

PARSHAH IN A NUTSHELL

Bo

Exodus 10:1-13:16

The last three of the Ten Plagues are visited on Egypt: a swarm of **locusts** devours all the crops and greenery; a thick, palpable **darkness** envelops the land; and **all the firstborn** of Egypt are killed at the stroke of **midnight** of the 15th of the month of Nissan.

G-d commands the **first mitzvah** to be given to the people of Israel: to establish a **calendar** based on the monthly rebirth of the **moon**. The Israelites are also instructed to bring a "Passover offering" to G-d: a lamb or kid is to be slaughtered and its blood sprinkled on the doorposts and lintel of every Israelite home, so that G-d should **pass over** these homes when He comes to kill the Egyptian firstborn. The **roasted** meat of the offering is to be eaten that night together with **matzah** (unleavened bread) and **bitter herbs**.

The death of the firstborn finally breaks Pharaoh's resistance and he literally drives the Children of Israel from his land. So **hastily** do they depart, there is no time for their dough to rise, and the only provisions they take along are unleavened. Before they go, they ask their Egyptian neighbors for **gold**, silver and garments, draining Egypt of its wealth.

The Children of Israel are commanded to consecrate all firstborn and to observe the anniversary of the **Exodus** each year by removing all **leaven** from their possession for seven days, eating matzah, and telling the story of their redemption to their **children**. They are also commanded to wear **tefillin** on the arm and head as a reminder of the Exodus and their resultant commitment to G-d.



PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

Bo

Exodus 10:1-13:16

“Come in to Pharaoh,” says G-d to Moses in the opening verse of *Bo* (“come”), “for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, that I might show these my signs before him.”

Seven plagues have failed to convince Pharaoh to accede to Moses’ demand in G-d’s name to “Let My people go, so that they may serve Me.” Time and again, while in the throes of a devastating plague, Pharaoh has promised to let the Hebrews go, only to renege the moment the affliction has been removed.

The eighth plague with which Moses threatens the Egyptians is the plague of locusts. “They will cover the face of the earth,” warns Moses “and they will eat the residue of that which remains to you from the hail.”

You say that you want to go serve your G-d? says Pharaoh. I’ll let the men go, as long as the women and children stay behind. No, says Moses,

We will go with our young and with our old, with our sons and with our daughters; with our flocks and with our herds will we go.

Pharaoh warns Moses that his efforts will only bring tragedy upon his people, and orders him from the palace. All that night, a strong east wind blows; in the morning,

The locusts went up over all the land of Egypt... And they covered the surface of the whole earth, so that the land was darkened; and they did eat every plant of the land... and there remained no green thing through all the land of Egypt...

Once again, Pharaoh begs Moses to pray to G-d that the plague be removed; once again, he promises to let them go; and once again, no sooner did the plague end that “G-d hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he would not let the children of Israel go.”

Darkness

Commentary

AND G-D SAID TO MOSES: “COME IN TO PHARAOH” (10:1)

Rabbi Simeon [bar Yochai] continued: It is now fitting to reveal mysteries connected with that which is above and that which is below. Why is it written, “Come in to Pharaoh”? Ought it not rather to have said, “Go to Pharaoh”? It is to indicate that G-d brought Moses into a chamber within a chamber, into the abode of the supernal mighty serpent that is the soul of Egypt, from whom many lesser serpents emanate. Moses was afraid to approach him, because his roots are in supernal regions, and he only approached his subsidiary streams. When G-d saw that Moses feared the serpent, He said, “Come in to Pharaoh”

(Zohar)

FOR I HAVE HARDENED HIS HEART AND THE HEART OF HIS SERVANTS (10:1)

When Pharaoh would soften, his servants and ministers would harden themselves; when they would soften, Pharaoh would harden; when both would soften, G-d would harden their hearts.

(Midrash HaGadol)

Moses was distressed to see the forces of evil capable of such resolution and determination. So G-d said to him: they, on their own, do not possess such power. It is only because I have hardened their hearts...

(The Chassidic Masters)

WE WILL GO WITH OUR YOUNG AND WITH OUR OLD, WITH OUR SONS AND WITH OUR DAUGHTERS (10:9)

Pharaoh was willing to let the menfolk go, as long as the children remain behind; for as long as the younger generation remains “in Egypt,” there would be no future for the people of Israel.

The “Pharaoh’s” of our day have the same attitude. If the older folk wish to cling

to Jewish tradition, that is perfectly acceptable; but the youth should be raised in “the spirit of the times” ...

(Maayanah Shel Torah)

AND [PHARAOH] SAID TO THEM: “...SEE, THERE IS EVIL BEFORE YOU” (10:10)

Pharaoh said to them; “By my astrological art I see the star ‘evil’ rising towards you in the wilderness; it is a sign of blood and slaughter.”

Consequently, when Israel sinned by worshiping the Golden Calf and G-d said to slay them, Moses said in his prayer (Exodus 32:12), “Why should the Egyptians speak and say: He brought them forth in evil.” The Egyptians will say: Indeed, we have already said, “See, there is evil before you.” Hence, “G-d bethought Himself concerning the evil” (ibid., v. 14).

G-d then changed the blood of which this star was an emblem to the blood of the circumcision. Thus, when Joshua circumcised the people of Israel in the desert (before they entered the Holy Land), he said (Joshua 5:9): “This day have I removed from you the reproach of the Egyptians” — that which the Egyptian said to you, “We see blood impending over you in the wilderness.”

(Rashi)

AND G-D TURNED A VERY STRONG WEST WIND, WHICH TOOK AWAY THE LOCUSTS, AND CAST THEM INTO THE SEA OF REEDS; THERE REMAINED NOT ONE LOCUST IN ALL THE BORDERS OF EGYPT (10:19)

When the locusts first came, the Egyptians rejoiced and said: “Let us gather them and fill barrels with them.” Then did G-d say: Wretches! Will you rejoice with the plagues I have brought upon you? Immediately, “G-d turned a very strong west wind... there remained not one locust in all the borders of Egypt” — even those that had been pickled in their pots and barrels took wing and fled.

(Midrash Rabbah)

STRETCH OUT YOUR HAND TOWARDS HEAVEN, THAT THERE SHALL BE DARKNESS

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Bo

Exodus 10:1-13:16

For the ninth plague to strike Egypt,

G-d said to Moses: "Stretch out your hand towards heaven, that there shall be darkness over the land of Egypt — palpable darkness."

