana*) raises a different question related to our counting of the months: what ever happened to the commandment, "This month shall be for you the beginning of the months; it is the first [month] for you of the months of the year?" Is this not a commandment from the Torah to count the months starting from Nissan, in order to remind us of the month in which God brought us out of slavery to freedom?! And Rashi has already commented on this mitzva as follows:

"'This month...' – God said this to him concerning the month of Nissan: this should be the first in the order of counting the months; such that Iyar is the second month, and Sivan the third."
(*Rashi* 12:2)

Indeed, this reflects the dating system used throughout the Torah. The months are noted by number, rather than by name. Why, then, do we not continue this practice?

The Ramban explains that since the return of the Babylonian exiles to Israel, the Babylonian-Persian names have been preserved in order to fulfill the prophecy of *Yirmiyahu*, "Therefore behold: days are coming, promises God, when they shall say no more 'As the Lord lives, Who brought up *Benei Yisrael* from the land of Egypt,' but rather 'As the Lord lives, Who brought up and led the seed of the House of Israel from the land of the north, and from all the lands to which I have driven them, and they shall dwell on their own land.'" (*Yirmiyahu* 23:7-8)

If the Ramban is declaring this to be an important principle, we can certainly accept it. But if he is positing that this is law, we may answer: nowhere does the Torah suggest that we are commanded to use the Egyptian names of months forever more in order to commemorate the Exodus. On the contrary – the Exodus and liberation should be expressed, *inter alia*, in a complete abandonment of Egyptian culture and idolatrous beliefs. Similarly, we may ask: does the use of the Persian names of months express our return to the Land from Persian exile? Does the use of their names not testify, in fact, that we have adopted something of the exile for ourselves, bringing it with us to our land, with no desire to liberate ourselves from it!? Rather, this is perfectly parallel to someone who comes from the Diaspora to Jerusalem, and then calls his neighborhood "Ramot Polin" or "Battei Ungarin." This person is not expressing his thanks to God for bringing him out of those defiled lands; rather, he is demonstrating that although he is physically located in *Eretz Yisrael*, his consciousness remains in Poland, where the observance of Torah seems more proper to him...

Let us add to this question the additional side-benefit of counting the months by number as opposed to name. The Christians have liberated themselves from the names of the months, which make daily activities more complicated and awkward, and have begun referring to the months by number. What was previously a difficult question (how many months are there between March and October) now becomes much easier to deal with (how many months are there between the third month and the tenth month). We, on the other hand, are still struggling with our calculation of the months: can the reader quickly answer how many months there are between Sivan and Shevat? Now try to calculate how many months there are between the third month and the eleventh. Surely this is a much quicker system!

If the only disadvantage to the Persian names of the months was the inconvenience involved in these calculations, we would not raise such a strong argument against them. But in reality, we are not merely complicating our calculations of months – a task with which we are frequently confronted. And since we are so certain that the Persian names of the months were given at Sinai – after all, our grandfather's grandfather used them! – and since "innovation is prohibited from the Torah – *chadash assur min ha-Torah*," we dare not replace these names with numbers, as the Christian world has so efficiently done. Therefore, the simplest solution would seem to be to leave the "traditional" Persian names, but to calculate dates with the help of the convenient and useful Christian calendar which, instead of being based on the date when the Lord our God brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery, is based on the birthday of Jesus. Woe to such shame and reproach!

Let us summarize this section as follows. We have listed three advantages to counting the months as the Torah does, rather than relying on the "Persian" system upon which the Hebrew calendar is based:

- i. The numbers free us of any connection with foreign idolatry.
- ii. The numerical dating system is far more convenient for everyday use, and we are not required to pander to Christian culture in order to enjoy this convenience.
- iii. The Torah's system of counting reminds us of the day when we left Egypt, and counts all the months accordingly.

C. COUNTING THE YEARS

Last week, the Chinese marked the "year of the monkey." Giving names to the years reflects a lack of a sense of history and a lack of need to plan for the long term. We assert all this on the basis of what we said above: it is extremely difficult to calculate how much time has passed from the "year of the dragon" until the "year of the monkey" – especially if that period consists of several decades or even centuries.

In contrast to the counting of the days of the week or months of the year, whose manner of counting have been adopted from western culture, when it comes to years both systems rely on counting numerically or with letters that represent numbers.

