

A month we can **COUNT ON**

Why Hashem chose to redeem us in Nisan

BY ROBERT SUSSMAN



THE HEBREW MONTH OF NISAN IS, WITHOUT A doubt, a very special month. After all, it's the month that Hashem chose to take us out from Egypt and openly reveal to the world, for the first time in history, that He

was its Creator and demonstrate His total and utter control over every aspect of Creation via the many miracles that He did for us. In fact, Moshe's father-in-law, Yisro, who was known for having studied all of

the religions of the world, would later come to convert to Judaism as a result of seeing Hashem's overt display of His hand in our wondrous exodus from Egypt. Was he merely impressed by Hashem's show of force, or was he, perhaps, just a little afraid to stand apart from the Jewish people? Yisro actually explained to Moshe his motivation for converting when they met up following the exodus, "Now I know that Hashem is greater than all the gods, because [the Egyptians were repaid] in the very thing that they conspired against [the Jewish people]." As Rashi explains, Yisro had been aware of Hashem in the past, but now, following these events, he was forced to take another, closer look. As a former adviser to Pharaoh, Yisro was well aware that the Egyptians had tried to destroy the Jews via water, by casting Jewish male offspring into the Nile. So when Yisro heard that the Egyptians had been destroyed by Hashem through water – that by the very means with which they had intended to destroy the Jews, they themselves had been destroyed – it was apparent to him that only G-d could do such a thing because Hashem's justice is not arbitrary, it's precise to a hairsbreadth.

WHY NISAN?

But, to say that Nisan is special because Hashem redeemed us in that month only begs the question, as Hashem could have miraculously taken us out from Egypt in any month, and whatever month He chose to redeem us in would, likewise, have become just as special. So, why did Hashem choose to take us out in Nisan rather than one of the other eleven months of the year? And we can strengthen the question, as Hashem didn't just take us out in Nisan, but He tapped Nisan to be the first month in our calendar, leaving us with a rather unusual situation where we count the passing of our years from the Hebrew month of Tishrei, but the passing of our months from Nisan.

Although it may be hard to believe, the choice to redeem the Jewish people in Nisan had everything to do with what that particular month meant to the Egyptians and its connection to their idolatrous reli-

“WHAT WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS 180 DEGREE CHANGE IN PHARAOH’S ATTITUDE? PHARAOH SAW THAT NISAN WAS DRAWING CLOSE, AND HE PLACED HIS FAITH AND TRUST IN THE RAM, THE ZODIAC SIGN ASSOCIATED WITH THAT MONTH.”

gious beliefs! And this shouldn’t come as much of a surprise, as part of the aim of the exodus was to demonstrate the pointlessness of the Egyptians’ idol worship. For example, the Egyptians famously worshipped the Nile¹, so Hashem used the very first plague, dam (blood), to attack it and show how helpless their god was. The Egyptians also connected many of the gods that they worshipped with animals. In fact, one of the justifications that Moshe gave to Pharaoh for why we couldn’t remain in Egypt to worship Hashem, but instead needed to make a three-day journey away from there, was because Moshe knew it would be very upsetting to the Egyptians to witness the Jews sacrificing animals that the Egyptians associated with their gods.² So what does the Egyptians’ idol worship have to do specifically with Nisan? Many of the Egyptians’ god-heads were depicted with the head of a ram, including the Egyptian god of the Nile. From the beginning of the world, the

stars, planets, and constellations served as the basis for many idolatrous religions, so much so, in fact, that our Sages even refer to idolaters by an abbreviation that stands for “worshippers of stars and constellations”. Each constellation corresponds to a different month, and the constellation, which stands at the head of the circle of twelve constellations (known as the zodiac) and which corresponds to Nisan, was none other than the ram (aka the male lamb, the female called a ewe), nowadays called by the name Aries.

AS THE ZODIAC TURNS

If we take a look at the how the Ten Plagues played out, we’ll notice something interesting. Following the utter devastation to the food supply wrought by the seventh plague, barad (hail), Pharaoh appears utterly broken and ready to throw in the towel, openly saying to Moshe and Aharon: “This

time I have sinned; Hashem is the righteous one and I and my people are the wicked ones...I shall send you out.”³ In spite of this, however, following the eighth plague, arbeh (locusts), Pharaoh starts changing his tune completely. The Torah tells us that, “[Pharaoh] drove them [ie Moshe and Aharon] out.”⁴ And then, with the ninth plague, choshech (darkness), Pharaoh becomes completely and unabashedly chutzpahdik, saying to Moshe, “You will not see my face anymore!”⁵ What was responsible for this 180 degree change in Pharaoh’s attitude? Pharaoh saw that Nisan was drawing close, and he placed his faith and trust in the ram, the zodiac sign associated with that month. Pharaoh thought that if he could just stall until the month of Nisan, especially if he could make it until the middle of the lunar month, he would be able to defeat Hashem. Make no mistake, Pharaoh believed in god – he just



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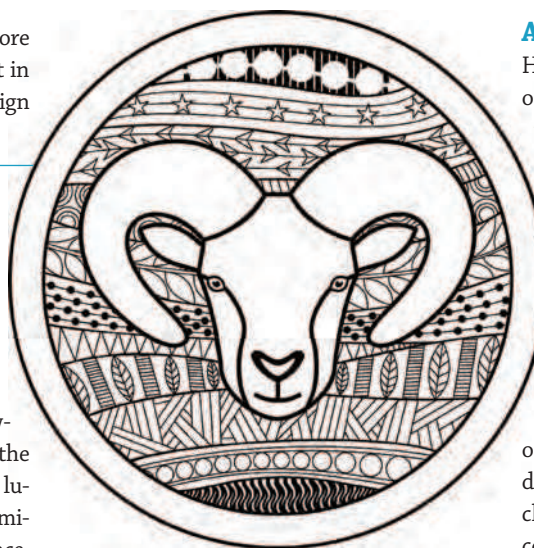
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believed in the wrong god (or to be more precise, gods), foolishly placing his trust in the strength of the god whose zodiac sign was associated with the month Nisan.