And Moses stretched out his hand towards heaven, and there was a thick darkness in all the land of Egypt for three days. A man saw not his fellow, neither rose any from his place for three days.

But all the children of Israel had light in their dwellings.

By now, Pharaoh has agreed to let even the young children go; "only let your flocks and your herds stay behind." Moses refuses: "There shall not a hoof be left behind; for of them must we take to serve G-d."

"Go out from my presence," says Pharaoh to Moses. "Take heed to see my face no more; for in the day you see my face again, you shall die."

Says Moses: "You have spoken well; I will see your face again no more."

G-d speaks to Moses: "One more plague I will bring upon Egypt, after which he will let you go from here" — a plague in which all the firstborn of Egypt shall die. Moses relays G-d's words to Pharaoh.

G-d also tells Moses to instruct the children of Israel that "every man ask of his neighbor, and every woman of her neighbor, articles of silver, and articles of gold" before they depart from Egypt.

Mitzvot

G-d then conveys to Moses and Aaron a series of mitzvot (divine commandments) in preparation for their Exodus from Egypt

The first mitzvah is to set the Jewish calendar in accordance with the monthly birth of the new moon, and regard the month of the Exodus as "the head of the months."

The second mitzvah is to bring a "Passover offering" to G-d while still in the land of Egypt:

On the tenth day of this month, they shall take to them every man a lamb... a lamb for each household...

Commentary**OVER THE LAND OF EGYPT (10:21)**

Why did G-d... bring darkness upon the Egyptians? Because there were transgressors in Israel who had Egyptian patrons and lived in affluence and honor, and were unwilling to leave. So G-d said: "If I bring upon them publicly a plague from which they will die, the Egyptians will say: 'Just as it has passed over us, so has it passed over them.'" Therefore He brought darkness upon the Egyptians for three days, so that the [Israelites] should bury their dead without their enemies seeing them.

(Midrash Rabbah)

A MAN SAW NOT HIS FELLOW, NEITHER ROSE ANY FROM HIS PLACE FOR THREE DAYS (10:23)

There were seven days of darkness... during the first three, "a man saw not his fellow"; during the last three days, he who sat could not stand up, he who stood could not sit down, and he who was lying down could not raise himself upright.

(Midrash Rabbah)

There is no greater darkness than one in which "a man saw not his fellow" — in which a person becomes oblivious to the needs of his fellow man. When that happens, a person becomes stymied in his personal development as well — "neither rose any from his place."

(Chidushei HaRim)

AND G-D SAID TO MOSES: "YET WILL I BRING ONE PLAGUE MORE UPON PHARAOH..." (11:1)

Ordinarily, G-d spoke with Moses only outside of the city, which was full of idols

and impurities. On this occasion, however, He spoke to him in the throne-room of Pharaoh's palace. For Moses had said to Pharaoh, "You have spoken well; I will see your face again no more"; yet in the following verses, he conveys this new message from G-d to Pharaoh! This means that G-d appeared to Moses in the very epicenter of the idolatry and depravity of Egypt.

(Nachmanides)

AND G-D SPOKE TO MOSES... "PLEASE, SPEAK INTO THE EARS OF THE PEOPLE, THAT EVERY MAN ASK OF HIS NEIGHBOR, AND EVERY WOMAN OF HER NEIGHBOR, ARTICLES OF SILVER, AND ARTICLES OF GOLD..." (11:2)

To what is this comparable? To a man who is locked up in prison and is told: "Tomorrow you shall be freed from prison and given a lot of money." Says he: "I beg you, free me today, and I ask for nothing more..."

[But G-d had said to Abraham at the "Covenant Between the Pieces": "Know thee that your children shall be strangers in a foreign land, [where] they will be enslaved and afflicted ... and afterwards they will go out with great wealth" (Genesis 15:23).]

So G-d had to plead with them: "Please! Ask the Egyptians for gold and silver, so that the Righteous One should not say: 'They will be enslaved and afflicted' He fulfilled, but He did not fulfill 'and afterwards they will go out with great wealth.'"

(Talmud, Berachot 9b)

Why was it so important that the Children of Israel should carry out the wealth of Egypt, to the extent that this was foretold hundreds of years earlier to Abraham as an indispensable component of their redemption?

Every creation contains a "spark of holiness" which embodies its divine purpose. When a person utilizes an object, force and phenomenon to serve the Creator, there-

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You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of the same month; and the entire community of the congregation of Israel shall slaughter it towards evening.

The First Seder

They shall take the blood, and put it on the two side posts and on the upper door post of the houses in which they shall eat it. And they shall eat the meat in that night, roast with fire, and unleavened bread: and with bitter herbs they shall eat it...

Thus shall you eat it: with your loins girded, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your band; you shall eat it in haste, it is G-d's passover.

For I will pass through the land of Egypt this night, and will smite all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast: and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judg-

ments: I am G-d.

And the blood shall be to you for a sign upon the houses where you are: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt.

The event shall be established a festival for all generations, "for on this very day I have brought your hosts out of the land of Egypt... Seven days shall there be no leaven found in your houses... in all your habitations shall you eat matzot (unleavened bread)."

The Exodus

And it came to pass at midnight, that G-d smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt: from the firstborn of Pharaoh that sat on his throne to the firstborn of the captive that was in the dungeon; and all the firstborn of cattle.

And Pharaoh rose up in the night, he, and all his servants, and all Egypt; and there was a great cry in Egypt; for there was not a house where there was not one dead.

Commentary

by realizing its function within G-ds overall purpose for creation, he "redeems" and "elevates" the divine spark at its core.

Every soul has its own "sparks" scattered about in the world, which actually form an integral part of itself: no soul is complete until it has redeemed those sparks which belong to its mission in life. Therein lies the purpose of *galut* in all its forms: the exile of the soul from its sublime origins to the physical world, and the various exiles that nations and individuals experience in the course of their history, impelled from place to place and from occupation to occupation by seemingly random forces. All is by Divine Providence, which guides every man to those possessions and opportunities whose "spark" is intimately connected with his.

As the father and prototype of all exiles, the Egyptian *galut* was a highly concentrated period of history, in which the foundations were laid for all that was to unfold in subsequent centuries. The material world contains 288 general "sparks" (each of which includes innumerable offshoots and particles); of these, 202 were taken out of Egypt, redeemed and elevated when the Jewish people carried off its gold and silver and used it to construct a Sanctuary for G-d in the desert (see Exodus 25).