We customarily count years since the Creation of the world. I have never quite understood the reason for counting back to that date, which bogs down our counting with a lot of extra years and generally complicates matters. Our most reliable source for counting since Creation is from the Middle Ages, around the time of the Rambam. It appears that at that time there was a transition from the counting system that had been accepted among *Chazal* and during the period of the *Geonim* - "*minyan shetarot*" (the system of counting used in documents which we shall discuss further on), to the system of counting back to Creation. This transition finds expression, for example, in the following law in the Rambam, dealing with the counting of *Shemitta* years:

"According to this calculation, this year – 1,107 years since the Destruction, which is the year 1,489 according to "*minyan shetarot*" which is the year 4,936 since the Creation – is a *Shemitta* year, and it is the twenty-first year of the Jubilee cycle" (Laws of *Shemitta* and *Yovel*, 10:4)

The system for counting years in *Tanakh* is generally based on the years of a king's rule: "In the fifty-second year of Azarya, King of Yehuda (*Melakhim II* 15:27), etc. This system is convenient for counting short periods, but is neither convenient nor practical for calculating longer periods. How is a person to calculate how much time passes between the thirty-third year of Yo'ash and the twenty-seventh year of Azarya?

But the "royal" dating system remains. The Christian count of years since Jesus is, in fact, the counting of the kingdom of "new Israel," of the "true nation of Israel," which has accepted upon itself the utterances of "that man" with no connection to the descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. The Moslem counting of years back to Mohammed – "the crazy one," as the Rambam refers to him – is the counting from the vision of the universal Arab empire that Mohammed's followers establish wherever they can. Not one of them ever thought to count from the Creation of the world.

An alternative system of counting is found in the *Tanakh* in the noting of the year of construction of the palace of God's kingdom, the Temple:

"And it was, in the 480th year since the Exodus of *Benei Yisrael* from Egypt, in the fourth year, in this month – the second month of King Shelomo's reign over Israel, that he built a house for God." (*Melakhim I* 6:1)

This count is also based on royalty, not mortal royalty, not the royalty of idolatry, but the kingship of God. God's kingship became manifest in the world with the declaration concluding the Exodus from Egypt, at the end of the Song of the Sea:

"God will reign for ever and ever" (15:18)

It would seem logical that the years should be counted from that point. For if the Torah commands us to remember the Exodus from Egypt through our counting of the months, why should we not commemorate the greatest event in our nation's history in our counting of years as well? This is the true counting based on royalty – the kingship of God! Moreover, we calculate the reign of all the kings of Israel starting from the month of Nissan (*Mishna Rosh Ha-shana* 2a), because of the kingship of God which begins with the Exodus. Why should we count only the years of mortal kings and not the years of God's kingship, from the Exodus [3]?

As mentioned, our sources reveal another way of counting years, and this is known as "*minyán shetarot*." This system was used in *Sefer ha-Makkabim*, in the period of *Chazal*, and in the period of the *Geonim*. In the Responsa of the Rif, too, this system is the dominant one; it is even to be found among the Sages of *Eretz Yisrael* in the generation following the Spanish Expulsion, and the Yemenites follow this custom of counting to this day.

It is generally agreed that this system dates back to the kingdom of Seleucid I, who inherited part of the kingdom of Alexander the Great, including *Eretz Yisrael*. The first year of Seleucid I's reign was 3448 years after the Creation (312 B.C.E.).

This custom is most surprising. For what reason did *Chazal*, the *Geonim* (especially in the letter of Rav Sherira Gaon) and those who followed, decide to count years according to such an archaic and irrelevant system, thereby memorializing a gentile king so many years after both he and his kingdom had

disappeared? Rav Reuven Margaliyot provides a simple and accurate answer: the Exodus from Egypt took place in the year 2448 after the Creation of the world, as we may calculate on the basis of the years listed in *Sefer Bereishit* up until the birth of Yitzchak (2048 years), together with another 400 years of slavery, as mentioned in the *Berit Bein Ha-betarim*. Hence, Seleucid I ascended the throne exactly one thousand years after the Exodus – as the author of "*Seder Olam*" notes explicitly. The counting of years based on "*minyan shetarot*" is therefore meant as a system of counting back to the Exodus, as arising from the sources and from the spirit of the commandment to "remember the Exodus from Egypt." The *Geonim* - who counted according to "*minyan shetarot*" – adopted the technical counting of from Seleucid I since they were in fact counting years since the Exodus, with the omission of the "thousands" – just as we count today back to Creation with the omission of the "thousands."

Let us summarize this section as follows: the essence of our counting should be the commemoration of the Exodus and of God's kingship. This is how *Tanakh* counts years, and it is possibly the same idea that lies behind the counting of *Chazal* and the *Geonim*.

D. LETTERS AND NUMBERS

Putting aside the question of what we're counting from – Creation or the Exodus – there is another difference between the Hebrew counting system and the Christian one, both in days of the month and in counting the years. The Christian count is numerical, while the accepted Hebrew notation is in letters. This is appropriate and reflects the custom dating back to our most ancient sources. The language of numbers (in written notation!) as opposed to the language of letters is not a custom of Jewish origin; why, then, should we adopt a foreign language?

