

When Rosh Chodesh Shevat coincides with our parashah, as it does this year, we have a wonderful opportunity to hear the messages of our calendar and our Torah in stereo. 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 later 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 have 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 marks the beginning of our peoplehood. 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 אֲבִיב (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, 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. But our parashah makes it clear that this departure is extremely difficult and dangerous. Based on the Hebrew name for Egypt: *mitzrayim* (narrows, constrictions), we often use the metaphor of birth to describe it. Indeed, the Israelites do not slip out easily, they are pulled out “with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.” It is messy, painful, frightening, and full of pressure. It is reflected in the last 3 plagues, which HaShem alone brings about, and which all deal with darkness. These plagues escalate like contractions, intensifying the pressure until the moment of release becomes inevitable. Of the 7 different words for locust in our TaNaKh, the word used here is *arbeh*, from the רבה (increase, multiply), with which HaShem describes to Eve the birthing pains women will suffer. Darkening the sky with their presence and stripping the land of everything that still grows increases the pressure, which the plague of darkness further exacerbates. This is no ordinary darkness; it is a palpable, constricting darkness. It is the darkness of the womb, a total enclosure that muffles and distorts sound. I have driven in fog so thick that I completely lost orientation and began to panic. I was literally frozen in fear, and I felt utterly alone and totally focused on my own immediate survival. Many of us who have gone through a difficult birth can relate to this feeling. Discussing the reason for the offering a woman must bring after childbirth, Talmud Tractate Niddah 31b teaches that during the birth process a woman’s pain is so great that she impulsively vows never again to engage in intercourse with her husband, a vow she always ends up violating. The final plague, the death of the firstborn, finally opens the womb. The death of Egypt’s firstborn is the breaking point for Pharaoh, like the water breaking before birth. And of course the blood on the doorposts is another powerful birth image. Pharaoh has claimed ownership over the Israelites in order to systematically destroy them – in other words, to cause a stillbirth. In response, HaShem performs a kind of “forceps delivery,” extracting the Israelites through that narrow corridor so aptly named *Mitzrayim*. Finally, Pharaoh and Egypt are the placenta, which sustains life during the process of development. However, the placenta must be expelled after birth, or it becomes lethal. Next week that will happen, once Israel stands on the far shore of the Sea of Reeds, singing and breathing while Egypt sinks into oblivion. It is noteworthy that the Torah says, “Do not hate the Egyptian, for you were a stranger in his land.” We must remember that Egypt was a place of refuge for Abraham, and for Joseph and his family. Parashah Bo is the birth, and the rest of the Torah is the childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood of a people slowly learning who – and Whose – they are, something we are still learning. Our redemption – our “forceps birth” – began with freedom, but freedom was only the beginning of our ongoing education.

Shabbat shalom!