(The Chassidic Masters)

THIS CHODESH (NEW MOON, MONTH) SHALL BE TO YOU THE HEAD OF MONTHS; IT SHALL BE FOR YOU THE FIRST OF THE MONTHS OF THE YEAR (12:2)

G-d showed Moses the new moon at its moment of rebirth, and said to him: "When the moon is reborn, mark the beginning of a new month."

(Mechilta)

There was a large courtyard in Jerusalem called Beth Ya'azek, where all the witnesses (who had seen the appearance of the new moon) used to assemble, and the *bet-din* (rabbinical court) used to examine them. They used to entertain them lavishly there, so that they should have an inducement to come...

The pair of witnesses who arrived first were cross-examined first. The senior of

them was brought in and they said to him: "Tell us how you saw the moon — in front of the sun or behind the sun? to the north of it or the south? how big was it, and in which direction was it inclined? and how broad was it? ... Rabban Gamaliel used to have diagrams of the phases of the moon on a tablet on the wall of his upper chamber, and he used to show them to the unlearned and ask, "Did it look like this or this?" ...

After that they would bring in the second witness and question him. If their accounts tallied, their evidence was accepted. The other pairs were questioned briefly — not because they were required at all, but so that they should not be disappointed and discouraged from coming (the next time).

The head of the *bet-din* would then proclaim: "Sanctified!", and all the people would repeat after him, "Sanctified! Sanctified!"

(Talmud, Rosh Hashanah ch. 2)

What blessing was to be recited by one who beholds the new moon, in the period when Israel used to sanctify the new month? Some of the Sages hold: "Blessed be He who renews the months." Others say: "Blessed be He who consecrates the months." And others say: "Blessed be He who hallows Israel," since unless Israel sanctify it, it is not sanctified at all.

(Midrash Rabbah)

The people of Israel set their calendar by the moon, because they are the moon of the world.

(Zohar)

The moon begins to shine on the first of the month and increases in luminance till the fifteenth day, when her orb becomes full; from the fifteenth till the thirtieth day, her light wanes, till on the thirtieth it is not seen at all. With Israel too, there were fifteen generations from Abraham to Solomon. Abraham began to shine... Jacob added to this light... and after them came Judah, Perez, Chetzron, Ram, Aminadav, Nachshon, Salmon, Boaz, Obed, Jesse, David. When Solomon appeared, the moon's orb was full... Henceforth the kings began to diminish in power... With Zedekiah [in whose time the Holy Temple was destroyed] the light of the moon

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And he called for Moses and Aaron by night, and said: "Rise up, and get you out from among my people, both you and the children of Israel; and go, serve G-d, as you have said. Also take your flocks and your herds, as you have said, and be gone; and bless me also."

And Egypt was urgent upon the people, that they might send them out of the land in haste; for they said: We are all dead men.

So hastily were the Children of Israel driven out by the Egyptians that "the people took their dough before it was leavened, their kneading troughs being bound up in their clothes upon their shoulders."

Nor did they forget to take the wealth of Egypt with them, as G-d had requested. "They requested of the Egyptians articles of silver, and articles of gold, and garments. G-d gave the people favor in the sight of Egypt, so that they gave them such things as they required; and they despoiled Egypt."

And the children of Israel journeyed from Raameses to Sukkoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides children.

A mixed *multitude* went up also with them; and flocks, and

herds, very much cattle.

And they baked unleavened cakes of the dough which they brought out of Egypt, for it was not leavened; because they were driven out of Egypt, and could not delay, neither had they prepared for themselves any provision...

And Moses said to the people: "Remember *this day*, in which you came out from Egypt, out of the house of bondage; for by strength of hand G-d brought you out from this place: no leavened bread shall be eaten. This day you came out, in the month of spring."

More Mitzvot

Moses also instructs them to observe the following mitzvot as commemorators of the Exodus:

* Each year, on the 14th of Nissan, all leaven must be removed from every Jewish home; that night, matzah should be eaten and the story of the *Exodus* told to one's children. No leaven should be eaten or be found in one's possession for seven days.

* All firstborn should be consecrated to G-d, in commemoration of G-d's killing the firstborn of Egypt and sparing the Jewish firstborn. Firstborn animals are to be sacrificed as offerings to G-d, and firstborn sons are to be "redeemed."

* The *tefillin* should be worn as "a sign on your arm and a remembrance between your eyes, that G-d's Torah be in your mouth; for with a strong hand did G-d bring you out of Egypt."

Commentary

dimmed entirely.

(Midrash Rabbah)

It is written (Genesis 1:16), "And G-d made the two great luminaries"; but then it says, "The great luminary& and the small luminary"?

[Indeed, at first they were both great; but then] the moon said to G-d: Master of the Universe! Can two kings wear the same crown?

Said G-d to her: Go diminish yourself.

Said she to Him: Master of the Universe! Because I have said a proper thing, I must diminish myself?

Said He to her: You may rule both during the day and at night.

Said she to Him: What advantage is there in that? What does a lamp accomplish at high noon?

Said He to her: The people of Israel shall calculate their dates and years by you.

Said she to Him: But the sun, too, shall have a part in that, for they shall calculate the seasons by him.

Said G-d: The righteous shall be called by your name—Jacob the Small, 'Samuel

the Small, David the Small.

Still G-d saw that the moon was not appeased. So G-d said: Offer an atonement for My sake, for My having diminished the moon. This is the significance of what Reish Lakish said: Why does the he-goat offered on Rosh Chodesh (the first of the month) differ from the others in that it is specified as for G-d? G-d is saying: This he-goat shall atone for My diminishing of the moon.

The months of the year are lunar months, as it is written: "... This *chodesh* shall be to you the head of months." So said our sages: G-d showed Moses the figure of the [new] moon in a prophetic vision, and said to him: "Thus you should see and sanctify."

However, the years which we figure are solar years, as it is written: "Keep the month of spring" (i.e., ensure that the month of Passover is always in the spring season).

The solar year is eleven days longer than a year of [twelve] lunar months. Therefore, when this surplus accumulates to the amount of 30 days — either a little more or a little less — one adds an extra month so that the year has 13 months; this is what is called a *shannah meuberet* ("pregnant year"). Because one cannot make the year to consist of so many months plus so many days, since the verse says, "[It shall be for you the first of] the months of the year" — implying that the year should consist of months, and months only.

