

### The Teaching from the Sefas Emes, Yehudah Aryeh Leib of Ger

How could *Nisan* also be Rosh Hashanah? We have an argument in *Rosh Hashanah* 10b-11a as to whether the world was created in *Nisan* or *Tishri*.

Rabbi Eliezer says that in *Tishri* the world was created. . . . On Rosh Hashanah the slavery of our ancestors in Egypt ceased [six months before the redemption]; in *Nisan* they were redeemed and in *Nisan* they will be redeemed in the time to come. Rabbi Joshua says that in *Nisan* the world was created. They're both right. The head of the year in *Nisan* is for the kings of Israel, which is to say that the children of Israel are called the children of kings, for they are free people, free at last from serving the Other side (*Sitra Achra*), no longer under the control of the laws of nature.

Now *Tishri* is the New Year with regard to stem judgment and the fear of heaven. And *Nisan* is the New Year with regard to compassion and the love of heaven, and this is the reason that our text says that "this month shall be [only] for you."

According to *Midrash Rabbah, Parashat Bo*, 15:25, we understand "this month shall be for you" in the light of Psalm 147:19, "He issued His commands to Jacob, His statutes and judgments to Israel." "His commands to Jacob . . ." refers to the Torah; "His statutes —

### Perush: Explaining the Teaching

Reading this passage from Exodus, the Sefas Emes wonders how *Nisan* (the month during which Pesach is observed) can also be Rosh Hashanah (which is observed during *Tishri*). He cites a passage from the Talmud that partially explains the verse. The world was created during *Tishri*; thus, Rosh Hashanah is observed at that time. On Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of the Hebrew calendar year, the Israelites were redeemed from slavery in Egypt. The head of the year in *Nisan* is for the Israelites who are called Kings of Israel — now a free people. But the head of the year in *Tishri* is when the Israelites stand before God as they are being judged. Our teacher supports this assertion with statements from the *Midrash*, Psalms, and the *Zohar*, closing the circle regarding judgments and a dispensation from it on Pesach. □

**Background** The Lizensker *rebbe* argued that there are those who are distant from God the entire year but on the first day of *Eilat* begin to devote a portion of their time to God. They are like cattle. They have no sense to remember God until the Day of Judgment approaches. □

### Scriptural Context

Part of the narrative highlighting the Exodus from Egypt, this portion focuses on the last stage of the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh. In the midst of the retelling of the last plague, Passover is described in anticipation of deliverance. Our text is taken from this section of the portion. □

### Targum: English Translation Exodus 12:1-2

- 1) Adonai said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt 2) "This month shall be for you the head of the months; it shall be the first for you of the months of the year." □

New Year for the tithe of animals; Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Simon say, the first of *Tishri* is the New Year for the years, for Sabbatical years, for Jubilee years, for planting and for vegetables; and on the first of *Shevat* is the New Year for trees, according to the view of the School of Shammai, but the School of Hillel, says on the fifteenth of *Shevat*" (*Mishnah Rosh Hashanah* 1:1). □

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### The Teaching (continued)

and judgments . . ." refers to the sanctifications of the months that involve statutes and judgments.

After God chose Israel, God set the new month of redemption. For also in *Tishri* is a time for judgment, but this is a special, intimate judgment just for God. □

## (45) Bo: Light at the End of the Tunnel

### The Teaching from Menachem Mendl of Kotzk

In Genesis 1:4 we read that "God saw the Light that it was good and made a separation."

Rashi, citing *Chagigah* 12a, interprets this to mean that the wicked were unworthy to use [the Light]; God therefore set it apart, reserving it for the righteous in the world to come.

Indeed, during the plague of darkness, since the wicked were unable to use the light in any way at all, it must obviously have been possible for Israel to make use of the primordial, hidden light.

And this is what our sages taught: that Israel was able to see all the hidden treasure of Egypt. For in this primordial, hidden light, nothing was concealed from them. And just this was the light enjoyed by Israel in their dwellings. □

### Perush: Explaining the Teaching

What was this plague of darkness? Menachem Mendl teaches us that during the plague of darkness, the Israelites were able to use the primordial light that had been hidden since creation. If it had been reserved for the world to use, why would the Israelites, albeit righteous, be able to use it now? Redemption had come; they were now able to see things that had been there all along, now able to leave the slavery of Egypt. □

**Background** Dov Baer of Mezerich taught that in order to offer proper prayer, we must feel

### Scriptural Context

This portion begins with the last four plagues and the final blow: the death of the firstborn. These introduce the Passover theme of liberation, and here we see a demonstration of God's power in greater detail. □

### Targum: English Translation Exodus 10:21-23

21) Then Adonai said to Moses, "Hold out your arm toward the sky so that darkness may fall on the land of Egypt, a darkness that can be touched." 22) Moses held out his arm toward the sky and thick darkness descended on the land of Egypt for three days. 23) People could not see one another, and for three days no one could get up from where he was, but all the Israelites enjoyed light in their dwellings. □

### From the Tradition

Since the first thing God made was light, but the sun, moon, stars, and heavenly luminaries were not created until the fourth day, we conclude that there were two different kinds of light. The ordinary light that we see by was created on day four, but the light of

day one was the light of ultimate awareness. It was light so powerful that, in it, a person could see from one end of space to the other, from the beginning to the end of time. *Havdalah*, the ceremony that marks the transition from sacred to normal everyday, *Shabbat* to the other six days, holy day, *Shabbat* to workdays, brings this light into the dwellings of Israel. With it we are able to carry the light of *Shabbat* with us throughout the week. □

ourselves encompassed by the light of the spirit. □

These were not his actual words. The editor of *Rishpei Esh* (R. Mordechai's grandson Eliezer Immanuel Horowitz) is informing us that this is a phrase, not a direct quotation.

