activities of early Zionist settlers constituted a challenge that human progress, rather than divine preordainment, could bring about the redemption of Israel.

For Anderson, only in infinite-yet-ordered "calendrical time" could societies of former subjects conceive of new egalitarian civilizations built upon the idea of the nation. Similarly, in our case, the newly liberated Israelites needed their own calendrical time, and not the doom-filled present and future of the slave, to envision a path forward for themselves in time and space. Only with this new mental framework could former subjects conceive of a world based on progress and change brought about through individual and collective agency.

These relatively recent parallels add another layer to the importance of a new calendrical structure for a previously enslaved people, and another reason for the primary placement of this mitzvah among the 612 others. It not only gave nascent Israelite society a civilizational system that was uniquely their own, but also a framework through which each Israelite could conceive of themself as a free person moving forward in time and influencing their own future and that of their society. In receiving the system of the month (חוֹדֶשׁ/*hodesh*), the former Israelite slaves now possessed a particularly Jewish societal organization and a new understanding of their capacity for innovation (חִדּוּשׁ/*hiddush*) and progress as free people.

The publication and distribution of the *JTS Parashah Commentary* are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee (*z"l*) and Harold Hassenfeld (*z"l*).

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Bo 5780 בא תש"ף

The Liberating Power of the Calendar

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הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם רֹאשׁ חֳדָשִׁים רִאשׁוֹן הוּא לָכֶם לְחָדְשֵׁי הַשָּׁנָה׃

This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you. (Exod. 12:2)

In Parashat Bo, God instructs Moses to formally begin the counting of months, with the month of Aviv (later *Nisan*) kicking off what we now know as the Hebrew calendar. This injunction represents the first commandment given to the Children of Israel, and only the third or fourth in the entirety of the Torah. It might seem odd that this, of all the many commandments the children of Israel will eventually receive, is handed down first, even before the exodus from Egypt was completed. However, the institution of this uniquely Hebrew calendrical system (its overlap with other frameworks aside) was a necessary precursor to support both the communal-religious practice and mental emancipation of a newly (or rather, soon-to-be) free people.

The medieval commentator Rabbi Ovadiah Sforno offers a straightforward answer for the chronological primacy of this commandment, saying that slaves have no control over use of their own time, a slave's "days, hours, and minutes even, were at the beck and call of your taskmasters." Going further with this idea, the management and recording of time are not only fundamental characteristics of free people but of ***a*** free people in control of its own destiny.

The effective administration of a calendrical system is a feat shared by the great civilizations of human history. From Babylon to Rome to China in antiquity, Islam and Christendom in the Middle Ages—among countless others—the careful consideration and measurement of the phases of time reflected in the natural world provide the order and framework that facilitate all other societal achievements. Moreover, months are of special importance as an intermediate measure of time, serving as the container for the hours and weeks that make up our day-to-day existence, and comprising the years by which we measure the longer progression of the lives of ourselves, our families, and our wider communities.

Nahmanides's understanding of the inaugural commandment of the book of Exodus also speaks to the civilizational nature of the commandment. Of special concern for him is the phrasing that "this month shall mark **for you** the beginning of months" הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם רֹאשׁ חֳדָשִׁים, whereas in the following verse Moses and Aaron are instructed to speak to "the whole community of Israel" (12:3) about acquiring a sacrificial lamb. For Nahmanides, the wording "**for you**" (which follows the description in the preceding verse that God was speaking to Moses and Aaron) denotes that the calculation and recording of months is a task that must be overseen by leaders and experts. The specific connection of the counting of months to legal or technical expertise reinforces the connection between an effectively administered calendrical system and an organized community.

Hizkuni further stresses how this particular counting of months is relevant in the collective development of the Jewish people, explaining that the words "**for you**" imply this lunar (later lunisolar) calculation of months is exclusively for Jews and not for the gentiles among whom solar calendrical systems prevail. This seems to be even more significant when we consider two later mitzvot of no small importance that relate to the calculation of time: the observance of Shabbat and of Rosh Hashanah.

The counting of these smaller and larger measures of time relate not specifically to an experience or characteristic of the Children of Israel, but rather to the entirety of existence—with Rosh Hashanah and Shabbat respectively drawing our attention to the commencement and consummation of the work of creation. Even though the Rabbis of the Mishnah indicate four "new years" (Rosh Hashanah 1:1), it is from this "first of months," that all Jewish festivals are calculated. The ability to openly practice such communal observances is the exclusive province of free people and it is therefore no coincidence that the timing of major holidays is determined in relation to זמן חרותנו, the time of our liberation.

But it is not only for reasons of societal cohesion and communal observance that the institution of a calendrical system was given primacy among the mitzvot. An orderly calendrical system is equally important for individual conceptions of time and one's own sense of agency as a free person. In line with Nahmanides's aforementioned commentary, to enslaved subjects the progression of time is to a great degree, if not entirely, imperceptible. Amidst the drudgery of forced labor, days, months, and even years might easily bleed into one another so as to present a static, unending, and immutable present in which the concept of personal or historical progress is unthinkable.

In a similar vein, the political scientist Benedict Anderson draws a direct link between the rise of modern self-determined national communities and changing perceptions of time in his seminal work, *Imagined Communities*. In the world of religiously justified dynastic realms, he argues, the human masses who were the subjects of these regimes perceived time (and by extension, their own lives) as unchanging, rather than dynamic, fluid, and capable of radical change or evolution. This is reflected in the static depiction of human activity and appearance over time—think of Medieval Christian imagery presenting ancient figures such as Mary or the Apostles in contemporaneous European dress and skin.

This was also evident in the apocalyptic "messianic" conception of time put forth by church and state alike, i.e. that the end of days was imminent and therefore any progress was both impossible and futile. "[T]he medieval Christian mind had no conception of history as an endless chain of cause and effect or of radical separations between past and present." (Anderson, 23) For similar reasons, many Orthodox Jewish figures who rigidly adhered to the messiah-centric conception of Jewish time opposed Zionism in its early days (and a few still do), claiming that the