The moon is concealed each month, and remains invisible for approximately two

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days — for about one day before it is closest to the sun and about one day after it is closest to the sun, after which it can be seen in the west in the evening. The night on which it is visible in the west marks the beginning of the month, and one counts from that day 29 days. If the moon is visible on the eve of the 30th, then the 30th day is *Rosh Chodesh* (“head of the month”); if not, then the 31st day is *Rosh Chodesh*, and the 30th day belongs to the previous month.

(*Mishneh Torah, Laws of the Sanctification of the Month*)

Time is the first creation (see Sforno on Genesis 1:1); thus, the sanctification of time is the first mitzvah commanded to Israel.

(*The Lubavitcher Rebbe*)

On the tenth day of this month, they shall take to them every man a lamb & You shall keep it until the 14th day of the same month; and the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall slaughter it towards evening (12:3-6)

When G-d told Moses to slay the paschal lamb, Moses said: “Master of the Universe! How can I possibly do this thing? Don’t You know the lamb is the Egyptian god? ‘Lo, if we sacrifice the abomination of the Egyptians before their eyes, will they not stone us?’”

Said G-d: “By your life, Israel will not depart from here before they slaughter the Egyptian gods before their very eyes, that I may teach them that their gods are really nothing at all.” This is what He actually did; for on that night He slew the Egyptian firstborn, and on that night the Israelites slaughtered their paschal lamb and ate it.

(*Midrash Rabbah*)

That year, the 10th of Nissan was a Shabbat; this is why the Shabbat before Passover is called *Shabbat HaGadol* (“The Great Shabbat”) — because a great miracle happened on that day. For when the Children of Israel took their paschal lambs on that Shabbat, the Egyptian firstborn converged on them and asked them: “Why are you doing this?” They replied: “It is a passover sacrifice to G-d, for He will kill the firstborn of Egypt.” The firstborn approached their fathers and Pharaoh to request that Israel be allowed to go, but they refused; so the firstborn waged war against them, killing many of them. Thus the verse (Psalms 136:10) proclaims: “[Offer thanks] to He who smote the Egyptian with their firstborn.”

(*Tosofot on Talmud, Shabbat 87b*)

I WILL PASS THROUGH THE LAND OF EGYPT THIS NIGHT, AND WILL SMITE ALL THE FIRSTBORN IN THE LAND OF EGYPT... AND AGAINST ALL THE GODS OF EGYPT I WILL EXECUTE JUDGMENTS: I AM G-D (12:12)

“I will pass” — I, and no angel; “I will smite” — I, and no seraph; “I will execute” — I, and no messenger; “I am G-d” — I am He, and no other.

(*Passover Haggadah*)

AND AGAINST ALL THE GODS OF EGYPT I WILL EXECUTE JUDGMENTS (12:12)

Those that were of wood rotted; those that were of metal melted.

(*Rashi*)

AND IT CAME TO PASS AT MIDNIGHT, THAT G-D SMOTE ALL THE FIRSTBORN IN THE LAND OF EGYPT (12:29)

The Jews in Egypt had sunk to the “forty-nine gates of impurity” so that, morally and spiritually, they were virtually indistinguishable from the Egyptians. Thus, when G-d passed over the Jewish firstborn to kill the Egyptian firstborn, the divine attribute of justice argued: “How are these any different from these? These are idol-worshippers, and these are idol-worshippers!” Nevertheless, G-d chose to extract the Children of Israel from “the bowels of Egypt” and acquire them as His chosen people.

This is why the plague of the firstborn occurred precisely at midnight. The first half of the night embodies the divine attribute of *gevurah* (justice), and its second half, the divine attribute of *chesed* (benevolence). Midnight is the juncture that fuses and supercedes them both, since the power to join two opposites can only come from a point that transcends their differences. “Midnight” is thus an expression of a divine involvement in creation that transcends all standard criteria for punishment or reward.

(*Ohr HaTorah*)

A MIXED MULTITUDE WENT UP ALSO WITH THEM (12:38)

The Hebrew word *rav* (“multitude”) has a numerical value of 202; the “mixed multitude” represents the 202 sparks of holiness that the Jewish people extracted from Egypt (see commentary on 11:2 above)

(*The Kabbalists*)

AND IT CAME TO PASS ON THAT VERY DAY, THAT G-D TOOK THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL OUT OF EGYPT (12:51)

In the Passover Haggadah we say: “If G-d had not taken our forefathers out of Egypt, we, our children, and our childrens children, would still be enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt...”

Our sages explain that the Children of Israel had become so entrenched in the paganism and depravity of Egypt, that the Exodus came at the very last possible moment, as they approached the very brink of total indistinguishability from the Egyptians. Had they remained slaves in Egypt a moment longer, there would have been no “Children of Israel” to redeem.

(*Rebbe’s Haggadah*)

“Egypt rejoiced when they went” (Psalms 105:38). Said Rabbi Berechia: This is comparable to a fat man who is riding on a donkey. The donkey longs: “O when will he get off me”; and he longs: “O when will I get off the donkey.” As soon as he gets off, the man is happy and the donkey is happy. Still I do not know: who is the happier?

So, too, when the Jews were in Egypt, and the plagues were befalling the Egyptians, the Egyptian were longing: “O when will the Jews get out!” And the Jews were longing: “O when will G-d redeem us!” As soon as they went out and were redeemed, these were happy and these were happy. Still, I did not know: which was the happier? Until King David came and said: “Egypt rejoiced when they went.”

(*Midrash Tehillim*)

AND YOU SHALL RELATE TO YOUR SON ON THAT DAY, SAYING: THIS IS DONE BECAUSE OF THAT WHICH G-D DID TO ME WHEN I CAME OUT OF EGYPT (13:8)

In every generation, a person is obligated to see himself as if he himself came out of Egypt; as it is written: “... This is done because of that which G-d did to me when I came out of Egypt.”

(*Talmud, Pesachim 116b*)

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FROM THE CHASSIDIC MASTERS

Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson

The Soul of Evil

Among the fifty-three Parshiot ("sections") of the Torah, several stand out as milestones in its narrative of the history of humanity and of the people of Israel. The Parshah of *Bereishit* recounts G-d's creation of the world in six days and Adam's banishment from Eden; *Lech Lecha* describes Abraham's journeys to bring the truth of the One G-d to a pagan world; *Yitro* includes the revelation at Sinai and the giving of the Torah to Israel; and so on.