#### COMMENT

According to the rebbe of Neschiz, Moses is not prepared to sacrifice in Egypt, out of respect for Egyptian beliefs. The ancient Egyptian god Khnum had the head of a ram. The sacrifice of sheep by the Israelites would have been seen as an affront. Like the Israelites of old, we too live among people of many religious faiths, all different from our own, or none at all. Even if we do not fear attack by those whom we might upset, we should be careful not to offend others, especially with regard to their religious beliefs, which are often dearly held, even if not always acted upon. Religious beliefs, by their nature, deal with that which is ultimately unknowable. Therefore, no one faith, no one group, can possess the whole Truth; each has at best only a portion. It is our duty to respect the faiths of others, for they too may have a portion of Truth.

## Bo'

### [43] Darkness between Us

*"There was a thick darkness throughout all the land of Egypt for three days. No one could see their fellows, nor did anyone get up from their place for three days."*

*Exodus 10:22-23*

#### CONTEXT

The plague of darkness, the ninth, strikes Egypt.

Yitzhak of Vorki was one of Menachem Mendel of Kotzk's disciples. He established his own dynasty, and his son, also called Menachem Mendel, succeeded him.

There is no darkness or gloom greater in the world than this: that people do not see, and do not want to see, their fellows, but each one worries only about themselves.

When no one sees their fellow, and worries only about themselves, then "no one gets up from their place," for there is no hope for revival or progress.

Yitzhak of Vorki (1779-1848) and Menachem Mendel of Vorki (d. 1868),

*Beit Yitzhak* [The house of Isaac] (Jerusalem, 1992), p. 44

#### NOTES

There is no darkness. In *Beit Yitzhak*, this paragraph is credited to R.

Yitzhak of Vorki.

When no one sees their fellow. This teaching is by Menachem Mendel of Vorki.

#### COMMENT

The Torah speaks of a tangible darkness across Egypt, apart from the region of Goshen where the Israelites lived. The rabbis of Vorki, father and

son, speak of a spiritual darkness, where selfishness rules and no one is concerned for others. In such a situation, what hope is there? Too often, modern global society looks spiritually dark. Where are the people who still care? Without them, we are doomed. With them, there is always hope.

#### [44] How to Eat

*“Speak to the whole congregation of Israel, and say that on the tenth of this month, they shall each take a lamb for each clan, a lamb for each household.”*

*Exodus 12:3*

#### CONTEXT

In the course of describing the commandment of the Passover lamb, instructions are given on how to cook it and eat it. It had to be roasted and eaten with matzah and bitter herbs by people who were all dressed and ready to depart from Egypt.

Moshe Cordovero was one of the great kabbalists who gathered in Safed in the late sixteenth century. He is the author of many classic texts of Kabbalah; the following is taken from his commentary on the prayer book.

Our rabbis have said: If two people are eating the Passover lamb, and one eats it for the sake of [fulfilling the commandment of eating] the Passover lamb, and the other eats it for the sake of the physical act of eating, of the first it is said: “the righteous eats for the satisfaction of the soul” [Proverbs 13:25], while of the second it is said: “but the belly of the wicked shall be lacking” [Proverbs 13:25]. In this way, they teach us that although eating the Passover lamb is a physical act, everything follows from the intention. If a person, by good intentions, draws spirituality from a holy source, as for example when one eats for the sake of [fulfilling the commandment of] the Passover lamb, [and] since it has been commanded by the Creator, then that act, by virtue of this drawing down from on high, brings perfection to the soul.

Moshe Cordovero (1522–70), *Tzifliah LeMoshe* [A prayer of Moses (Psalm 90:1)], (Jerusalem, 2004), Gate 1, §4, p. 4a

#### NOTE

**Our rabbis have said.** What follows, up to “of the first it is said,” is a paraphrase of the Talmud, *Horayot* 10b. A different proof-text (Hosea 14:10) is offered there.

#### COMMENT

Cordovero’s point is based on the basic kabbalistic understanding of the relationship between the spiritual and physical realms. These are not two distinct realms of existence; they are intimately interconnected, with the spiritual as the “root” and the physical as the “branch.” Therefore, each and every act we do, and most especially so-called religious acts (i.e., rituals) should involve both our physical and spiritual selves. And in the case of Jewish rituals, where a blessing normally precedes the ritual action, the act of saying the blessing mediates between the two realms: the spiritual, exemplified through our *kavanah*, our mental concentration on the ritual; and the physical, the actual act we are engaged in.

Turning to the ancient ritual of eating the paschal or Passover lamb, he argues, based on a talmudic precedent, that one’s mental intention is an essential part of fulfilling the ritual. Indeed, it is a *sine qua non*. Without it, the ritual is worse than meaningless. With it, we may rise to spiritual heights and bring untold benefit to ourselves, and perhaps to the world.

#### [45] The Firstborn Thought

*“Dedicate to Me all the firstborn . . . .”*

*Exodus 13:2*

#### CONTEXT

The fact that the firstborn males of the Israelites and of their animals were spared, when those of the Egyptians died in the tenth plague, means that all firstborn in perpetuity are to be dedicated to God: the firstborn of kosher cattle were to be given for sacrifice, firstborn donkeys were to be killed and thus removed from normal use, while the firstborn of the Israelites were to be redeemed.

Yisra’el of Ruzhyn, the great-grandson of the Maggid of Mezritch, inaugurated a dynasty of his own that continues to the present.