

Mar-Cheshvan: The Scent of Redemption

Section 1: The Challenge of Anticlimax

Ours is the only month whose very name evokes such profound ambivalence. The first syllable, 'Mar,' which is sometimes found in traditional texts referring to this month, and sometimes not, is variously interpreted by rabbis and scholars as meaning:

'Eight' – as it is the eighth month if counting from Nisan, head of the months;

'Bitter' – as the month has no festivals and many tragedies befell our people in it;

'Drop of water' – for its many associations with water;

'Master' – for the first Temple was completed in it, and the third will be dedicated in it.

We will explore some of these facets of Mar-Cheshvan together. First of all, consider where we are in our own experience of the calendar. After Tishrei's marathon of festivals, Mar-Cheshvan's complete lack of them is stark. This lack of festivities and excitement may summon anxiety, boredom, restlessness or desire for distraction.

We are invited this month to let ourselves become deeply comfortable with the regular weekly cycle of six work days and Shabbat, and to find the nourishing, redemptive, waters hidden within its rhythms. In Tishrei, we considered what seeds we wished to plant for the coming year, and now the difficult work begins of digging, planting and ploughing – work whose rewards are not instant.

Nomi Shemer (1930 – 2004) wrote and sang many of Israel's best-known songs and received the Israel Prize for Hebrew song in 1983. A year later, she released 'Hitchadshut' Acheret' (A Different Renewal), an adaption of her earlier song 'Hitchadshut' (Renewal), and it became widely beloved. What do these lyrics from the song evoke for you, after your own experience of the festival season?

A Different Renewal

After the festivals
 Everything will be renewed
 The weekdays will be renewed and return
 The air, the earth, the rain and the fire
 Also you
 Also you
 Will be renewed
 ...
 Your work will not be completed
 ...
 Your love will not be completed

התחדשות אחרת

אחרי החגים
 יתחדש הכל
 יתחדשו וישבו ימי החול
 האוויר העפר המטר והאש
 גם אתה
 גם אתה
 תתחדש
 ...
 לא נשלמה מלאכתך
 ...
 לא נשלמה אהבתך

The descent from the period of the festivals into the darker, shorter and colder days of our month manifests in many ways in our tribal web of narrative consciousness. For example, according to some midrashic texts, two of our matriarchs, Sara and Rachel, both passed away in this month (see Esther Rabbah 7:11 and Yalkut Shimoni, Shemot 162).

Their death alludes to a loss of inspiration and unity that we also find in the story of the ancient Israelite kingdom. According to the verses below, what happens in this month? What is their connection to our journey over the previous two months (especially to Yom Kippur), and what might be the implications of these events for our own inner work?

I Kings 11:43-12:32

Solomon slept with his fathers and was buried in the city of his father David; and his son Rehoboam succeeded him as king.

Israel revolted against the House of David, until this day.

When all Israel heard that Jeroboam had returned, they sent messengers and summoned him to the assembly and made him king over all Israel. Only the tribe of Judah remained loyal to the House of David.

Jeroboam said to himself, "Now the kingdom may well return to the House of David.

If these people still go up to offer sacrifices at the House of the Eternal in Jerusalem, the heart of these people will turn back to their master, King Rehoboam of Judah; they will kill me and go back to King Rehoboam of Judah."

So the king took counsel and made two golden calves. He said to the people, "You have been going up to Jerusalem long enough. This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!"

He set up one in Bethel and placed the other in Dan.

And Jeroboam established a festival on the fifteenth day of the eighth month; in imitation of the festival in Judah...

מלכים א יא:מג-יב:לב

וַיִּשְׁכַּב שְׁלֹמֹה עִם־אֲבוֹתָיו
וַיִּקְבְּר בְּעִיר דָּוִד אָבִיו
וַיִּמְלֹךְ רְחֹבָעָם בְּנוֹ תַחְתָּיו

וַיִּפְשְׁעוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּבֵית דָּוִד
עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה

וַיְהִי כִשְׁמֹעַ כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי־שָׁב יִרְבֵּעָם
וַיִּשְׁלְחוּ וַיִּקְרְאוּ אֹתוֹ אֶל־הָעֵדָה
וַיִּמְלִיכוּ אֹתוֹ עַל־כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל
לֹא הָיָה אַחֲרָי בֵּית־דָּוִד
זֹלָתִי שִׁבְט־יְהוּדָה לְבָדוֹ