On second thoughts, though, let us address the question of how useful the language of letters really is. I was recently involved in the last chapters of *Massekhet Ketuvot* including, *inter alia*, the commentary of Rabbi Betzalel Ashkenazi – the "*Shita Mekubetzet*" – on these chapters. Let us investigate how many printed pages comprise his commentary on these chapters. In my printed edition (Ministry of Education, Tel Aviv 5725) the commentary of the "*Shita Mekubetzet*" on the ninth chapter of *Ketuvot* begins on page tav-tav-tav-resh-nun-heh, and concludes, at the end of chapter thirteen, on page tav-tav-tav-tav-kuf-peh. The indulgent reader is invited to try and calculate the total number of pages. Had the page numbers been noted in numerical form, we would know that we're trying to find the difference between 1455 and 1780 – a far easier and more practical calculation.

A similar problem arises in the calculation of years. How many years have passed since the year four thousand and tav-tav-kuf-ayin-alef (the year when 300 *Ba'alei ha-Tosafot* arrived in *Eretz Yisrael*) until today? And how long would it take us to work this out if we were to refer to the years numerically?

The same point can be made concerning the days of the month. How many days are there between "tet-zayin" of a month and "khaf-gimel" of the same month? Now, how many days are there between the sixteenth and the twenty-third?

Let us emphasize once again: the price of using letters is not the convenience of the calculation, since we should never forego that convenience. The price is the practicality and usefulness. Our brains are used to a decimal, digital system, while the system of letters – especially from the letter 'tav' onwards – is not suited to that way of thinking [2]. As a result, counting by letters has remained a "religious," ceremonial system used for *ketuvot* and divorce documents. And because the Hebrew date of the month is not noted numerically, we end up using the Christian calendar for all of our everyday purposes; our consciousness regulates the order of our lives and our historical awareness with reference to the birth of Jesus. Thus we have a Torah that is infinitely punctilious with regard to the laws pertaining to recitation of blessings and to the mention of God's Name during Torah study and prayer, but quite lackadaisical in this aspect of the laws of idolatry! Woe to us when it comes to the Day of Judgment, when we must answer to He Who commanded, at Sinai, "I am the Lord your God Who took you out of the land of Egypt" for the sin of omitting any mention of His Kingship from the order of our time and calendar, commemorating instead the Nazerene.

Our historical consciousness, too, suffers to no small extent as a result of our reliance on foreign dates. Let us consider two examples. According to the *Gemara* in *Bava Batra* (3a) and according to Rashi in his commentary on *Vayikra* 16:3, we all know that the First Temple stood for 410 (tav-yud) years. We think of these years as lasting from 961 B.C.E. until 586 B.C.E. According to those same sources, the Second Temple stood for 420 years – and we generally think of these years as lasting from 521 B.C.E. until 70 C.E. A quick calculation illustrates the absurdity and contradiction between the two counting systems. The reason is quite simple: we think in terms of Christian research, because it uses numbers; we do not think in the chronological terms bequeathed to us by *Chazal* because we have translated them into numbers. And so we are forced to resolve the contradiction in favor of the system utilized by Christian research.

E. THEORY VS. PRACTICE

A transition to counting the days of the month, the names of the months, and the years in numerical terms, and a simultaneous transition to a system that counts years and months back to the Exodus is not wildly unrealistic and impractical. It is possible to do. In this way we could educate our children and students towards a faith-based, Jewish historical consciousness, and restore the trampled glory of the commemoration of God's Kingdom and the Exodus from Egypt.

The author of this article uses the following system of dating. The date of the writing of this article, for example – 5.11.315 – commemorates the death of the 35 heroes who died in the convoy to Gush Etzion. We are now in the year 3315 since the Exodus, but I omit the "thousands" figure for the sake of convenience as well as to preserve the system used by the *Geonim*, who omitted the "thousands" from their counting based on "*minyan shetarot*" – which also

commemorated the Exodus from Egypt. The author uses the same system for dating in memoranda that he sends to academics, legalists and government officials with whom he comes into contact, and never has any one of them raised any objection.

But to date the author remains alone in this campaign. Dear readers: "If you wish it – it is no dream!" The date can begin with the blackboard at school. One day it will reach the computers of the Central Bank of Israel...

Notes:

[1] We may compare the difference between the ways of counting days to the difference between the systems for naming streets in different cities. In Israel, street names usually commemorate political bigwigs, names of flowers, etc. A person who finds himself in a certain city on Rabin Boulevard, for example, will have considerable trouble knowing how far he must walk, and in which direction, in order to get to Democracy Avenue, and from there to Peace Square. In Manhattan, longitudinal streets are numbered, while latitudinal streets are noted by name. A person has little trouble finding his way from 77th street to 71st.

[2] In the past there was an unsuccessful attempt to adjust the letters to a decimal system by adding "final" letters: 'kaf-sofit' = 500; 'mem-sofit' = 600; 'nun-sofit' = 700; 'feh-sofit' = 800; 'tzaddi-sofit' = 900. As stated, this endeavor did not work out.

Translated by Kaeren Fish