

Date: 13 Cheshvan 5786 (November 4, 2025)

Torah Portion: Vayeira

Topic: A Reminder of Deliverance

As it is written (Genesis 18:2), “And [Abraham] raised his eyes and saw, and behold, three men were standing over him; and he saw, then he ran toward them from the entrance of the tent and bowed down toward the ground.” We learn that, due to the unusual heat, there were no travelers on the road and, thus, no visitors for Abraham. The Midrash records Abraham’s concern and Elohim’s response.

Abraham said, “Before I circumcised myself, passersby would come to me, but now that I am circumcised, no one is coming!” The Kadosh Baruch Hu said, “Before you circumcised yourself, only uncircumcised people would come to you; but now that you are circumcised, I and My ministers will be appearing before you.” Thus, it is written, “And [Abraham] raised his eyes and saw, and behold, three men were standing over him; and he saw, then he ran toward them...” In this verse, Scripture states twice: “and he saw,” to indicate that he saw Elohim’s Presence, and “he saw” also refers to the angels, as Elohim had assured him.

Having mentioned angels, the Midrash comments on the source of their names. R’ Chanina said, “The current names of the months of the Hebrew calendar came up to the Land of Yisrael from Babylonia with the returning exiles.” The Midrash is indicating that the names we use today for the months of the year—which are Persian in origin—first came into use during the Babylonian exile. This is implied by the fact that these names are mentioned only in Biblical books written after the Babylonian exile, such as Zechariah, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. Pre-exilic Biblical books refer to the months simply by using ordinal numbers, such as “the first month, the second month” (1 Kings 8:2; 6:1, 37, 38), which are not considered names but rather allusions to events that occurred in those months. Although only seven of the months—Nissan, Sivan, Elul, Kislev, Tevet, Shevat, and Adar—are mentioned in the post-exilic Biblical books, the Midrash asserts that the names of the remaining five unmentioned months also came from Babylonia.

Why is it that before the Babylonian exile the months were called “the first month,” “the second month,” etc. (with the first month being Nissan, the second Iyar, etc.), while ever since the Babylonian exile we call the months by their Persian names?

Exodus 12:2 states, “This month (referring to Nissan, the month of the Exodus from Mitzrayim) shall be for you the beginning of the months; it shall be for you the first of the months of the year.” That is, even though Tishrei—not Nissan—marks the beginning of the Hebrew calendar year (Exodus 23:16 and 34:22), Nissan shall from now on be the first month of the year “for you,” to enable you to remember the Exodus. Just as we call Sunday “echad b’Shabbos” and Monday “sheni b’Shabbos,” as a fulfillment of “Remember the Shabbat day to sanctify it,” so too calling Nissan the first month, Sivan the third month, etc., serves as a commemoration of our redemption from Mitzrayim.

The Midrash states that the names of the months we currently use came from Babylonia, although Ramban notes that the names themselves are actually Persian. The prophet Yirmeyahu, in prophesying the redemption from the Babylonian exile, said, “However, behold, days are coming—the word of YHWH—when it will no longer be said, ‘As YHWH lives, Who took out the Children of Yisrael from the land of Mitzrayim,’ but rather, ‘As YHWH lives, Who took out the Children of Yisrael from the land of the North...’” (Jeremiah 16:14–15). In fulfillment of this prophecy, when the House of Yehudah returned to Yisrael after a seventy-year exile in Babylonia, they began calling the months by the names they were given in Babylonia. This served, and continues to serve, as a reminder of their deliverance from that exile.

Ramban adds that this does not mean the original system of referring to months by number from Nissan should be abandoned, nor that the redemption from Mitzrayim should be forgotten. Rather, the Babylonian/Persian names are now to be used in addition to the original numbering system, in order to ensure that we recall the second redemption as well.

Shalom.