A list of pivotal Parshiot would certainly include the Parshah of *Bo*, which tells of the exodus of the children of Israel from the land of Egypt. The Exodus marked our birth as a people, and we are enjoined to "Remember the day that you went out of Egypt, all the days of your life." Indeed, when G-d revealed Himself to us at Sinai, He introduced Himself not as the Creator of heaven and earth, but as "...your G-d, who has taken you out of the land of Egypt"! For the defining element of our relationship with G-d is not that we are beings created by Him (of which there are many others in G-d's world), but that we are free beings--beings in whom He has invested of His own infinity and eternity, beings empowered by Him to transcend the constraints of the material world and the limits of their own natures.

The Name

Bo means "come." The name derives from our Parshah's opening verse, in which G-d instructs Moses to "come to Pharaoh" to warn him of the seventh plague (the plague of locusts) and once again deliver the divine demand that the ruler of Egypt set free the children of Israel.

The Torah considers the name of a thing to be the articulation of its essence; certainly, such is the case with the Torah's own names for itself and its components. The name of a Torah section always conveys its primary message and the common theme of all its subsections and narratives.

One would therefore expect the section of the Exodus to be

called "Exodus," "Freedom," or some other name that expresses the significance of this defining event in the history of Israel. Instead, it derives its name from Moses' coming to Pharaoh--an event that seems but a preliminary to the Exodus. Indeed, the concept of the leader of Israel coming to Pharaoh's palace to petition him to let the Jewish people go--implying that the Jews are still subservient to Egypt and its ruler--seems the very antithesis of the Exodus!

The phrase "Come to Pharaoh" also evokes much discussion in the commentaries. Why does G-d tell Moses to come to Pharaoh? Would it not have been more appropriate to say, "Go to Pharaoh"?

The Zohar explains that Moses feared confronting Pharaoh inside his palace, at the hub of his power. (On earlier occasions, Moses had been directed to meet Pharaoh in other places, such as on the king's morning excursions to the Nile). So G-d promised Moses that He Himself would accompany him to Pharaoh. The word "come" is thus to be understood in the sense of "come with me"; G-d is saying to Moses, "Come with Me to Pharaoh."

The Zohar goes on to say that Moses is being invited by G-d to meet with the innermost essence of Egypt's ruler and god. Thus we have another meaning of the phrase "Come to Pharaoh"--"come" in the sense of "enter within." To liberate the people of Israel from the "great and mighty serpent," it was not enough to merely go to Pharaoh; Moses had to enter into the core of Pharaoh, into the very root of his power.

My River

Who is Pharaoh and what does he represent? What is his "innermost essence"? Why did Moses dread confronting Pharaoh in his palace if G-d Himself had sent him there? And how does "coming into Pharaoh" hold the key for the Exodus from Egypt and the liberation of the soul of man?

The prophet Ezekiel describes Pharaoh as "the great serpent who couches in the midst of his streams, who says: My river is my own, and I have made myself" (Ezekiel 29:3). In other words, the evil of Pharaoh is not defined by the promiscuity that characterized the pagan cults of Egypt; not by his enslavement and torture of millions; not by his bathing in the blood of slaughtered children; but by his egocentrism, by his regarding his own self as the source and standard for everything.

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For this is the root of all evil. Self-centeredness might seem a benign sin compared to the acts of cruelty and depravity to which man can sink, but it is the source and essence of them all. When a person considers the self and its needs to be the ultimate arbiter of right and wrong, his morality--and he might initially be a very moral person--is a sham. Such a person is ultimately capable of committing any act, should he regard it as crucial to himself or to his self-defined vision of reality.

Ultimately, every good deed is an act of self-abnegation, and every evil deed is an act of self-deification. When a person does a good deed--whether it involves contributing a single coin to charity or devoting an entire lifetime to a G-dly cause--he is saying: there is something greater than myself to which I am committed. When a person violates the divine will--whether with a minor transgression or with the most heinous of crimes--he is saying: "My river is my own, and I have made myself"; good is what is good to me, evil is what is contrary to my will; I am the master of my reality, I am god.

The Soul of Evil

So is the ego evil? Is this fundamental component of our soul an alien implant that must be uprooted and discarded in our quest for goodness and truth?

In the final analysis, it is not. For the cardinal law of reality is that "There is none else besides Him" (Deuteronomy 4:35)--that nothing is contrary to, or even separate from, the Creator and Source of all. The ego, the sense of self with which we are born, also derives from G-d; indeed, it is a reflection of the divine "ego." Because G-d knows Himself as the only true existence, we, who were created in His image, possess an intimation of His "sense of self" in the form of our own concept of the self as the core of all existence.

It is not the ego that is evil, but the divorcing of the ego from its source. When we recognize our own ego as a reflection of G-d's "ego" and make it subservient to His, it becomes the driving force in our efforts to make the world a better, more G-dly place. But the same ego, severed from its divine moorings, begets the most monstrous of evils.

This, explains the Lubavitcher Rebbe, is the deeper significance of the opening verses of the Parshah of Bo. When G-

d commanded Moses to "Come to Pharaoh," Moses had already been going to Pharaoh for many months. But he had been dealing with Pharaoh in his various manifestations: Pharaoh the pagan, Pharaoh the oppressor of Israel, Pharaoh the self-styled god. Now he was being told to enter into the essence of Pharaoh, into the soul of evil. Now he was being told to penetrate beyond the evil of Pharaoh, beyond the mega-ego that insists "I have created Myself," to confront Pharaoh's quintessence: the naked "I" that stems from the very "self" of G-d.

Moses did not fear the evil of Pharaoh. If G-d had sent him, G-d would protect him. But when G-d told him to enter into the essence of Pharaoh, he was terrified. How can a human being behold such a pure manifestation of the divine truth? A manifestation so sublime that it transcends good and evil and is equally the source of both?

Said G-d to Moses: "Come to Pharaoh." Come with Me, and together we will enter the great serpent's palace. Together we will penetrate the self-worship that is the heart of evil. Together we will discover that there is neither substance nor reality to evil--that all it is, is the misappropriation of the divine in man.

If this truth is too terrifying for a human being to confront on his own, come with Me, and I will guide you. I will take you into the innermost chamber of Pharaoh's soul, until you come face to face with evil's most zealously guarded secret: that it does not, in truth, exist.

When you learn this secret, no evil will ever defeat you. When you learn this secret, you and your people will be free.

The Soul of Evil

And G-d spoke to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, saying: This month shall be to you the head of months -- the first of the months of your year.

