

Does it Have to be “*Marcheshvan*?”
Bereshit 5786 Drash
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Tuesday night we begin the Hebrew month of Cheshvan. Cheshvan stands out because in a Jewish calendar filled with holidays, fasts, and special observances, it is the only month with *none* of these days.

Along with this, it is historically the month when our matriarchs Sarah and Rachel died – and the great flood in Noah’s time began. The flood began on the 17th of Cheshvan, and the waters receded by the following year on the 27th of Cheshvan, allowing Noah and the other inhabitants of the ark to disembark. The term *mabbul* (meaning “flood”) is used in Genesis to refer to this deluge of water. The *mabbul* was an event of catastrophic divine judgment, and linguistically related, *Bul* is the biblical name for Cheshvan. In modern times, Cheshvan’s reputation for bitterness is sometimes taken so seriously that it has led to some Jews avoiding getting married in Cheshvan so that their marriage will not begin under a bad sign.

So for these reasons, Cheshvan, the biblical month of *Bul*, has the unfortunate nickname of *Marcheshvan*, or “bitter Cheshvan.” But I’m going to “*call bul*” on this.

The name *Marcheshvan* has always stood out for me – especially coming on the heels of what I call “the Berenstein Bears and Too Much Yontif.” I know - from personal experience – that the walk home from shul on the day of Simchat Torah is when pulpit rabbis do a big exhale. And I also know that while my fellow congregants and I have been inspired by the liturgy, the sermons, the gathering in community – we are ready to get back to “normal life.” There is a built-in tension with which I’ve always grappled. On one hand, we renew our souls during the *chagim*; and on the other hand, we instantaneously confront a month laden with burdens of the past. It just doesn’t sit right with me.

This week’s Parsha - my favorite, *Bereshit*, offers us wisdom to navigate this tension. Parshat *Bereshit* displays God’s work in all its magnificence.

We read that beginning on the third day of Creation, God stops and sees that the act of creating the world is good. In fact, when we get to the 6th day of Creation, God saw *all* that God had made and pronounced it *very* good.

The 20th century Hasidic master, the Netivot Shalom, was struck by this, teaching that *each day* we are confronted with new tasks of repairing the world, but *each day* God renews creation and so there is *new* energy that we may call on for the *new* day.

In perhaps a similar fashion, as we end this holy season with the abundance of soul renewal work we arrive immediately to the month of Cheshvan. We have the opportunity to emulate God and *begin* to focus on implementing change for the better in the year ahead. Our process of turning - teshuvah – doesn't end with Yom Kippur. Cheshvan is our first opportunity to bring that change into our world.

I posit for your consideration that in each of our own personal annual cycles, Cheshvan represents a turning –a *return* to creation.

As our friends at the Jewish Studio Project like to point out, our creativity is our greatest tool and our deepest power. Our world desperately needs each one of us to harness the inspired energy we gained from engaging in this all-encompassing renewal process and use it to heal and reimagine a better life for us and those around us.

Judaism is often seen through the lens of its celebrations, life cycle events and special occasions. But Judaism is also defined by its high moral standards and good works.

Is Cheshvan a time that is “bitter,” or should it be our time for growth and spiritual connection?

Is it a time of deterioration, as the leaves wither or is it not also when our potential for future growth is being sown?

Is it really a time when spiritual darkness reigns or should it be when our growth re-emerges, lighting our way forward?

For me, the message of Cheshvan is that despite the darkness, and even because of the darkness, there is future growth that awaits us. We have the opportunity to nurture that growth right now. In Cheshvan, the spiritual seeds we've planted during Tishrei begin to take root.

So is Cheshvan truly bitter? When we water and nurture the creative growth we planted, in Cheshvan we can begin to harvest the sweet produce of our enhanced souls. And it is very good.

Earlier I told you that Bereshit is my favorite parsha. I also have a favorite quote that has guided me throughout liminal moments in my life. It's by Goethe and it goes like this: “

Whatever you can do, or dream you can do, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it.”

My prayer and wish for you as we enter the month of Cheshvan is that you create something brilliant, powerful and magical through your continued process of teshuvah.

Va-yehi tov m'od – and it will be very good.

Shabbat shalom.