

PARSHAS HACHODESH
Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

This Shabbos is a special Shabbos. It is Parshas HaChodesh. On this Shabbos we took out two Torahs and read a special Maftir from Bo. This Shabbos we bench Rosh Chodesh. We make a blessing for the new month of Nisan. Nisan is the month, of course, in which Pesach occurs. In the special Maftir that we read we read how the Jewish people were commanded to set up a calendar making Nisan the first of the months of the Jewish year. We were to do this as a precondition for our redemption from Egypt, for our liberation from slavery. This seems strange. Why should the first commandment given to the Jewish people as a people be the setting up of a calendar? We understand the importance of bris milah, circumcision, the first commandment that was given to Abraham. We can ever understand the importance of the first commandment given to Adam and Eve: "Be fruitful and multiply." But why were the Jewish people given of all commandments the commandment to set up a calendar? This does not seem to be the type of commandment that would be so important for the Jewish people that dependent upon it was their liberation from Egypt.

What's more, the second commandment that was given to the Jewish people was the taking of the lamb and slaughtering it. This would seem more logical to be a precondition for the Jewish people's liberation from Egypt. After all, the lamb stood for idolatry. It is not as commonly thought that they slaughtered the lamb as some sort of a sacrifice to G-d. They did that, that is true, but it had a greater and deeper meaning because during this time of year in the signs of the zodiac Aries holds supreme. Aries was, of course, the lamb, and the Jewish people took the lamb and slaughtered it to show we rejected all idol worship, that we do not believe the world is controlled by spirits that

sometimes inhabit vessels that we make for them, whether it be an idol or animal. This time of year the Egyptians believed the spirit of Aries inhabited the lambs, and anyone who touched a lamb would be killed because he was interfering with this spirit which would bring great benefit or harm to Egypt. We would think then that the second commandment should have been the first commandment and that it has greater importance than setting up a calendar, that setting up a calendar really had no bearing on the Jewish people's liberation from Egypt.

That that is not what stayed in the Torah. If we examine how we are to set up the calendar and what we are to do when we set up the calendar in Jewish life perhaps then we can understand why this should have been the first commandment and why it is so important. We know that the Jewish calendar is based upon the new moon and when we sight the new moon we then start the new month, and, as you know, the new moon varies from month to month. In the seantise there are 29 1/2 days in a lunar month. However, the moon can vary in its appearance in the sky for more than 13 hours. Therefore, we cannot predict that just 29 1/2 days after the last new the new moon will come into being. That is why it is interesting to note that although we believe very much in Shabbos and do not believe we can break Shabbos except to save a life, etc., yet here we are told we can break the Shabbos in order to go declare a new moon. If we saw a new moon in the sky we could go up to Jerusalem, break the Shabbos by going beyond the restricted distance that we can travel on Shabbos. This seems silly. After all, the new moon is going to happen. If it doesn't happen today, it will happen tomorrow. Why should we make such a big issue of going out of the Shabbos limits and breaking Shabbos in order to go up to Jerusalem to testify that a new moon has occurred.

The reason, to my mind, that this was so important was because this explains the whole Jewish concept of freedom. The Jewish people were about to be liberated, to be given their freedom, but they were to understand that their freedom was not absolute. We speak a lot about how we can do everything, how nothing is impossible, how there are no impediments before the will, how if we dream it we can make it a reality. This, of course, has only limited veracity and application. We are not free to do anything and everything that we want to do. We are all going to die. We are all born with a genetic defect. Our cells can only replicate a certain number of times. Scientists have done experiments with cells and found that even with the best conditions and the best nutrients they can divide and replicate only so many times and then they die. It is interesting to note that this period of time corresponds to the 120 years time mentioned in the Bible. We are limited. We cannot reverse time. We cannot even put our socks on before our shoes unless we have very large socks or don't mind tearing our socks up.

There are certain things we cannot do. We are nothing more than a hormonal time clock. Certain hormones shoot off and we grow taller and mature. Other hormones shoot off and we get older. Other hormones shoot off and our hair turns white and we lose some of our body vigor. Eventually we leave this earth. We are nothing more than a time clock. We are determined to follow a certain course. In this century there have been two different views of man. One has said that we are free and can do anything we want to do and no one can stand in the way of our freedom. The other says that man is completely determined and everything is mechanistic, everything is cause and effect, and man has no freedom whatsoever. Paradoxically, these views were sometimes held by people simultaneously. We all know that both these views

are wrong. We, in Judaism do not believe in a rigid determinism. That, of course, was based on a Newtonian view of the world which modern physics now disputes. Newton was not wrong. He was just a special case. We all know now that scientific laws are only probabilities. We have no idea what an individual atom is going to do in the second law of thermodynamics. We have no idea even of where the electron is as it goes around the nucleus. We only can speak about statistical right and wrong, statistical laws. We cannot speak anymore about individual atoms following rigid laws.