Exodus 12:1-2

*Rabbi Eliezer says: The world was created in Tishrei...
Rabbi Joshua says: The world was created in Nissan*

Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 10b-11a

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The Talmud tells of an exchange between the wise men of Athens and Rabbi Joshua in which the Greek philosophers challenged the Talmudic sage to identify the exact center of the world. Rabbi Joshua pointed to a field atop a nearby hill, and said: "In middle of that field is a well. That well is the center of the world. You can take ropes and measure it, if you wish."

As every schoolchild knows today, the earth is a sphere, meaning that its every point can be considered its center. If a certain point is regarded as the top or bottom of the globe, or a certain half designated as its eastern or western hemisphere, these are expressions of a particular historical or conceptual view of our world. In purely geometrical terms, the surface of a sphere has no definitive top, bottom or center, just as a circle is a line with no definitive beginning or end.

The time we inhabit is also circular in form. As we travel through time, we come in contact with the various qualities imbued in it by its Creator: freedom on Passover, awe on Rosh HaShanah, joy on Sukkot, and so on. But each year we return, like a traveler circling the globe, to the same point in the annual cycle at which we stood a year earlier. Theoretically, any point in this cycle can be regarded as its beginning.

This explains a curiosity of the Jewish calendar. We know that the Jewish year begins on the first of Tishrei -- a day we observe as Rosh HaShanah, "The Head of the Year" -- and ends twelve (or thirteen) months later, on the 29th of Elul. But if the head of the year is on the first of Tishrei, why does the Torah (in Leviticus 23:24) refer to Tishrei as the *seventh* month of the year? And why is the month of Nissan, occurring midway through the Tishrei-headed year, designated -- in the very first mitzvah commanded to the Jewish people -- as "the head of months, the first of the months of your year"?

But like a sphere with two poles, the Jewish year has two "heads" or primary points of reference, each of which is equally its beginning. Our annual journey through time is actually two journeys -- a Tishrei-to-Elul journey, and a Nissan-to-Adar journey. Every day on the Jewish calendar can be experienced on two different levels, for it simultaneously exists within these two contexts.

(For example: in the Tishrei-to-Elul year, Yom Kippur is the climax of the Ten Days of Repentance that begin on Rosh HaShanah; on the Nissan-to-Adar calendar, Yom Kippur is the second "Giving of the Torah", culminating a 120-day process that begins on Shavuot. In the Tishrei-to-Elul year, the seventh day of Passover is the cosmic "birth of the souls", following their "conception" on Shemini Atzeret, the eighth day of Sukkot; in the Nissan-to-Adar year, Passover is the first festival, commencing a cycle that culminates in Purim, "the last miracle" and final frontier in our quest for connection with G-d.)

A Miraculous People

As already noted, both these beginnings for the Jewish year are referred to in the Torah as "heads": the first of Tishrei is Rosh HaShanah, "The Head of the Year", while the month of Nissan is designated as "the head of months."

The head is the highest part of the body, both in the literal, spatial sense, as well as in that it is the seat of its loftiest and most sophisticated faculties. More significantly, it serves as the body's nerve and command center, providing the consciousness and direction that guides the body's diverse components toward a unified goal.

And the Jewish year has not one but two heads. For Jewish life embraces two different -- indeed, contrasting -- modes of existence, each with its own nerve-center and headquarters.

The "Head of the Year" that we're all familiar with -- the one on which we sound the shofar and pray for a healthy and prosperous year -- occurs on the first of Tishrei. The first of Tishrei is the anniversary of G-d's creation of the universe, particularly His creation of man. On this day we reaffirm our commitment to G-d as our Creator and King, and ask that He inscribe us in the book of life.

But if the first of Tishrei is the first day of human history, the month of Nissan marks the birth of Jewish time. On the first of Nissan, 2,448 years after the creation of Adam, G-d commanded His first mitzvah to the fledgling nation of Israel -- to establish a calendar based on the monthly lunar cycle. On the fifteenth of that month, the Jewish people exited the land of Egypt and embarked on their seven-week journey to Mount Sinai.

The Jew is a citizen of G-d's world -- a status he shares with all other peoples and all other creations. As such, his head of the year is the first of Tishrei, the birthday of man and the

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Rosh HaShanah of the natural world. But the Jew also inhabits another reality -- a reality born of the supra-natural events of the Exodus, the splitting of the Red Sea, and the divine revelation at Sinai. This dimension of his life has its own "head" -- the miraculous month of Nissan.

For the first twenty-five centuries of human history, the basic, natural relationship between Creator and creation held sway. The Torah records miracles and supernatural events prior to the Exodus, but these are exceptions, temporary departures on the part of G-d from His normal manner of running the world in accordance with the pre-defined formula we call "the laws of nature." The Exodus, on the other hand, produced the Jew, a being whose very existence is a perpetual miracle. The Jew makes redemption a constant, living a life in which the miraculous is the norm.

G-d of the Exodus

This is why when G-d revealed Himself to us at Sinai He proclaimed: "I am the L-rd your G-d, who has taken you out from the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery." Would it not have been more appropriate, ask the commentaries, for G-d to introduce Himself as the creator of the heavens and the earth? Is not the fact that we owe our very existence to G-d more significant than the fact that He took us out of Egypt?

But G-d as the creator of the heavens and the earth, G-d as the author of nature, is the G-d that Israel shares with the rest of creation. At Sinai, however, G-d did not speak to us as the G-d of creation, but as the G-d of the Exodus. At Sinai, a new chapter was opened in divine-human relations as G-d and the people of Israel committed themselves to a *miraculous relationship* -- a relationship that does not recognize the dictates of convention and normalcy.

It is for this reason that our sages question the very inclusion of the first 2,448 years of history in the Torah. In his commentary of the very first verse of the Torah, Rashi cites the question posed by Rabbi Yitzchak:

Why does the Torah begin, "In the beginning [G-d created the heavens and the earth]"? It should have begun, "This month shall be to you [the head of months]," which is the

first mitzvah commanded to Israel.

If the Torah is the document that outlines our mandate as a people unconstricted by the laws of nature and history, of what relevance are the events of the pre-Exodus era? And even if they are of historical and educational value, should the Torah *begin* with these stories?

Cross-References

And yet, the Torah does not begin with that first mitzvah, commanded on the first of Nissan, but with the creation of the world on the first of Tishrei. Our covenant with G-d, though a product of the Exodus and of a Nissan/miraculous character, has its roots in the natural soil of Tishrei.

