

Our parashah marks a watershed moment in our development – our release from slavery and emergence into the world of freedom. How easy it sounds, but how difficult it is to realize! As the rest of our Torah and the checkered history of the human race has taught us, one painful episode after the other, there is a profound difference between the physical state of freedom and living the concept of freedom. As I mentioned last week, the plagues are also a wakeup call for the Israelites, whose connection to and trust in HaShem had waned over the centuries. Midrash Tanchuma likens the plagues to the military tactics used by kings to deal with rebellion: Cutting off their water supply (blood), tumultuous noise (frogs, “whose croaking was harder to bear than the havoc they wrought”), arrows (gnats), barbarians (swarms of beasts), deadly cattle epidemic, naphtha (boils), projectiles (hail), stirring up a large population against them (locusts), imprisonment (darkness), killing their important men (death of the firstborn). Indeed, Israelites and Egyptians alike need something tangible to capture their full attention and help them understand the power of this invisible deity. Relating to the sequence of plagues is easy in their world with its abundant examples of how autocrats quell opposition. But this is only a small first step. The most daunting challenge is to teach the Israelites that although they are no longer slaves with no choice but to obey, the society they are to build must also have rules and regulations to which they are subject. They still have to obey, but they need to acquire a new motivation for doing so. Fear must be replaced with gratitude in order to transform slaves to Pharaoh into servants of HaShem. They will leave the suffering of slavery behind them, but once they have put some distance between themselves and Egypt, how will they avoid the pitfalls of taking their freedom for granted and developing a sense of entitlement? As we read time and again in our Torah, this is an ongoing challenge. It is no coincidence that that our prayers continually remind us that we once were slaves in Egypt, and that we achieved our freedom solely through the power and mercy of HaShem, Who did not, and will not, abrogate the terms of our eternal covenant. Now, this downtrodden group of people abruptly released into a new paradigm of freedom must learn to uphold their part of this covenant, i.e. to understand and accept the responsibilities that freedom entails. Obedience indeed, but now grounded in gratitude for the miracles that have made this possible. Cultivating gratitude is best achieved through stories and rituals, and it is no coincidence that two of our most fundamental ones are initiated in this parashah. The first commandment the Israelites receive as nascent people is the *mitzvah* of Rosh Chodesh. “This month shall be to you the head of the months; to you it shall be the first of the months of the year.” (12:2) While still in Egypt, the Israelites are commanded to make the month of Nisan, the month of their delivery, the first month of the year; and that from that time on, they are to observe each new moon and create their own calendar based on its cycles. Although this early calendar evolved into the lunar-solar calendar we use today, its significance is profound. HaShem introduces it to Moses and Aaron immediately after outlining the tenth plague, the final blow that will gain their freedom. This is an enormous first step along the way to independence. As slaves, the Israelites had no control over their time, but as free people, they will be able to use their time as they please. Heady stuff, which makes it imperative for them to recognize that because time is essentially an element of HaShem’s creation, HaShem is the ultimate arbiter of time. Therefore, the Israelites’ calendar must contain ceremonies expressing gratitude to HaShem for redeeming them from slavery into the manifold obligations of their eternal covenant. What follows in our parashah are the statutes, rituals, and stories we know from our Pesach Haggadah. They are deeply ingrained in us, passed on from generation to generation as HaShem commands: “And this day shall be for you as a memorial, and you shall celebrate it as a festival for the Lord; throughout your generations, you shall celebrate it as an everlasting statute.” (12:14) “Holy convocations” are ordered, which we now celebrate in our synagogues in addition to the Seder we celebrate with family and friends. Even for non-observant Jews, Pesach is important because it commemorates the beginning of our peoplehood and the establishment of HaShem’s covenant with Israel, rather than only with certain individuals. It is noteworthy that the Torah emphasizes the time of year when the Exodus took place: “Today you are going out, in the month of spring.” (13:4) In Biblical Hebrew, the word אביב (aviv) refers to the spring season as well as to the fresh ears of barley that form during that time. Indeed, in addition to celebrating the Exodus, Pesach also marks the beginning of the barley harvest and the Omer counting period. This adds a more mundane explanation for the commandment to first make matzot and then eliminate all leaven (12:15-20, 13:7) , i.e., the rest of the old stores of grain – a form of spring cleaning to make way for the new harvest. But Midrash Mekhilta d’Rabbi Yishmael sees another reason for gratitude in HaShem’s choice of this season: “A month that is *kasher* – neither burning sun nor heavy rains. ...” In other words, congenial weather for our departure is one more reason among a myriad of other reasons to be grateful for this turning point in our history.

Shabbat shalom and belated *chodesh tov* – Rosh Chodesh Shevat was Monday