וַיֹּאמֶר יִרְבֵּעָם בְּלִבּוֹ

עַתָּה תָּשׁוּב הַמַּמְלָכָה לְבֵית דָּוִד
אִם־יַעֲלֶה הָעָם הַזֶּה

לַעֲשׂוֹת זִבְחִים בְּבֵית־יָקוֹק בִּירוּשָׁלַם
וְשָׁב לֵב הָעָם הַזֶּה אֶל־אֲדֹנָיהֶם
אֶל־רְחֹבָעָם מֶלֶךְ יְהוּדָה

וַהֲרַגְנִי וְשָׁבוּ אֶל־רְחֹבָעָם מֶלֶךְ־יְהוּדָה
וַיֹּוֹעֵץ הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיַּעַשׂ שְׁנֵי עֲגֹלֵי זָהָב
וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם רַב־לָכֶם מַעֲלוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם
הִנֵּה אֱלֹהֵיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל

אֲשֶׁר הָעֵלִוְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם
וַיִּשְׂם אֶת־הָאֶחָד בְּבֵית־אֵל
וְאֶת־הָאֶחָד נָתַן בְּדָן

וַיַּעַשׂ יִרְבֵּעָם חֹג

בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁמִינִי בַחֲמֵשֶׁה־עָשָׂר יוֹם לַחֹדֶשׁ
כַּחַג אֲשֶׁר בִּיהוּדָה

This story casts a strong shadow over our month, but of course, nothing is ever so one-dimensional, in life or in Torah.

Yalkut Shimoni (Gathering of Simon) is a medieval compilation of midrashic teachings on the Tanach. What is being taught here about our month, and the one that follows it, Kislev? Concerning Mar-Cheshvan, how might this teaching be taken as a suggestion for practice and behavior?

<p>Yalkut Shimoni, Kings 184 (translated by R' Mike Feur)</p> <p>R' Chanina said: On the twenty-fifth of Kislev the work of the tabernacle was completed, but it was left folded up until Nisan...</p> <p>Now because of this the month of Kislev, in which the work of the tabernacle was completed, lost out. The Holy One said, "It is incumbent upon Me to make restitution." What restitution did the Holy One make? The rededication of the Temple by the Hasmoneans, and so too the Holy One will compensate Mar-Cheshvan in the future.</p>	<p>ילקוט שמעוני - מלכים קפ"ד</p> <p>א"ר חנינא בכ"ה בכסליו נגמר מלאכת המשכן ועשה מקופל עד אחד בניסן</p> <p>...</p> <p>ומעתה הפסיד כסלו שנגמרה בו המלאכה אמר הקב"ה עלי לשלם מה שלם לו הקב"ה חנוכת חשמונאי וכן מרחשון עתיד הקב"ה לשלם לו</p>
<p><i>R' Tzadok haKohen Rabinowitz of Lublin (1823 – 1900), usually referred to as Rav Tzadok, was a major figure in Polish Chasidut. He started life in a prominent Lithuanian rabbinic family who were opposed to Chasidut, but was won over to Chasidut by R' Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izbica, known as the Mei HaShiloach. His classes on Shabbat and festivals were transcribed by his students and compiled in Pri Tzadik after his death.</i></p> <p><i>What does he add here that we might find helpful in this month's spiritual work?</i></p>	
<p>Pri Tzadik on Mar-Cheshvan 1:2</p> <p>The saintly R' Mendel of Rimonov taught that many tragedies befell our people in Mar-Cheshvan because this is when the Kingdom of the House of David was divided. And it appears that this was not only for the sake of punishment, but rather that this would be the appropriate time to repair this division.</p>	<p>פרי צדיק לראש חודש מרחשון א:ב</p> <p>איתא מהרחה"ק ר"מ מרימונוב זצוקללה"ה שבחדש מרחשון הם רוב גזירות מפני שאז נתחלקה מלכות בית דוד ומן הסתם אינו רק לעונש רק שבו הזמן מסוגל לתקן זה</p>
<p><i>Sefer Yetzirah (The Book of Formation) is the earliest extant work of proto-Kabbalah and it is traditionally attributed to Abraham (18th Century BCE) and/or R' Akiva (2nd Century CE). In it, each month is associated with a Hebrew letter, a constellation, a part of the human body and a human emotion, sense, or faculty. What does this passage teach us about our month's psycho-spiritual opportunities and challenges?</i></p>	
<p>Sefer Yetzirah 5:9 (translated by R' Aryeh Kaplan)</p> <p>He made the letter Nun king over smell And He bound a crown to it And He combined one with another And with them He formed Scorpio in the Universe Cheshvan in the Year And the intestine in the Soul Male and female</p>	<p>ספר היצירה ה:ט</p> <p>המליך אות נ' בריח וקשר לו כתר וצרפן זה בזה וצר בהם עקרב בעולם וחשון בשנה ודקין בנפש זכר ונקבה</p>

