



# The First Commandment...And I Don't Mean "I am the Lord Your God"

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What is the purpose of a calendar? A calendar is a way to organize time, to create distinct periods of time, such as days, weeks, months, years and beyond. Each people and religion has created their own calendar in order to make sense of time according to their own particular needs. One of the most amazing things about calendars is how they create community, even when great distances (either temporal or geographic) separate people. For example, do you know the significance of May 25<sup>th</sup>? You would if you were a serious fan of the Star Wars franchise. May 25<sup>th</sup> is the date on which all Star Wars movies were released. Star Wars fans across the globe often gather on that date (or the nearest weekend) to have their annual Star Wars marathon. The date becomes a way for everyone in that community to gather to retell their master story, a story of good overcoming the forces of evil. The Jewish calendar works the same way.

Up to now, the Torah has been 99% narrative and 1% law. There are some laws derived from Breisheet: having children, brit milah, hospitality, avoiding certain cuts of meat, and so on. In Parshat Bo, on the eve of the Exodus from Egypt, God gives Moses and Aaron a series of laws for B'nai Yisrael, centered on the Pesach offering. The first law given, however, is a new calendar:

“God said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, ‘This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you.’”  
(Shemot 12:1-2)

How is this calendar different from all other calendars?

Rashbam, a great French Torah commentator, teaches that “the straightforward sense [of the above verse] would be in essence as follows: Though it is not the beginning of the months for other nations, it shall be *for you* – to enumerate the sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth, up to ‘the twelfth month, that is, the month of Adar’ (Esther 3:7). You must count starting with this month as a reminder that in this month you went out of Egypt.” According to Rashbam, this new calendar gives Israel a unique way of reckoning the year, making Israel distinct from all other nations. More over, it focuses our national consciousness on

events that have been and are about to take place. Every day, month and year will be experienced in relation to the Exodus, the most important story of the Jewish people.

Ibn Ezra, a Spanish commentator, reminds us that the Jewish calendar is also a God-human partnership. This mitzvah is about “the year and the month that were fixed by the rabbinical courts. Now that we are in exile we rely on what they set up: the intercalation of the leap months.” The Jewish calendar is a combination of a solar and lunar calendar. Our months are lunar, but with a solar correction. If we only had the lunar months, in some years we would celebrate Hannukah in July and Pesach in December. In Shemot 13:10, we learn that Pesach must be celebrated “at its set time from year to year.” The early Rabbis enacted “leap months”, extra months that we add into the calendar seven times in nineteen years. In fact, this year we will add a second Adar (a.k.a. Adar Bet) to keep Pesach in the spring. If not for human involvement in the Jewish calendar, we would not be able to keep the Jewish holidays as set out in the Torah. It takes two.

Nachmanides, another Spanish commentator, adds yet one more layer to the Jewish calendar: layers. The Torah calls the months by numbers, but now we use a system of names for the months: Tishrei, Cheshvan, Kislev, etc. Nachmanides teaches, “The month names now commemorate our redemption from Babylonia, not from Egypt...So now we commemorate the second redemption with our month names as we did up until then with the first redemption.” Our calendar does not only reflect the experience of leaving Egypt (Pesach), receiving the Torah (Shavuot) and living in the wilderness for forty year (Sukkot). Our calendar also has recurrences of our master story repeating itself again and again. Purim reflects our time in Persia, saved from Haman’s cruelty. Our months’ names reflect our return from the Babylonian Exile, when we returned to our land to rebuild. Hannukah recalls a later time of being saved from King Antiochus’ persecution. The modern Israeli holidays, Yom HaShoah, Yom HaZiakron and Ha’atzmaut, tell about our near destruction and the rise of the third Jewish state. Our calendar reminds us that God has not only been involved in our history once, but that in every generation, we have experienced God freeing us, giving us wisdom, and sustaining us.

One final aspect of the Jewish calendar is that even when we were spread across great geographic and temporal distances, our common calendar kept us a people around the world and across generations. What is the purpose of a calendar? Nothing short of creating and sustaining the Jewish people.

Shabbat Shalom,  
Rabbi Pepperstone

#### **AS A FAMILY:**

- Compare the Jewish and American calendars. What are the important dates on those calendars? How does each calendar tell the story of a nation?
- Look over the Jewish calendar for the year. How do the festivals and seasons of the year match up? Are there any correspondences? How does the progression of the festivals tell the Jewish story.

**TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THIS WEEK’S [TORAH](#) PORTION, TRY TO ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS:**

1. How many plagues are there in Bo and what are they?
2. On what wind did the locusts come and on what wind were they blown away?
3. Name any seven of the mitzvot given in Bo.
4. What are the two Hebrew names for the month in which Passover falls?
5. On what day of the month were the Israelites commanded to select the lamb for sacrifice? On what day were they commanded to sacrifice it? When were they told to eat it?
6. What is the punishment for eating hametz during Passover?
7. What was used to put the blood on the lintel and doorposts?
8. How many Israelites went into Egypt counting Joseph and his two sons? How long were the Israelites there and how many came out?
9. Is the use of *tefillin* mentioned in this week's parashah once, twice, or three times?