

"THIS MONTH - AND EVERY MONTH"

It is appropriate on Parshat Ha-Chodesh to recall that the Jewish calendar is based upon the lunar year. By this we mean, that each month begins with the birth of the new moon; rosh chodesh, the first day of the new month, commences with the appearance of the first sliver of the new moon. No wonder that the Hebrew word for month is chodesh, which derives from the Hebrew chadash, which means "new."

Because the length of the revolution of the moon around the earth is not a full number of days, an integer, but a fraction - a little over $29\frac{1}{2}$ days - therefore the length of each individual month varies; sometimes the month is thirty days (called malei, or full) or twenty-nine days (called chaser, or incomplete.) Today if we want to know on what day rosh chodesh falls, whether the month is malei (thirty days) or chaser (twenty-nine days), our task is very simple: we ~~simply~~ refer to the Jewish calendar which is based upon very precise astronomic calculations. When we sanctify the new month in this manner, this is called kiddush al yedei cheshbon - sanctification based upon calculation. It is scientifically precise and contains no errors or doubts whatsoever.

But the original method for sanctifying the new month, the one practiced in the days of the Bible and during the time of the Temple, was not ~~observation~~ ^{sanctification} by calculation but rather kiddush al yedei re'iyah - sanctification by observation.

There was ~~an~~ ^{an} elaborate ritual prescribed and followed for the sanctification of the new month by visual observation. Two valid witnesses had to observe the birth of a new moon. They had to testify before a competent court of three expert judges who examined the witnesses carefully and, if they were satisfied with the veracity of the two people, would join in a rising declaration that

the month was mekudash, sanctified. Then messengers would bring the news to the outlying areas, informing them of the length of the past month and what day must be observed as rosh chodesh.

Some people have mistakingly assumed that in ancient days kiddush al yedei re'iyah was practiced because our ancestors were ignorant of the intricate cheshbon or precise calculations upon which a correct calendar must be based. The implication is, that if our ancestors had known the proper cheshbon, they could have dispensed with what seems, in retrospect, to have been a crude method of arranging the calendar: re'iyah, visual observation.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, in a brilliant passage, points out that this notion is utterly absurd. It is obvious that our ancestors always knew the correct calculation of a Jewish calendar. After all, in Palestine during the rainy season it happened often that it was cloudy for several weeks on end. Does this mean that the month lasted for seven or eight weeks? Furthermore, the Sanhedrin would always be prepared to sit in session and await the arrival of witnesses. How did they know when to anticipate this event? Even better proof is the famous passage in the Bible, when David speaks to Jonathan and says, "behold machar chodesh - tomorrow is the beginning of a new month." How did he know that the days following would be rosh chodesh, unless the calculations were widely known at that time?

But if we did know the calendar, then we ought to ask: why was it necessary to resort to kiddush al yedei re'iyah if the techniques of kiddush al yedei cheshbon were readily available? Why the uncertainties of visual observation, when you have accessible the ~~certainties of~~ precise mathematical calculations?

And the answer that Hirsch offers reveals the ^opr^ofundity and the humaneness of the Jewish tradition. It is, that kiddush al yedei cheshbon is a purely mechanical act, and Judaism discouraged the mechanical and the impersonal, except as a last

resort - such as the destruction of the Temple and Sanhedrin, and hence the impossibility of kiddush al yedei re'iyah. Sanctification through re'iyah raises the whole calendar, all the holidays and all of Jewish life, from a purely mathematical, mechanical, natural fact to a deeply human encounter, an intensely personal process of the visual observations of nature, of the growing moon, of reporting that event to human judges, and their declarations on behalf of a human community as to how and when Time is to be sanctified. Thus, Judaism raised the whole year and all its observances and sacred events from the realm of the impersonal to that of the personal, from mute nature to a human-social act. By insisting upon kiddush al yedei re'iyah, although the processes of cheshbon were very well known, the Torah taught us that the month, the year, all of life are not predetermined natural facts dependent only upon the conjunction of moon and sun, but that they are to be declared mekudash by man, by flesh and blood. Human effort can decide and declare whether a month is malei or chaser, and when rosh chodesh is to be celebrated.

So that when kiddush al yedei re'iyah was abandoned because of the destruction of the Temple and the Sanhedrin, it was regarded as a national tragedy. For the role of man was ^areduced, and new ⁿdehumanization and depersonalization prevailed.