The frequently recited 'Ashrei' prayer consists mostly of Psalm 145, which is an acrostic that includes every Hebrew letter except one – the Nun. What reason does R' Yochanan provide for this, and what can we glean from R' Nachman's citation of the verse relating to the next letter in the Alef Bet, the Samech? How might we apply Rav Tzadok's teaching about this, below, in our daily lives this month?

<p>Babylonian Talmud, Brachot 4b</p> <p>R' Yochanan said: Why is there no verse beginning with the letter Nun in 'Ashrei'? Because it contains an allusion to the downfall of the enemies of Israel [a euphemism for Israel itself]. As it is written: “The virgin of Israel has fallen (nafla) and she will rise no more” (Amos 5:2). ... R' Nachman bar Yitzchak adds: Even so, David went and provided support, through divine inspiration, as it says: “The Lord supports the fallen” (Psalms 145:14).</p>	<p>תלמוד בבלי – ברכות ד:ב</p> <p>אמר רבי יוחנן מפני מה לא נאמר נון באשרי מפני שיש בה מפלתן של שונאי ישראל דכתיב נפלה לא תוסיף קום בתולת ישראל ... אמר רב נחמן בר יצחק אפילו הכי חזר דוד וסמכן ברוח הקדש שנאמר סומך ה' לכל הנפלים</p>
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<p>Pri Tzadik on Mar-Cheshvan 1:1</p> <p>Every month has a specific matter to engage work on, and in Mar-Cheshvan it is to strengthen ourselves to begin to get up from having fallen, and to bring ourselves into sanctity, in awe of G!d.</p>	<p>פרי צדיק לראש חודש מרחשון א:א</p> <p>לכל חודש יש ענין מיוחד לעסוק וחודש מרחשון העסק להתחזק להחל לקום מהנפילה ולהכניס עצמו לקדושה ביראת השם</p>
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Section 2: Scent and Consciousness

The scientific consensus is that this month's sense of smell is the most powerful of our senses in at least two respects:

- 1) *It is the sense that involves the most direct contact with the object we are sensing; when we smell something, we are inhaling molecules from the object itself into our nose.*
- 2) *The part of our brain that processes our experiences of smell is the primitive and highly influential limbic system, which plays a major role in shaping our emotions, moods, memories and behavior.*

In light of the above, how might we understand this talmudic passage?

<p>Babylonian Talmud, Brachot 43b</p> <p>R' Zutra bar Tuvya said that Rav said: From where is it derived that one recites a blessing over scent? As it is stated: “Let every soul praise the Eternal” (Ps. 150:6). What is it from which the soul derives benefit and the body does not derive benefit from it? You must say: That is scent.</p>	<p>תלמוד בבלי – ברכות מג:ב</p> <p>אמר רב זוטרא בר טוביה אמר רב מנין שמברכין על הריח שנאמר כל הנשמה תהלל יה איזהו דבר שהנשמה נהנית ממנו ואין הגוף נהנה ממנו הוי אומר זה הריח</p>
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As we have seen, the sense of smell is unique. What is the claim being made about it in the talmudic interpretation of the following prophetic verses?