A SHABBOS BECOMES THE GREAT SHABBOS

But Hashem had other plans in mind. Immediately after Moshe angrily left Pharaoh following Pharaoh's final outrageous outburst, Hashem informed Moshe about the very first mitzvah that would be given to the Jewish nation: Rosh Chodesh (lit: head of the month) – sanctifying the start of each lunar month, which is vital to the determination of when our Chagim will take place. Hashem comforted Moshe, "This month [ie Nisan] will be the first of the months for you [ie not for Pharaoh]."⁶ In other words, Pharaoh, who thinks this month is going to be a game-changer, is in for a big surprise, as things are going to change dramatically – only it's going to be for the worse for him and his people! And then, as if to emphasise the point, Hashem told Moshe to inform the Jewish people: "On the tenth day of this month, each man [shall take] a lamb for his family...a male lamb [aka a ram]...you shall safeguard it until the 14th day of this month and [then] slaughter it...and eat it."⁷ This was the famous Paschal Lamb (aka the Korban Pesach), symbolised on our seder plates nowadays by the shankbone (aka zeroa).

Our Sages explain in greater detail the events that transpired. The very first Pesach, which was celebrated while we were still in Egypt, took place on a Thursday. Although the celebration of Pesach begins with nightfall on the 15th of Nisan, we're commanded to slaughter the Korban Pesach just a few hours earlier, on the afternoon of the 14th of Nisan. If we do the maths, this means the day that Hashem wanted us to take the lambs (ie the 10th of Nisan) was Shabbos. The midrash⁸ tells us that, at Moshe's request, Pharaoh agreed to give the Jews one day off each week so they could rest from their backbreaking labour, thus enabling the Jews to keep Shabbos in Egypt even while they were enslaved. Accordingly, our Sages explain⁹ that



the Egyptians were well aware that the Jews kept Shabbos. So, the Egyptians stood there on that fateful Shabbos watching the Jews, aghast and bewildered at what was transpiring before their very eyes, as each Jewish family took a lamb into their home and then proceeded to tie it to a bedpost. The Egyptians were bothered by two things: firstly, we were taking an animal that they connected with one of their gods and even worshipped, and, secondly, they thought we were violating Shabbos by tying the lambs to our bedposts (the Egyptians didn't realise that there's a distinction in halacha between tying a permanent knot and tying a knot that isn't permanent). So, seeing this all transpire, the Egyptians couldn't help but ask the Jews, "What's going on here?" To which the Jews responded quite matter-of-factly, "Hashem commanded us to take these lambs, tie them to our bedposts, and slaughter them." And an open miracle occurred, as the Egyptians were left literally speechless, having been prevented by Hashem from doing anything to harm us in response to our actions, let alone even so much as express their great displeasure to us verbally. This miracle came about because of Shabbos – because the Egyptians knew that we kept Shabbos and this caused them to take notice of our very strange actions on that day. This is one of the reasons that the Shabbos before Pesach came to be called Shabbos HaGadol, aka "The Great Shabbos".

AN ODDITY EXPLAINED

Have you ever noticed that Pesach is the only holiday for which the Torah commands us to slaughter the offering associated with that holiday on the day before the holiday actually starts! A lunar month is 29.5 days. The height of a lunar month is actually the middle, as the moon starts out entirely dark, waxes during the first half of the month to its fully-illuminated glory in the middle of the month and then wanes the other half of the month until it goes completely dark again. Hashem wanted to make clear once and for all that the stars and constellations, which had been worshipped since almost the beginning of Creation, were not powerful gods to be worshipped. So, to emphasise this point, he commanded us to slaughter the Korban Pesach on the afternoon of the 14th of the month – in the middle of the lunar month, at the time that the stars and constellations were considered to be at the height of their power.¹⁰ The whole point was to demonstrate that the Egyptian gods – and all other gods – were really nothing at all. This is why Nisan was chosen as the month in which Hashem would formally announce to the world that "only He is G-d, in heaven above and on earth below"¹¹, that He was the Creator of our world and remains constantly involved in all aspects of its control, and that we are His treasured people who He watches over. **IL**

Adapted from Rabbi Yechiel Michel Epstein, ztz"l, the Aruch HaShulchan¹²

¹See Rashi on Shemos 7:17

²See Shemos 8:22 and Rashi on that verse

³Shemos 9:27-28

⁴Id. 10:11

⁵Id. 10:28

⁶Id. 12:2

⁷Id. 12:3-8

⁸Shemos Rabbah 1:28

⁹Prisha on Tur O.C. 430

¹⁰Haggadah Leil Shimurim on Yachol meirosh chodesh

¹¹Devarim 4:39

¹²Shulchan Aruch O.C. 429:1 and 430:1, 3