When therefore we read this morning of parshat ha-chodesh about the sanctification of the new moon through the process of re'iyah, we reaf^firm our allegiance to the idea that observation must take preced^{ence} over calculation, man over machine, spirit over science, and humanity over nature; that each of us, rather than yield the integrity of his personality to an I.B.M. world, reaffirm "I will be a man in the world," I will assert the tzellellem Elohim, the image of G-d in which I was created. We declare our consent to the interpretation of the Rabbis who, expanding on the biblical verse ha-chodesh ha-zeh lakhem (this month is unto you), declared: mesurah be'yedkhem - it is put into your hands.

Today, one of the inherent evils of our civilization is its bland impersonality. We have come to view employers or employees, competitors or colleagues, our husbands or our wives - even our very selves - not as pulsating, ineffably precious human beings, but as objects, things, devoid of uniqueness. In the words of a modern philosopher, we have come to view each other **and** ourselves as an "it" not a "thou." As a result - we have come to believe that man as such is expendable.

One of the supposedly remarkable results of the recent orbital flight of Col. Glenn was the fact that a human astronaut is still necessary, that better results are obtained with a man at the controls than with a complicated computer in the pilot seat. It occasioned great surprise. We were amazed to learn that man is not yet completely obsolescent! How surprising - man is really not superfluous! ^A Automation is another example. ^D Despite the fact that it is a symbol of great scientific progress and even holds forth the promise of great economic opportunities, it is another move in the direction of the eclipse of human beings, of re'iyah giving way to cheshbon. Or take the recent report that some engineers ^{have} ~~had~~ designed a computer which can compose original music. Maybe some people were thrilled by this news. I felt that we human beings had thereby pushed ourselves down another rung into oblivion as a result of this displacement of a beautiful, creative human act by a mechanical process of a giant computer.

We have not yet learned to retain the magic and the charm of personality in an increasingly mechanized world. No wonder that so many of us moderns in the great cities of our country suffer from psychiatric illness. I have no doubt that this factor of impersonality is a strong contributing factor to the distressing statistics we recently read of, in which it was revealed that 80% of the population of our city is psychologically unhealthy.

Indeed, individual men have become expendable. We have become hardened to the death of individuals by the atrocious figure of eighteen-million victims in World War II. So we now talk and write about the possibilities of World War III, the Nuclear War, and have coined such words as "overkill" in which we indifferently estimate the murder, by nuclear blasts, of millions of people.

Social philosophers of our day have pointed to a gruesome phenomenon: a good-hearted citizen walking in the street will notice another man, a stranger, suddenly clutch at his heart and fall to the ground. Once upon a time, the onlooker's reaction would have been immediate and spontaneous: run over and help. Today - how dreadful to have to say it! - all too often our good-hearted citizen will ignore his fellow man, and merely walk away. He will ask himself: why get involved? Why make trouble for myself? And then he will rationalize: the man was probably drunk anyway.

We have not only failed to observe the moon; we have failed to look into the hearts of our fellow men. We have closed our eyes not only to nature but also to humanity. Our lives have become dominated by impersonalities. We have immersed ourselves in all kinds of intricate cheshbon - except, of course, cheshbon ha-nefesh...

We should be happy, therefore, to witness the public expression of revulsion and disgust that swept across our nation this week against the whole system of institutionalized barbarism and official savagery called "prize fighting." If our society will have enough courage to outlaw this legalized manslaughter instead of just appointing another investigating commission, it will prove that we have left within us at least some residual kiddush al yedei re'iyah, that all is not a matter of the cheshbon of dollars and cents.

I believe that this idea may be the explanation of an unusual story recorded in the Talmud (Shabbat 146b). It is told by R. Elazar b. Arakh, one of the greatest teachers of Judaism of all generations, that at one point in his life he decided to leave the great Academy at Yavneh and make his way to two communities which were very well known in those days, and for many centuries before, for their ⁿyayin yashan, their exquisite old wines, and makom yafeh u-mayim na'im - beautiful spots with abundant lakes and wells of sparkling water. It was these two resort areas, the Talmud tells us parenthetically, that had led astray the ten lost tribes of Israel in the days of old. The Rabbi settled there, and before long he began to follow the new style of life completely. And soon - he forgot all his learning. One day he returned by chance to a Jewish community, and was honored with the reading of the Torah on the Sabbath. It was a Sabbath on which was read the special portion we have read this morning. And when R. Elazar b. Arakh ascended the pulpit and opened the Torah, he saw the words ha-chodesh ha-zeh lakhem (this month is unto you^m). But he was no longer able to read simple Hebrew without atrocious errors. And so in each word he mistook one letter for another letter which looked much like it. And instead of ha-chodesh ha-zeh lakhem, he read ha-cheresh hayah libam - which means "their heart was mute!"

