

Every year the Cantor and I joke about Cheshvan, the Jewish month which follows after the fall holidays.

It is frequently called Mar Cheshvan, which means literally the bitter month of Cheshvan, mar meaning bitter, as in the familiar word marror, the bitter herbs we eat on Passover. Cheshvan was considered a bitter month as it lacks a holiday. It is a completely bland month, it doesn't even have a little half-holiday like Tu Bishvat, or even a day of historical mourning like the 17th of Tammuz. Nothing, zilch, just Shabbat, and one regular day after another.

This year I learned that this is not exactly the real story about Mar Cheshvan. For starters Mar is not an addition to the name of the month but is actually part of its name. Further it doesn't come from the Hebrew word bitter, or the Hebrew honorific Mr. but rather from the Akkadian. In ancient Akkadian, this month is Marcheshvan or mara shevan in Hebrew yerech shemini, the 8th month.

In general in the Torah, the months were just given numbers, the first month, the fifth month, etc. The only exception was the month of Aviv, literally the spring month. Later in the books of Kings, three other months are referred to by name, Ziv, Eitanim and Bul, but these are clearly names borrowed from the surrounding

countries, Bul being most notably a Canaanite God. These names did not stick and are not mentioned elsewhere.

So how did we get the names of the Jewish months we use today? The Jerusalem Talmud tells us that these names came back from Babylonia with Ezra and the other returning exiles. That is exactly the period when the first day of the 7th month, the day of the sounding of the shofar, began its transformation into Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of the new year. There was tension around this reform of the Jewish calendar, as previously the year began in the spring, with the month in which Passover is celebrated. There was also resistance to using Babylonian terms instead of Hebrew or Aramaic.

Marcheshvan is a wonderful example of working things out. It is a Babylonian word that has become accepted in our tradition. It is part of the Jewish calendar which celebrates the New Year in Tishrei in the fall. But it is also a sign of respect for the earlier tradition which begins the year with Nisan, as Marcheshvan, the 8th month, counts from that spring beginning. It was a compromise that bridged the gap between the Exiles and those who stayed in the land, and it enabled Jewish life to go on.

In Jewish law, there are times when a peshara, a compromise, is considered greater than following the law. Peshara comes from the root solution, and focuses on creating shalom bayit, good relations, whether in a family or in a community.

Our tradition sees pesharah everywhere. At this time of the year, night is borrowing from day, according to the midrash, but that's ok, in the summer, the opposite will be the case. Even God is obliged to look for pesharah. The midrash tells us that first God tried to create a world of strict justice, din, but that did not work. God had to add the element of mercy, rachamim, in order to keep balance in the world.

Ellis, in the part of the Torah portion you read for us this morning, the character of Melchizedek, a foreign king was introduced. He greets Abraham after the battle with wine and bread and offers prayers to El Elyon, the most supreme God. Here too we see an example of the kind of compromise we find so often in Judaism- accepting a custom with foreign origins, and then remaking it in a way that fits the values of Judaism. As Professor Nahum Sarna, the great Biblical scholar, notes, "It is clear that the Hebrew titles (for God, like el elyon) belong to a widespread liturgical tradition in the ancient Near East, which Israel adopted

and modified to its own peculiar monotheism.” Many of the stories in Genesis have foreign parallel’s, yet they have become our own and been stamped with uniquely Jewish values.

Let us in our own day not be afraid to incorporate elements from the contemporary world in which we live, and let us look for ways, that eilu v-eilu, these and those, can be respected and thus live in peace.