

Haftarot Unrolled: HaChodesh

New Year for Kings

Shabbat HaChodesh is the fourth and last of the special Shabbatot, the Shabbat immediately preceding Rosh Chodesh Nissan.

On Shabbat HaChodesh we read Parshat HaChodesh, the very first commandment that G-d gave to all of Israel as a nation¹:

(א) וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל אַהֲרֹן בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לֵאמֹר:
(ב) הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם רֵאשִׁית רָאשֵׁי חֳדָשִׁים רֵאשִׁוֹן הוּא לָכֶם לְחֹדְשֵׁי הַשָּׁנָה:

- 1) Hashem said to Moshe and to Aharon, in the Land of Egypt, as follows:
- 2) This month will be for you the first of months,
it will be the first for you among the months of the year. (Shemot 12)

Just days before the Exodus, G-d told Israel to set up a calendar based on the new moon, starting with the month of Nissan. From that point on, all the dates in the Torah are based on that month being the first month, and the years are counted from that date.

Not only was this the first commandment that Israel was given as a nation, it is this commandment that made Israel a nation in the first place. In the ancient world, what distinguished a nation from a bunch of tribes was that nations had kings. The Jewish People in exile were still just a large family, a dozen tribes. By giving us commandments, G-d made Himself our king, and made us a nation.

The 1st of Nissan is associated with kings in Halacha. When listing the various new years in our calendar, the Mishna states:

ארבעה ראשי שנים הם באחד בניסן ראש השנה למלכים
There are four new years: 1st of Nissan is the new year for kings and for holidays
(Mishna, Rosh Hashana 1:1)

What is a "new year for kings?" In the times of the Tanach, people would date their documents based on the reign of the current king, eg: "in the 2nd year of the King Yehoshafat." The year was incremented not on the date of the coronation of that king, but rather on the 1st of Nissan. Let's say King Yehoshafat had been crowned during Adar; starting with the 1st of Nissan of that year, we would start dating our documents as the 2nd year to his reign, even though he had only been king for a month.

¹ Avraham's commandment of Brit Milah was given to him as an individual and the head of a family.

The "coronation date" of the Jewish People is not the coronation date of a particular human king, like all other nations. Instead, it is the date that we accepted G-d as our king and became a nation, the date when G-d gave us our first commandment: the 1st of Nissan.

The Haftarah of HaChodesh describes the dedication ceremony of the final Temple, which begins on the 1st of Nissan². It talks about the offerings that will be made on that day, in particular, by the leader of the Jewish People, whom Yechezkel calls "nassi."³ Surprisingly, the Haftarah begins a few verses before the description of the dedication ceremony, and ends a few verses later. Those extra verses refer to a seemingly unrelated topic: the laws that limit the power of the leader of the Jewish People.

This "nassi" has an important role, especially in the dedication of the final Temple: he must collect the taxes, and he must represent the people in bringing their offerings. He is shown respect: certain gates are opened especially for him, and he is allowed to use certain passages that others are not. But the Haftarah states explicitly that these privileges are only given to him when he is actively representing the nation. When he comes to the Temple as a private person, as an individual, he does not get any special treatment.

The Haftarah goes out of its way to point out that the leader of Israel, whether he be called "king", or "nassi", is given power only to the extent that he serves the nation. He represents them, he organizes them, he leads them, but he does not truly rule them. It is not his authority that defines them as a nation. Their years are not dated from the beginning of his reign, but from the beginning of G-d's reign - the date of the first commandment given to Israel.

The nation of Israel may have many new years, but we have only One King.

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In memory of my father, Peter Rozenberg, ז"ל

לעילוי נשמת אבי מורי פנחס בן נתן נטע ז"ל

<http://www.torahforum.org/haftara/>

² The Mishkan's dedication ceremony was also on the 1st of Nissan.

³ "Nassi" is used in modern Hebrew to mean president. It is sometimes translated as "prince", but a prince in English connotes the child of a king. It literally means, "one who is raised", as in "his highness", or in the case of the Jewish People, "first among equals".