What a remarkable story! This man was the greatest student of R. Yochanan b. Zakkai, the one who kept Judaism alive at the most critical juncture in all of Jewish history. Does it mean that R. Elazar b. Arakh simply abandoned all his Jewishness?

Of course not. I have no doubt that even while disporting himself in those pleasure spots of ancient Judea he sent his annual check to the Academy at Yavneh, his old Alma Mater. But he did not study by himself... I have no doubt that he provided for poor Galileans and contributed to the hospitals of Judea - but probably said: "Gentlemen, I will give you all the money you want - but don't get me involved in meetings." R. Elazar b. Arakh was still a good Jew - but he tried to be Jewish

vicariously, without personal involvement. He attempted the process of sanctifying his life Jewishly only through the impersonal method of cheshbon, not through the inner commitment of re'iyah. He somehow imagined that those who can afford to move to such pleasure spots, can afford to buy their religion! He probably conjectured that when you ^{have} ~~had~~ reached a certain status you were exempt from the actual personal practice of Torah and Mitzvot. He thought that sympathy and support are sufficient substitutes for actual practice and participation, that good cheshbon for charity deductions can take the place of re'iyah-reality. And so this great teacher -- the one who outweighed all the other students of R. Yochanan b. Zakkai, the one who responded to his rabbi's request for the major element of a good life by proclaiming the paramount importance of "the good heart" -- now could no longer read the words ha-chodesh ha-zeh lakhem, which represent the Torah's injunction to live life wholly and personally, and instead read: ha-cheresh hayah libam, the heart is mute, the spirit is dumb, the soul is silenced and insensitive. The man who believed in the good heart - his very heart was now stricken dumb.

And so he learned that it is not enough to have external gestures, you need internal involvements. Religion, Torah, Judaism are either truly personal, or ultimately meaningless. Organizational work is blessed - provided it accompanies a profound personal commitment. Otherwise, the "Organization Man" in Jewish life cannot survive to the next generation. Only those whose communal work is based upon personal participation in the cause which they espouse, only those who have subjective commitment, and are not mere absentee landlords, can expect that their work and its value be abiding.

How can we, in our lives, assure that we will have kiddush al yedei re'iyah rather than kiddush al yedei cheshbon? How can we implement ha-chodesh ha-zeh lakhem

so as to avoid ha-cheresh hayah libam?

We can make sure that our children will participate in the preparation of Passover ~~at home~~, in the burning of the Chametz, in the cleaning of the home, and the preparing of the Seder plates.

When it comes to charity, we must live not only through the cheshbon of the checkbook and its impersonality, but the re'iyah of involvement in groups dedicated to personal assistance to those less fortunate, and to direct contact with the beneficiaries of our generosity.

Torah education must mean for us not only the support of other scholars, as great and important as that is, but also the advancement of our own Jewish learning, at whatever level we are, by participation in classes and lectures of *all* kinds.

With regard to the State of Israel it means that in addition to our own financial assistance, we must visit the land, we must see to it that our children spend at least a year there and study, if they will not settle there.

No wonder that we welcome the month of Nisan, the month of liberation, with the admonition ha-chodesh ha-zeh lakhem. The Jewish emphasis on personality, its abhorrence of the mechanical and the dehumanized, is decisive in the preparation for the celebration of freedom. For man is free only when he can be himself, only when man can reach ~~into~~ the deepest recesses of his own uniqueness, his own selfhood, and thus establish permanent bonds with other free beings created in the image of G-d. For there is no alternative to this save that of the petrified spirit, the silenced self, the insensate soul: ha-cheresh hayah libam.

This month - as every month - the Torah challenges us: this month is unto you. This is your month. Make it your own by opening your eyes and sanctifying nature; by opening your heart - sanctifying life itself.