The same thing is true for human beings, too. We can take scientific polls and determine how most people will vote, but how an individual will vote, we do not know. This is the Jewish view that we have freedom within limits, freedom within order, freedom within law. That is the way nature works, and that is the way man works, too. That was what the setting up of the calendar was to tell us. The moon can vary. The Sanhedrin had the right to declare when the holidays were. There was a certain play, we have a certain freedom, even within nature, in order to determine when the new month will be. Of course, we use this freedom to make sure Yom Kippur never comes on a Friday or Sunday. This is the way we have to look at all aspects of life, that we have freedom, but freedom within order, freedom within law. Our freedom is not absolute and we are not completely determined that we have a freedom. That, of course, is the basis of our relationship with G-d. We are free but not completely free. This, of course, is the paradigm for marriage, too. We are free but not completely free. We have to realize we have freedom but within limits. Many young people getting married today just think they are adding marriage to their life styles, but you cannot have marriage and not be restricted and not be dedicated

and devoted to the person to whom you are married. You cannot play around and still be married. You have to be there when the person needs you. You have to be free, but, yet, you also have to be limited in your freedom. A spouse that demands complete obedience from the other spouse will, of course, wreck the marriage, too. You have to get your spouse freedom to think and to do and to act, but there is always freedom within limits. If your spouse ever would tell you, "Do what you want. I don't care." You had better not do it. What you are doing is testing the limits of your freedom, and you will destroy your relationship. The relationship we have with G-d but free within limits, and the relationship we have with our spouse is the same. It is freedom within limits. A person knows that if your spouse needs you, then you have to be there and help and give your paycheck and do this and do that. It does not matter how you divide your responsibilities, but you know you have to be responsible for certain things. Many young people do not know that the first years of marriage are the hardest, and we do not tell them. It is the hardest because you have to compromise two different view and life styles and unless, of course, there is infidelity or drugs, people can really overcome these difficulties. They should overcome them. People have come to me fighting over toothpicks, but the truth of the matter is, you have to give a person freedom in a marriage but there are still definite limits.

That is something people have to understand. That is the same type of relationship we have with G-d, and that is the type of freedom that we want out of Egypt. That is the type of freedom that we really want in a marriage, too. Too much stress has been placed today on material things. What is really important is not what you have but the quality of the relationship that you have,

There is nothing greater in life than the feeling that you are loved and that you can elicit love in others, knowing that your love for yourself and knowing, too, that you can elicit love and companionship and friendship in your spouse. That is a great feeling. Unfortunately, today we stress many times things, and then marriage becomes nothing more than a power game. That is not the type of freedom or relationship we want. G-d said, "I am giving you freedom from Egypt so that you can have a relationship with Me and a relationship with each other." Judaism is based on a concept of freedom, but freedom within order, within law. It is not fancy technological inventions which make a society run, and it is not fancy objects and things that make a marriage work. It is devotion and dedication to each other. Relationships can only be built if we realize that each of us has freedom but freedom within order. None of us should try to impose our will on another completely, but, on the other hand, each of us is responsible to each other and knows the limits of our freedom. That is what dedication and devotion is.

I am reminded of the story of a professor of a university who went to a rabbi in Jerusalem and said, "You know, Rabbi, we are doing marvelous things now. We can fly higher than the birds. We can run faster than any deer. Our cars and trains go faster than any deer. We can dive deeper than any fish." The rabbi said, "That's wonderful that you can fly higher than a bird and run faster than a deer and dive deeper than a fish, but can you walk like a man?" That, of course, is the key question. What kind of relationships do you have? Can you receive love? Can you give love? Can you feel free and still be responsible? If you can, then you have fulfilled the charge of the first commandment that G-d gave us to make a calendar, to realize that although many things are determined and do follow a certain

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pattern, there is still freedom. There is freedom within order and that is what we have to respect in every relationship, the relationship between man and G-d, and especially in the relationship between man and #age 1