

And The Name Of This Hebrew Month Is.....

I write these words as we prepare to read in the Torah this Shabbat, the first mitzvah, the first commandment, given by God to the Jewish People.

Not “Be fruitful and multiply.”

Not “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Not even “Never buy retail!”

The first commandment is – **to establish the Jewish calendar**. This Shabbat is called Shabbat HaChodesh – the Shabbat in which we announce the new month of Nisan, which is the month of Pesach, the first month of the Jews being a people after leaving Egypt.

As many know, we have a Jewish calendar – it’s lunar based, twelve months, sometimes thirteen in a leap year, we start at Rosh Hashana, and end, well, twelve months later. Some months have thirty days, some have twenty-nine. It’s the Jewish calendar, sometimes called the Hebrew calendar, that determines when our holidays fall (Rosh Hashana is always at a new moon, Pesach is always at a full moon), and when we observe yartzeits.

Jewish calendars are fixed, like the secular calendar, by mathematical formula, so we know now, by looking at a multi-year calendar in a book or on-line, when Pesach will fall in 2044, and if Yom Kippur will coincide with the World Series in 2011.

In recent years, publishers have produced a wide variety of beautiful art-filled Jewish calendars and datebooks, Most of us have a Jewish calendar, from the funeral home, or from the United Synagogue, or from the kosher butcher (ah, that’s from an age gone by...) or from B’nai Shalom, hanging in our kitchen or hallway.

So, you’d think that with the wide availability about Jewish calendars, and knowledge of the way the Jewish calendar works that people would know the names of the Hebrew months, and what day of the month it is. Strangely, that is not something all of us know.

Why is it important? It’s important because the Hebrew calendar is how we mark time as Jews. Pesach is on the fifteenth of Nisan. Purim is exactly a month before, on the fifteenth of Adar. So When I see that full moon of Adar, as I leave Beth David after megilla reading, I know that I have exactly a month to get ready for Pesach.

I see the moon shrinking night after night, and then when the new moon of Nisan starts to peep out, skinny and sleek in the sky, I know that there are only two weeks to get rid of my chametz, and finalize the guest list, and clean the house, and as the moon grows, I get nervouser and nervouser, and then, when it’s full, it’s Pesach!

You can imagine how rabbis feel about watching the moon of Elul, the month before Rosh Hashana, as the moon waxes, then wanes, as the “big days” get closer and closer.

On a more personal level, our yartzeits are determined by the Hebrew calendar. My mother, may she rest in peace, died on the 23 of Sivan. It was sometime in June, I don't exactly remember what the secular date was, but the yartzeit is always always always always on the 23 of Sivan.

Sometimes it falls around June 16, and sometimes it falls around June 24, but it's always on the 23 of Sivan. So to plan ahead to see when I have to buy a yartzeit candle and plan when I need to be in minyan to say kaddish, all I need to do is check my calendar on the fridge to see when the 23 of Sivan falls this year. Who needs the reminder postcard from the shul which, despite the best efforts of our staff, sometimes has the wrong date on it?

If we know Jewish dates of yartzeits, even birthdays, if we know the name of the Hebrew month, and what date an event falls in the Hebrew month, we can be independent! No reminders, no postcards, no calls that the yartzeit is coming up – we know our important Hebrew dates – when our parents' yartzeits are observed, year after year. All we need to do is look on the calendar to know when they fall this year. I hope I've inspired you to check the dates of your yartzeits, and to look at the Hebrew dates on the Jewish calendar – If you need assistance determining when a yartzeit is, I'm happy to help. After all, knowing the Jewish calendar is the first mitzvah in the Torah, one that we can all observe, and be proud of.

The new month of Nisan begins on Sunday April 6. The moon will be skinny. Watch as it grows, and when it's full, two weeks later.....

I wish you and yours a happy and healthy and sweet Pesach.

Rabbi Eliezer Havivi