Indeed, the Exodus itself also has its beginnings in the month of Tishrei: the Talmud notes that the process of our liberation from Egypt began on the first of Tishrei, when the hard labor imposed upon our forefathers by the Egyptians ceased six months before they actually left Egypt.

The reverse is also true: the creation of the natural world on Tishrei has its origins in the month of Nissan. Our sages tell us that while the physical world was created in the six days that culminate in the first of Tishrei, the "thought" or idea of creation was created six months earlier (conceptual months, that is, since physical time is itself part of the physical creation), on the first of Nissan.¹

In other words, the natural and the miraculous time-systems are mutually interconnected, each serving as the basis for the other.

As Jews, we follow both cycles, straddling both worlds. On the one hand, even the most natural aspects of our lives are predicated upon the miraculous, and are permeated with a norm-transcending vision. On the other hand, our most miraculous achievements are grounded in the natural reality.

For our mission in life can be achieved only by inhabiting both worlds -- only by being a part of the natural world and, at the same time, rising above it to transcend its strictures and limitations.

The Paradox

Our mission in life is to transform the very nature of reality; in the words of the Midrash, to build "A dwelling for G-d in the lower realms." This, writes Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi in his Tanya, is what man is all about; this is the

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purpose of his creation and the creation of all the worlds -- that we transform the lower realms (i.e., the natural, material world which, by its nature, conceals the face of its Creator) into an environment receptive to the divine truth, into a place in which the goodness and perfection of G-d is at home and is the dominant reality.

But here comes the paradox, a seemingly closed logical circle: are we ourselves part of this "lower realm" we are to transform, or are we a step above it? If we are part and parcel of the material world, how can we truly change it and uplift it? As the Talmudic axiom goes, "A prisoner cannot release himself from prison" -- if he himself is bound by its parameters, from where might derive his ability to supersede them? On the other hand, if we are, in essence, transcendent beings, existing beyond the confines of the natural reality, then whatever effect we have upon the world cannot truly be considered "a dwelling for G-d in the lower realms." For the world per se has not been transformed -- it has only been overwhelmed by a superior force. The true meaning of "a dwelling in the lower realms" is that the lower realms themselves change, from within.

So to achieve His aim in creation for a dwelling in the lower realms, G-d created the Jew, a hybrid of the Tishrei and Nissan realities. For only in incorporating both these time-cycles in our lives, combining a norm-defying approach with a natural-pragmatic *modus operandi*, can we achieve the redemption of ourselves and our world. Only by drawing from above to change from within can we make our world a home for G-d.

Footnotes:

1. The Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 10b-11a) cites a debate between two sages: "Rabbi Eliezer says: The world was created in Tishrei... Rabbi Joshua says: The world was created in Nissan." The Kabbalists explain that Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua are not debating the date of G-d's actual creation of the universe, which, after all, is a matter of historical fact. Rather, both sages agree that the physical world was created in Tishrei, and that the idea of creation was created in the month of Nissan; where they differ is on the question of priority and emphasis: is the day that the physical universe was completed to be regarded as the primary anniversary of creation, or is the world's true date of birth the day that it was conceived in the divine mind?

The 29th Day

And Jonathan said to [David]: Tomorrow is the new month; you will be remembered, for your seat will be vacant.

I Samuel 20:18

In the first mitzvah commanded us as a nation, G-d decreed that we link our lives to the moon. He instructed us to establish a calendar that is predicated upon the lunar month -- the 29.5-day cycle in which the moon, as perceived by an earthly observer, completes its revolution around the earth.

Thus, the Jewish calendar is a calendar of months, measured by the duration from one new moon to the next. Twelve such months add up to a year of approximately 354 days, eleven days short of the 365.25-day solar cycle. The Jewish year therefore alternates between 12 and 13 months, the extra month (added seven times in a 19-year cycle) serving to align the lunar months with the solar cycle of seasons. (In contrast, the months of solar-based calendars are wholly artificial, being merely the division of the solar year into twelve more-or-less equal segments. These months bear no relation to the lunar cycle or to any other natural phenomenon.)

The new moon is the night on which the moon is first visible after its monthly disappearance from our nighttime sky. The alignment and movement of the moon in relation to the earth and sun means that, to the earthly observer, the moon passes through phases in which it grows and diminishes and, at one point in its cycle, disappears altogether. When the moon is closest to the sun, positioned between the sun and earth, its lighted side -- the side illuminated by the sun's light -- faces away from the earth, so that it is invisible to us. As it moves away from the sun to orbit the earth, it appears first as a thin crescent of light and continues to grow and fill for the next fifteen days. Midway through its orbit, when it is furthest from the sun and the earth is between the sun and the moon, the lighted half of the moon is entirely visible on earth, so that it appears as a complete sphere in the heavens and bathes our night with the full luminescence of its pacific glow. Then, as the moon continues its orbit of the earth, moving closer to the sun, less and less of it is visible to us; the sphere shrinks by nightly increments to a half-sphere and then to progressively leaner slivers of light, until, at the point of its greatest proximity to the sun, it once more disappears from our view.

The night on which the moon is first visible after its hiatus

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is the first of the Jewish month (hence the Hebrew word for month, *chodesh*, from the root *chadash*, new). The month consists of 29 or 30 days, until the next new moon marks the onset of a new month. The first half of the Jewish month is thus marked by a nightly growing moon, which reaches its full luminescent potential on the night of the 15th; but on the 16th of the month the moon is already diminished, and continues to shrink nightly until a new moon and month are born.

[At the time that the *Sanhedrin* (Supreme Court of Torah law) existed, the onset of a new month was proclaimed each month based on the actual sighting of the new moon -- a practice which will be resumed with the coming of Moshiach and the re-establishment of a central Torah authority for all of Israel. Today, our pre-set calendar is not as exact, with the first of the month falling within a day or two of the new moon's "birth".]

The people of Israel, says the Zohar, mark time with the moon because they emulate the moon. Like the moon, the Jewish people dip and soar through history, our regressions and defeats but preludes to yet another rebirth, yet another renewal. The story of the moon is the story of a nation, and the story of every productive life: lack fuels initiative, setbacks stimulate growth, and one's highest achievements are born out of moments of diminution and depreciation.

