

Why We Need Passover Now

Category: Holidays, Pesach, Tzav, Vayikra

Last year, a petition was filed with Israel's chief rabbinate to postpone Passover. Is that actually possible? Is it something worth postponing?

Postpone the Holiday!

Good Shabbos!

Last year, when the coronavirus epidemic had just begun, somebody in Israel suggested that they postpone Passover for a month. He said that due to the coronavirus outbreak and the resulting quarantine, people won't have the chance to properly prepare for the holiday. And so he argued that the holiday ought to be postponed for 30 days and be celebrated not in April but in May.

Now, that of course sounds like a really strange idea. I don't remember any holiday being postponed lately, whether Passover or any other holiday. But in fact, the idea is based on something real.

As we all know, the Jewish calendar has a leap year. In contrast to the Gregorian calendar, in which a leap year means that February has not 28 days but 29 days, a leap year in the Jewish calendar means that there's one full extra month. Instead of 12 months, a Jewish-calendar leap year has 13 months.

The reason we add a full month in a Jewish leap year is because the Torah instructs us to make sure Passover is in the spring. "Keep the month of spring, and make the Passover offering to the L-rd, your G-d, for in the month of spring, the L-rd, your G-d, brought you out of Egypt at night."

In order for this to work, a new month has to be inserted every few years, because the lunar year is eleven days shorter than the solar year. Without the extra month, the holiday would eventually fall before the start of spring. And so the month that we add is Adar II, which is always right before Passover.

So our Jewish brother in Israel suggested that due to the coronavirus, we should insert a leap month again—meaning, to postpone Passover by a month so that the

Jewish Nation will have the time to get organized and plan a proper Passover Seder as it should be.

Now, the interesting thing is that such a discussion would actually have been very relevant 2,000 years ago when each new month was declared month-by-month by the Sanhedrin. Before there was a fixed calendar, they would decide when to declare a leap year. But for the past 1,700 years, ever since the Sage, Hillel, established the Jewish calendar as we know it today, everything has gone according to that calendar—and no one has the authority to declare a new leap year.

But our hero here said that the coronavirus pandemic had created an emergency situation— and so therefore, the rabbis had to assemble so as to declare the year a leap year. The gentleman actually approached the Chief Rabbinate of Israel with his suggestion, and they apparently didn't dignify his suggestion with a response. Frustrated, the man submitted a petition against the Chief Rabbinate with Israel's Supreme Court. The petition requested that the high court order the Rabbinate to reply why they were not prepared to declare the year a leap year due to the coronavirus crisis.

Well, as perhaps expected, the Supreme Court dismissed the petition, responding that first of all, it was not within their authority to force the Rabbinate to do such a thing. Additionally, the justices of the Supreme Court actually quoted from Maimonides, who writes that only the Sanhedrin of the Land of Israel had the power to declare a leap-year. And therefore, since there is no Sanhedrin today, nobody had the capacity to declare the year a leap year.

Hezekiah's Leap Year

But as is always the case in Jewish history, a similar story already once took place.

Over roughly 2,700 years ago, King Hezekiah reigned in Jerusalem. His father, who had ruled before him, had worshiped idols; he had closed the Holy Temple and built altars to false gods throughout the city. His son Hezekiah, on the other hand, was a tzadik, a man of G-d—and when he took up the throne, it was actually two short weeks right before Passover!

Well, King Hezekiah immediately resumed the daily services in the Holy Temple, and also summoned the entire Jewish Nation to come and celebrate the holiday of Passover in Jerusalem. But in order for there to be enough time to purify all the people, and to purify the Holy Temple, he postponed Passover by a month. How did he accomplish that? Simple: He declared a leap year—he declared that the month of Nissan was now Adar II. And indeed, the Jewish Nation came and celebrated that Passover with great joy (Chronicles 2:30).

Now, in Tractate Pesachim (56a), the Talmud lists six accomplishments that King Hezekiah achieved during his rule. The Talmud goes on to say that of those, three were approved by the Sages of his generation, while the other three were opposed. One of the things the Sages disapproved of was the fact that he declared a leap year. Since he had declared the leap year too late, once Adar had passed and Nissan had commenced, says the Talmud, he “impregnated Nissan with Nissan.”

On the other hand, the Talmud describes an act for which the Sages very much praised him. That action was connected to something that had happened to the Jewish Nation a long time earlier, when they had been wandering the desert under Moshe Rabbeinu. In the Torah portion of Chukas (Bamidbar 21:5-6), we are told how the Jewish Nation complained about their situation, and G-d sent snakes to punish them. Afterwards, Moshe prayed for the people, and G-d responded, “Make yourself a serpent and put it on a pole, and let whoever is bitten look at it and live.” It was an amazing miracle! Anyone who would physically gaze upon the snake would be immediately healed. (If only we had such a miracle today!)

On that verse, Rashi comments, “Does a snake cause death or life? However, when Israel looked heavenward and subjected their hearts to their Father in heaven, they would be healed.” Meaning, the cure was not the “copper serpent” but rather, when the Jews would look up towards the serpent, they would contemplate G-d and turn their hearts over to their Father in Heaven, and they would get better.

Now, that snake of copper endured for many centuries—right up to the era of Hezekiah, who came along and “pulverized the copper serpent.” Why did he do so? Because, as Rashi later explains, “they were erring after it.” In other words, there were Jews who were worshiping it as an idol; they said, “This copper snake will save us from disease,” instead of remembering that it was G-d who heals

Man. And so, King Hezekiah decided to pulverize it so that it wouldn't be used as the opposite of its original purpose. And it was that action that the Sages approved.

When We Need it Most!

But in truth, the idea to postpone Passover is really not a good idea, not last year, not this year, and not ever. In fact, the opposite is true. It is precisely when we find ourselves in the midst of a pandemic that we need this holiday now more than ever. It is now, when we're all cooped up in our, with many separated from their loved ones, that we need Passover. There is nothing like Passover to inspire the Jewish Nation and boost our morale. On the night that inaugurates the holiday, everyone will put their smartphones down, forget our troubles and celebrate the Exodus from Egypt.

And most important of all, we'll be eating matzah.

As the Rebbe quotes from the Zohar in his own Haggadah, matzah is "michla d'mehaymnusa," food of faith. Why so? Because it reminds us of the faith that our ancestors had in Egypt—that they were prepared to go into a desert without any guarantees and assurances, without knowing how they'd manage to survive there, with a simple belief in G-d and His servant, Moshe. And as the Prophet says, "I remember to you the lovingkindness of your youth... your following Me in the desert" (Yirmiyahu 2:2). And so when a Jew eats matzah, it gives him "a shot of faith." As the Rebbe says, "By simply eating matzah... you reinforce the power of faith."

And that brings us to the second thing associated with matzah: "Michlah d'asvasa," food of healing. When a person has strong faith in G-d, he'll never get spiritually sick in the first place, and as a result of that, he won't get physically sick either.

And so we pray that tonight, when we sit down at our Seder table and eat the matzah, we'll discover within ourselves higher levels of faith in G-d—and that faith will bring us, the Jewish Nation and the entire world healing and salvation.

Good Shabbos!