

## Nissan and Tishrei

### A Holistic View of the Jewish Year

#### I

We tend to think of the holidays as discrete events scattered randomly throughout the year, but they are actually all part of one organic, organized whole. Let's examine a framework which reveals the absolute unity of all of the Biblical holidays (and sheds light on some of the others, as well).

The fundamental structure of the festivals is as twin chains of holidays; the Nissan and Tishrei series closely paralleling each other. These two groups are located at parallel points in the cycle of time, each being initiated by the respective beginnings of the year: The first of Tishrei and the first of Nissan. These poles of the year each signify a beginning of time; Tishrei's *hayom harat olam* (today is the birthday of the world) echoing Nissan's *hachodesh hazeh lachem rosh chodashim* (this month is the beginning of months).

The next crucial point in each progression is 10 Nissan/Tishrei. This day in the process of the Exodus represents the self-perfection and cleansing from imperfection, as we learn in the *Mechilta* [*Parshat Bo mas. D'Pischa* (§11)]:

רבי יוסי הגלילי אומר משכו ידיכם מע"ז והדבקו במצוה.

R. Yossi Hagelili said: [This means] separate yourselves from idolatry and  
cleave to *mitzvot*.

The tenth of Nissan was set aside for this purification. Needless to say, the

10th of Tishrei is the twin of the corresponding day in Nissan. Yom Kippur is the day on which we purify ourselves from sins and commit to doing mitzvot.

The fifteenth day of each of these months is also essentially the same. They each mark the beginning of a major seven-day festival that commemorates the Exodus. This parallelism is noted by the *Zohar* (III: 102b) which compares the basis for the 10th and 15th of Nissan and Tishrei. The *Talmud* contains numerous applications of a *gezeirah shavah* of *chamishah assar* that connects them. This explains the apparent difficulty which puzzles many commentators: Why do we commemorate the Exodus in Tishrei?

Obviously, there are local distinctions as to how the parallel holidays express the underlying concept that they share. We eat *matzah* on Pesach and sit in the *sukkah* on Sukkot; the seventh day of Sukkot is not a holiday as Pesach's is, but both celebrate the Exodus for seven days and the first night of each has a special status.

Needless to say, this parallelism did not escape *Chaza'l's* attention. One source which reflects the fact that they clearly operated with the assumption that the two holiday cycles are fundamentally parallel is the *Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar* (§782)<sup>1</sup>:

עצרת של פסח רחוקה חמשים יום אף זאת היתה צריך להיות רחוקה  
חמשים יום, ולמה היא סמוכה לחג...

The atzeret of Pesach is distanced 50 days, and this one also ought to be distanced 50 days. Why is it immediately after Sukkot?

Each of these holidays is followed by an *atzeret*, as noted by the Ramban on *Vayikra* (chapter 23).<sup>2</sup> It is true that one follows immediately, while the other has a period of preparation. Nonetheless, at their root they are fundamentally

1. As well as *Tanchuma Pinhas* (§15). It is also alluded to in the debates between R. Yehoshua and R. Eliezer concerning what occurred in Nissan and what in Tishrei (*Rosh Hashana* 8a, 10b).

2. , See further our discussion below of the *Aveilut* of *Sefira*.

the same type of satellite holiday. Once again, there are local differences, but underlying the disparate details lies a fundamental similarity.

This framework gives context to literally all of the Biblical holidays of the entire year. They are not separate points on the calendar. They are actually segments in two parallel chains or processes.

This framework was well known and understood in ancient times, as we can see from Yeravam ben Nevat's abuse of the concept. In *Melachim* I (12:33) we find:

ויעל על המזבח אשר עשה בבית אל בחמשה עשר יום בחדש השמיני בחדש  
אשר בדא מלבו ויעש חג לבני ישראל ויעל על המזבח להקטיר.

And he went up onto the altar which he made in Bet El, on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, in the month which he fabricated, and he established a holiday for *Bnei Yisrael*; and he went up onto the altar to sacrifice.

It is very striking that only the month—not the holiday or the day—was *fabricated*. The reason for this is simple. Yeravam was interpolating from the concept of Pesach Sheni, based on the framework that we've noted here. If the paschal sacrifice could have a “make- up” one month later for those that were distant [as those in his kingdom were], why not Sukkot?

There is an incredible nuance in the *parshah* of the festivals that reflects this understanding. The *Torah* makes a seemingly superfluous statement (which has no parallel in the description of the other four holidays dealt with in the same chapter) concerning Sukkot [*Vayikra* (23:41)]:

בחדש השביעי תחגו אתו

In the seventh month you shall celebrate it.

Why does this need to be stated, given the fact that the *Torah* already made clear that the date of Sukkot is the fifteenth of the seventh month?

In light of what we've seen, the reason for this is clear. We need to be told not to make the mistake of following Yeravam's approach. Despite the parallelism between the structures of the two cycles, we are warned that whereas there is a replacement for Pesach, Sukkot may only be observed in the seventh month.

There is an interesting extension of this concept. The date that we choose for Simchat *Torah* is specifically Shemini Atzeret. We could have anchored the cycle of *Torah* reading in any day of the year. Based on our analysis, we can understand why we chose this day. It is the perfect day for celebrating the completion of our learning of the *Torah*. It complements the parallel day in the Nissan side of the year, namely *Atzeret/Shavuot*. That is, of course, when we commemorate the fact that Hashem gave us the *Torah*. On the parallel day we celebrate our taking that *Torah* and learning it!<sup>3</sup>

## II

Another point that needs to be considered in this context: There is a fascinating perspective on the Exodus, suggested by the language and imagery that is used. The *Torah* repeatedly refers to the Exodus as an expulsion (*gerush*), which is somewhat jarring.