Going Moon

In its account of the creation of the universe, the Torah speaks of "the two great luminaries" created by G-d to shed light upon the earth and set "the signs, times, days and years" of life on earth. In the very same verse, however, the two great luminaries become "the great luminary to rule the day and the small luminary to rule the night." The Talmud explains: initially, the sun and moon were indeed two great luminaries, equal in size and luminescence. But the moon objected that "two kings cannot share the same crown." So G-d commanded it: "Go, diminish yourself."

Thus was born the month. For not only was the moon reduced to a pale reflector of another's light, it was further diminished in that its illumination of the earth would be curtailed by the constant changes in its juxtaposition with the source and the recipient of its light. For two weeks of each month, the moon faithfully fulfills the divine decree "Go, diminish yourself," steadily reducing itself to the point in

which it is completely enveloped in darkness.

These repeated diminutions are what yield the unique qualities of lunar time. Living with the moon, we learn how darkness can give birth to light and how absence can generate renewed presence. We learn to exploit the momentum of our descents to scale new and unprecedented heights -- heights which could never be anticipated by an unvarying "solar" path through life.

On a deeper level, the injunction "Go, diminish yourself" relates to the very essence of our humanity. Man is unique among G-d's creations in that he alone is a *mehalech*, a "goer" or journeyer through life. All other creations, including the loftiest of spiritual beings (and this includes the soul of man prior to its investiture in a physical body) are *omdim*, stationary "standers." A "stander" is not necessarily immobile; indeed, all things possess, to some degree or other, the potential for development and advancement. But all creations move in a "solar" orbit -- an orbit defined by pre-ordained limits which it cannot transcend. Only the human being is lunar, with a trajectory through life that includes both growth and decline, obliteration and rebirth.

For man alone possesses the power of free choice -- a power as potent as it is lethal, as infinite as it is constricting. With free choice comes the capacity for utter self-destruction, and the capacity for utter self-transformation. Man has the power to negate everything he is and stands for, and in the next moment, to re-create himself in a new mold and embark on a path that his prior existence could never have anticipated.

"Go, diminish yourself," is the Creator's perpetual injunction to His lunar creation. For it is only by diminishing itself that the human soul can "go." Only by making itself vulnerable to the mortality and pitfalls of the physical state can the soul of man become a "goer," a being with the power to make of itself more than it is.

David's Absence

This is the message implicit in the *haftorah* (reading from the prophets) read in the synagogue when Shabbat falls on the day before *Rosh Chodesh*, as the first of the month is called. The opening verse of this haftorah reads: "And Jonathan said to [David]: Tomorrow is the new month. You will be remembered, for your seat will be vacant." David has reason to suspect that King Saul wishes him harm, so he plans to avoid the royal palace. Jonathan tells him that his very absence will attract Saul's notice, inducing the king to reveal his intentions toward him.

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At first glance, the connection between the *haftorah* and the new month seems merely incidental -- the reading begins by relating a conversation that took place on the day before *Rosh Chodesh*, so we read it on the day before *Rosh Chodesh*. But upon closer examination, Jonathan's words to David express the deeper significance of the lunar month, and particularly of the day before *Rosh Chodesh* -- the day of the moon's disappearance. Jonathan tells David that you will be remembered because your seat will be vacant. The key word in the Hebrew original of this sentence is *pakod*, which is the root of both *v'nifkadta*, "you will be remembered," and *yipaked*, "will be vacant." Indeed, the two are intertwined: we are remembered when we are missed. Like the vacuum which draws liquid into a syringe, it is the voids and absences of life that compel its greatest achievements and fulfillments.

This is the essence of lunar time, to which the Jew sets the rhythm of his individual and communal life: oblivion as the harbinger of renewal; darkness as the impetus for reborn light.

The Sixteenth Increment

Thus the fifteenth of the Jewish month, the day on which the moon achieves the pinnacle of its luminary potential, marks the high point of that month's particular contribution to Jewish life.

Nissan is the "month of redemption," and it is on the first day of Nissan that the process of our liberation from Egypt began; but the results of this process were fully manifest only on the 15th of Nissan, the day of the Exodus, which we celebrate each year as the festival of Passover and on which re-experience the divine gift of freedom through the observances and customs of the seder. By the same token, the first of Tishrei is the day on which we crown G-d as king of the universe, rededicating the entirety of creation to the purpose for which it was created and evoking in G-d the desire to continue to create and sustain it; but the celebration of the divine coronation is eclipsed by days of solemnity and awe which occupy the first part of Tishrei, coming to fruition only on the joyous festival of Sukkot which commences on the fifteenth of the month.

The same is true of each of the twelve months of the Jewish year. Each has its own unique import and quality, and each

undergoes a cycle of diminution and growth, concealment and expression, which reaches its climax on the fifteenth of the month. Thus we have the "New Year for Trees" on the 15th of Shevat; Purim on the 14th and 15th of Adar; and the 15th of Av, which the Talmud calls "the greatest festival" on the Jewish calendar.

Yet the sixteenth is greater than the fifteenth.

In Torah, everything is precise and meaningful. So if the fifteenth were truly the apex of the month, it would also be represented by its highest numeric figure. Yet following the fifteenth, we have a day which the Torah regards as the sixteenth -- a number greater than fifteen. And the numbers continue to climb: seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, and so forth, up to the 29th or the 30th. According to this, the loftiest day of the month is the day on which the light of the moon is completely concealed!

But as we have already noted, the point at which the moon disappears from our earthly view is also the point at which it achieves its greatest proximity to the sun. In other words, there are two perspectives from which the lunar cycle may be viewed: from the perspective of the moon's illumination of the earth, or from the perspective of the moon's relationship with the source of its light, the sun. Viewed from the first perspective, the moon undergoes changes and diminutions, achieving its full luminary potential only after an arduous climb of fifteen days, and then waning to nothingness in the course of the latter half of the month. Viewed from the second perspective, the moon, of course, is never diminished: it remains the same size throughout its orbit, and the light of the sun bathes its surface at all times (except in the case of a lunar eclipse, when the earth comes directly between the sun and moon and blocks the light of the sun from reaching the moon). Indeed, the very point at which the moon is completely dark (and thus non-existent) to the earthly observer is the apex of the moon's relationship with the sun -- the point at which the sun's illumination of the moon is at its brightest and most intense.

Viewed from the perspective of manifest light, the setbacks of life are points of diminished luminescence and vitality. But when one looks at the deeper significance of these descents, one recognizes them as points of intensified vitality, points at which we draw closer to our Source to receive the fortitude and impetus to surmount the next challenge and summit of visible life.

Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, adapted by Yanki Tauber.