

Parashat HaChodesh, 5784, 2024:

*The Power of Rosh Chodesh*

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ה' יעזור וירחם על אחינו כל בני ישראל, בארץ ישראל ובכל חלקי הארץ

This Shabbat we will read Parashat HaChodesh which focuses on Rosh Chodesh, the first *mitzvah* Hashem commanded to the entire Jewish people: “This month shall be to you the head of the months; to you it shall be the first of the months of the year.” (*Sefer Shemot* 12:2, this and all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Rosh Chodesh’s historical and legal significance to our people is presented in a treasure trove of halachic analyses and aggadic interpretations that give voice to its remarkable import. In particular, Rabbi Elazar ben Arach, the greatest of all the students of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai (*Pirkei Avot* II: 9-10), looms large in the list of famous Torah personalities associated with this special day:

Rabbi Chelbo said: The wine of Perugitha and the water of Diomsith cut off the Ten Tribes from Israel [due to their powerful hedonistic and anti-Torah influences, Rashi]. Rabbi Elazar ben Arach visited those places. He was attracted to them [the wine and the bath waters] and [as a result,] his learning was uprooted [that is, he forgot it, Rashi]. When he returned [to the community of scholars], he arose to read the Torah. He wanted to read, “*HaChodesh hazeh lachem*” (“This month shall be to you...”) [instead,] he read “*HaCharesch hayah libbam*” (“Their hearts were silent”). But the scholars prayed for him, and his learning returned. (*Talmud Bavli*, Shabbat 147b, translation, *The Soncino Talmud* with my emendations)

In his commentary on the Torah entitled, “*Kedushat Tzion*,” the second Bobover Rebbe, HaRav Ben-Zion Halberstam *zatzal* (1874-1941), suggests the following interpretation of our passage: “We must understand the words of our Sages and the quizzical nature as to why Rabbi Elazar ben Arach was called upon to read the specific *parasha* of ‘*HaChodesh*

*hazeh lachem.*” Rav Halberstam’s exploration of the connection between Rabbi Elazar and Rosh Chodesh sheds light upon the concept of *mitzvah goreret mitzvah* (one commandment brings another in its wake, *Pirkei Avot* 4:2) and the problems associated with *mitzvat anashim m’lumdah* (the rote performance of a *mitzvah*):

The *meforshim* ask, “Does the phrase, ‘*mitzvah goreret mitzvah*’ really imply that an individual who performs one *mitzvah* will henceforth be like an unceasing river [of *mitzvot* observance], since one *mitzvah* brings another in its wake so that the entire rest of his life will be, by definition, *mitzvot*-suffused?” (*Kedushat Tzion*, Parashat Bo, page 98, this, and the following translations, my own)

Rav Halberstam summarizes the *meforshim*’s response to this question in this manner:

The commentators address this difficulty by noting that the uniquely valuable reward inherent in the phrase “*mitzvah goreret mitzvah*” applies solely to a commandment that is performed with deep intention (“*b’kavanat halev*”) and in its proper manner—then, and only then, does it lead one to perform another *mitzvah*. If, however, the commandment is performed as a *mitzvat anashim m’lumdah*, that is, without proper intention, then it will not lead one to undertake another *mitzvah*.

In an interpretative tour de force, Rav Halberstam opines that Rabbi Elazar ben Arach was frightened after reading “*HaChareish hayah libbam*” in place of our *pasuk*’s phrase, “*HaChodesh hazeh lachem.*” Based upon his abiding humility, Rabbi Elazar believed his error resulted from having “failed to properly concentrate when fulfilling the commandments on prior occasions,” for if this were not the case, the great *mitzvah* of Rosh Chodesh, the subject of his Torah reading, should have protected him. After all, since Rosh Chodesh was the first *mitzvah* given to the entire Jewish people, it should engender *mitzvah goreret mitzvah*. Rabbi Elazar, therefore, concluded that his *mitzvot* observance must have been on the low level of *mitzvat anashim m’lumdah*, which resulted in the loss of the reward and protection of *mitzvah goreret mitzvah*, and made him susceptible to the lure of hedonistic pursuits and the subsequent loss of his Torah knowledge. According to Rav Halberstam, however, Rav Elazar ben Arach’s “colleagues knew full well that, in truth, he

had performed prior *mitzvot* with the requisite intentionality,” and as a result, “prayed for mercy on his behalf and his learning returned.”

This poignant episode underscores the great power and holiness of Rosh Chodesh, and its remarkable significance in the thought of *Chazal*. As such, may the merit of our heartfelt observance of this *mitzvah* bring us bountiful blessings from Hashem and hasten the coming of the *Mashiach*, soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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Please contact me at [rdb718@gmail.com](mailto:rdb718@gmail.com) to be added to my weekly email list.

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at:

<http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik's English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link: [The Rav](#)