<p>Isaiah 11:1-4</p> <p>But a shoot shall grow out of the stump of Jesse, a twig shall sprout from his stock. The spirit of the Eternal shall alight upon him: A spirit of wisdom and insight, a spirit of counsel and valor, a spirit of intimacy with and awe for the Eternal. He will sense the truth by his awe for the Eternal: And he will not judge by the sight of his eyes, nor decide by what his ears perceive. And he will judge the poor with righteousness, and decide with justice for the lowly of the land. He shall strike down a land with the rod of his mouth and slay the wicked with the breath of his lips.</p>	<p>ישעיהו יא:א-ד</p> <p>וַיֵּצֵא חֹטֵר מִגִּזְע יֵשׁוּ וַיִּנְצֹר מִשְׁרָשָׁיו יִפְרֶה וַיִּנְחָה עָלָיו רוּחַ יְקֹוֹק רוּחַ חֲכָמָה וּבִינָה רוּחַ עֶצָה וּגְבוּרָה רוּחַ דָּעַת וַיִּרְאֵת יְקֹוֹק וְהִרְיָחוּ בִּירְאֵת יְקֹוֹק וְלֹא לַמְרֹאֶה עֵינָיו יִשְׁפֹּט וְלֹא לַמְשַׁמֵּעַ אָזְנוֹ יוֹכִיחַ וְשִׁפֵּט בְּצַדִּיק דְּלִים וְהוֹכִיחַ בְּמִשׁוֹר לְעַנְוֵי אֶרֶץ וְהִכָּה אֶרֶץ בְּשִׁבְט פִּי וּבְרוּחַ שְׁפָטָיו יָמִית רָשָׁע</p>
<p>Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 93b</p> <p>Rava says that “he will sense” (haricho) teaches that the Messiah will smell (demorach) and then judge [on that basis,] as it is written: “And he will not judge by the sight of his eyes, [nor decide by what his ears perceive,] And he will judge the poor with righteousness, and decide with justice for the lowly of the land” (Is. 11:3-4).</p>	<p>תלמוד בבלי - סנהדרין צג:ב</p> <p>רבא אמר דמורח ודאין דכתיב ולא למראה עיניו ישפוט ושפט בצדק דלים והוכיח במישור לענוי ארץ</p>
<p><i>R' Nathan Sternhartz of Nemirov (1780 – 1844), also known as Reb Noson, was the foremost disciple and scribe of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, and led the Breslover Chasidic movement after Rebbe Nachman's death in 1810. Likutei Halachot is Reb Noson's magnum opus, which gives explanations of Jewish law and practices in the light of Breslover teachings. How does this teachings relate to the contemporary scientific view of smell, and how might it translate into practice?</i></p>	
<p>Likutei Halachot, Orach Chaim Laws of Blessing on Fragrance 3:8</p> <p>The Messiah will open everyone's eyes to intimately know that the Transcendent Divine is the Immanent Divine, as it is written: “For the land shall be filled with intimate knowledge of the Eternal [as water covers the sea]” (Is. 11:9). Therefore the Messiah (Mashiach) is named after the anointing oil (Shemen HaMishchah)...for through the sense of smell, which is an aspect of the anointing oil, the life-force of the soul is awakened, for the sense of smell is an aspect of the surrender of our ego-self.</p>	<p>ליקוטי הלכות - אורח חיים הלכות ברכת הריח ג:ח</p> <p>מְשִׁיחַ יִפְקַח עֵינֵי כָּלֶם לְדַעַת כִּי הַשֵּׁם הוּא הָאֱלֹקִים כְּמוֹ שֶׁכָּתוּב כִּי תִמְלֵא הָאָרֶץ דַּעַה לְדַעַת אֶת ה' וְכוּלֵי וְעַל-כֵּן נִקְרָא מְשִׁיחַ עַל שֵׁם שְׁמֹן הַמִּשְׁחָה כִּי עַל-יְדֵי בְחִינַת הָרִיחַ בְּחִינַת שְׁמֹן הַמִּשְׁחָה עַל-יְדֵי זֶה נִמְשָׁךְ חַיּוֹת הַנְּשָׁמָה כִּי הָרִיחַ הוּא בְּחִינַת הַרְשִׁימוֹ שֶׁל הַבְּטוּל</p>