The connotation of an expulsion would seem to be at odds with that of the Exodus. The terminology that the *Torah* uses is therefore very striking. [There are, of course classical answers to this question; nonetheless the phenomenon gives us pause and spurs reflection].

It is noteworthy that we originally<sup>4</sup> find the idea of *gerush* by Hashem in the

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3. There are many other extensions of this framework, some of which are mentioned elsewhere in this *sefer*.

4. Note that there is an important principle that the first time that a word or phrase is used in Tanach sets the tone for its subsequent usage. This methodology is variously ascribed, but it

Expulsion from Gan Eden (3: 24). In both the description of the Expulsion in *Bereshit* and in that of the Exodus in *Shemot* this word is used in conjunction with sending out (*shalach*). This detail takes on greater significance as we note that in fact much of the imagery of the Garden of Eden story is used as the backdrop for the Exodus<sup>5</sup>.

In fact, Egypt itself is depicted as another Garden of Eden (which, given the meaning of Egypt for the Jewish People, is quite striking): In *Bereshit* (13:10), the *Torah* describes the plain of the Jordan as being *like the garden of Hashem, like the land of Egypt*<sup>6</sup>.

This comparison of Egypt to the Garden of Eden lends context to the *gerush* from Egypt, suggesting that it is patterned after the exile from the Garden of Eden for some reason.

[It is also noteworthy that the primary emphasis on this *gerush* is concentrated in the phase of the plagues that parallels the story of the Garden of Eden; that is to say *b'acha*"v.<sup>7</sup>]

This relationship between the Exodus and the story of the Garden of Eden can best be understood within the framework of the Nissan-Tishrei relationship that we've developed here. The Tishrei cycle opens with the anniversary of the sin of the *eitz hada'at*. The parallel cycle revolves around the Exodus!

The issue of sin and punishment is a dominant Tishrei theme, having its roots in *the eitz hada'at* narrative. The primary theme of Nissan is precisely parallel, but in an opposite context: the idea of redemption. Its roots reside in the Exodus. Both are responses to man (Adam and *Pharaoh* respectively)<sup>8</sup> viewing himself as God, albeit in opposite modes. The Nissan response is one of *rachamim*,

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actually is one of the 32 *middot* of *Aggada* of R. Eliezer, the son of R. Yossi Haglili in the *Beriata* cited in the beginning of the *Midrash Mishnat R. Eliezer*.

5. As we developed at length in *Amittah Shel Torah* (*Sefer Shemot*).

6. *Chazal* comment on this comparison in *Shemot Rabbah* (*Parshah* 18).

7. See the chapter on the ten plagues in *Amittah Shel Torah on Torah* (*Vaera*).

8. See the discussion in *Amittah Shel Torah on Torah* of Adam's sin (*Bereshit*) and of the ten plagues (*Vaera*).

the Tishrei reaction is one of *din*. Yet at their root they are the same; they are a correction of man's attempt to usurp God's place. It is no coincidence that the expulsion from the Garden of Eden and the Exodus are described so similarly!

In light of this analysis, it is fascinating to note that all three phases (*detzach adash* and *b'acha"v*) of the plagues have a message of *l'maan tedah* (8:6,18; 9:29). All of the plagues convey the knowledge (*da'at*) that Hashem is in fact the God/Creator. This is the perfect antithesis to *the eitz hada'at*, which conferred the opposite knowledge (*da'at*), namely the experience of man defying God and usurping His place as the one defining good and evil.<sup>9</sup>

Along similar lines, it is important to realize that the Exodus was a process of transformation for *Bnei Yisrael*, from being *avdei Pharaoh* to *avdei Hashem*.<sup>10</sup> They had, for many years, been governed by human authority, now they were subject to the Divine will. In light of this, it is compelling to note that *Pharaoh* is represented by the *nachash/tanin*. We find in *Yirmiyahu* (46: 22):

קולה כנחש ילך כי בחיל ילכו ובקרדמות באו לה כחטבי עצים.

Its sound will go forth like a serpent's; for attack her with an army, and they come at her with axes, like hackers of wood.

*Bnei Yisrael* went from listening to the *serpent* to listening to God! This is a beautiful depiction of the negation of *the eitz hada'at* problem.<sup>11</sup>

As we have seen, there is a tremendous similarity between the two beginnings of the year: Nissan and Tishrei. At the same time, the tone is different.

The beginning of the year is clearly a time for *teshuva*. This is true of both beginnings. The difference lies in the type of *teshuva* that is central to each.

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9. See our analysis in on *Bereshit*, and elsewhere.

10. See *Amittah Shel Torah on the Torah on Shemot (Shemot)*.

11. See further *Amittah Shel Torah on the Torah (Shemot)*.

The focus of Tishrei is clearly on *din*, while that of Nissan is on *rachamim*<sup>12</sup>. The emphasis in Tishrei is on awe (*yirah*); in Nissan on love (*ahavah*)<sup>13</sup>.

It is clear that there is always the possibility of *teshuva*, in its various forms. However, there is also the concept of *dirshu Hashem b'himatzo*, that there are propitious moments for *teshuva*. So too there are auspicious occasions for the different kinds of *teshuva*. It follows from what we've seen that the ideal time for *teshuva meahavah* is the season of Nissan.

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12. See further *Amittah Shel Torah on the Torah (Shemot)*.

13. See further our discussion of *Avot* (chapter 2) in this *sefer* concerning these concepts.