



**BNEI AKIVA**  
OF THE US AND CANADA

# CHOVERET CHINUCH

Chodesh Nissan

Noseh: Freedom חרות



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## Chodesh Tov!

We're happy to introduce you to the Choveret Chinuch for Chodesh Nissan. The holiday of Pesach has many names: חג האביב, חג הפסח, חג המצות, and **חג החרות** - Holiday of Spring, Holiday of Passing Over, Holiday Of Matzah, and **the Holiday of Freedom**. Nissan is a month where we reflect on Bnei Yisrael's exodus from Egypt. Many commentators discuss that when Bnei Yisrael left Mitzrayim they had to go from a slave mentality to the mentality of free people. This is one of the reasons given for why Bnei Yisrael sinned so many times in the desert. They had to learn what it means to be free but in accordance with what Hashem wants from us. Judaism has a unique perspective on freedom. In this month's choveret we will be learning about what it means to be a free person according to Judaism. The first two peulot explore how we view freedom of time according to Judaism. The third peula discusses free will and our ability to make good decisions. There is extra material at the end about freedom in the State of Israel. Additionally, at the end, there is a recommended article by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks which illustrates our noseh of חרות. Chag Kasher V'Sameach!

### **It is important that you and your madrichim own these peulot as your own.**

What we gave you is just the skeleton, if you do exactly what this page says- you will not run a successful snif! Read the peulot, make edits, and add your own stories or favorite games! Mix and match- these peulot have many parts, you can take parts of a peula and move them to another or create new ones. At the end of this choveret you can find extra stories and ideas to add as you like. Feel free to run ideas by any of us!

Bivrakat Chevrei Torah v'Avodah,

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## Choveret Chinuch Nissan 5778

### Peula #1 - "את הכבש האחד תעשה בבוקר" The Value of Structure and Consistency

Written by Jen van Amerongen, Merakezet Chinuch BANA

**Goal:** Have the chanichim understand that freedom in Judaism is more than being able to do whatever we want. As we learn from the Pesach story, Being free is actually about being responsible and being consistent. There's no such thing as a "vacation" or "snow day"- we must always have a basic structure.

**Trigger: No Rules** (this can be done in a lot of different ways with a lot of different games)

Play a game of dodgeball, or a game that your kids like, and tell the kids that the madrichim will be in charge of calling the outs. While the game is going on, have the madrichim slip outside the room (stay close), one by one. The idea is that no one will be there to enforce the rules.

**Discuss with the chanichim after the game is over:**

- How did the game work once the Madrichim left?
- Did people follow the rules?
- Were you upset that the rules weren't being followed?
- Why do we need rules (so that the game works!)
- Maybe the game was fun for a little while, but could you always play a game with no rules?
- If the Madrichim never came to sniff, or never prepared for sniff- what would that look like?

**Game #2- Which one is not like the others?**

- Print out each word or phrase on different pieces of paper and have the kids try and figure out which one seems different than the others.
  - The beginning riddles are a trigger before you get to the topic of the Avodat HaTamid. When looking at the 5 tragedies that happened on 17 of Tamuz, the stopping of the Avodat HaTamid seems out of place- why is it as tragic as the others? Also, when we look at the most important pesukim of the Torah- why is the Korban the most important? It doesn't seem as significant as Veahavta Lereacha Kamocha or Shema Yisrael!
- The Torah ones will not be as obvious to figure out but support and challenge the chanichim's thoughts.

### **Examples:**

Questions:

1. Green, yellow, red, blue
2. April, December, November, June
3. Cirrus, calculus, cumulus, stratus
4. Carrots, radishes, potatoes, cabbages
5. Fork, comb, rake, shovel

Answers:

1. Green. Yellow, red and blue are primary colors, green is not.
2. December. The other months have only 30 days.
3. Calculus. The others are cloud types.
4. Cabbage. The others are vegetables that grow underground.
5. Shovel. The others have prongs.

### **Avodat HaTamid:**

6. Most Important Pasuk in the Torah:

1. Ben Zoma: "Shema Yisrael"
2. Ben Nannas: "Love your fellow as yourself"
3. Ben Pazi: "One lamb should be brought in the morning (as a korban), the other in the afternoon."

7. Significant Tragedies that Happened on 17 B'Tamuz

1. Moshe broke the tablets at Har Sinai – in response to the sin of the Golden Calf/Cheit HaEgel.
2. The daily korbanot in the First Beit Hamikdash were suspended during the siege of Yerushlayim.
3. Yerushalayim's walls were breached, prior to the destruction of the Second Beit Hamikdash in 70 CE.
4. Prior to the Great Revolt, the Roman general Apostamos burned a Torah scroll
5. An idol was placed in the Kodosh Kedoshim in the Beit Hamikdash.

### **The difference- Idea to discuss:**

The main idea is that the Avodat HaTamid is the daily Korban that was given twice daily in the Beit Hamikdash and it is a symbol on consistency and structure in Jewish life.

An idea paraphrased from Rav Aharon Lichtenstein: The mishna records five tragic events that took place on the 17th of Tamuz. *The negation of the daily korbanot doesn't seem as*

devastating as the other 4 events; it was merely the absence of the daily offering; the Temple was still around and the situation could have been reversed. What's the big deal?

A similar question emanates from a midrash, in which three prominent Tannaim debate the verse that expresses the most all-encompassing principle of the Torah. The first two views are simple to understand: Ben Zoma focuses on a Jew's commitment to the One G-d of history, while Ben Nannas highlights the oneness of the Jewish people. But Ben Pazi's view is cryptic! How all-inclusive is the concept of a twice daily offering?

### **So what's the reason why they are included?**

Answer: **Judaism is built on consistency.** Those two little lambs represented the consistency required in religious life. This explains why, when the daily sacrifice ended, we mourn. It signaled the end of normal religious life. The absence of these korbanot, starting on the 17th of Tamuz, broke our consistency, it broke our expression of commitment to The One who dwelled in the Temple. Dedication and commitment to Hashem is THE all-encompassing principle of Jewish life - hence, Ben Pazi

### **Discuss what this means for the chanichim in their lives:**

- Have you ever had a really long vacation or snow day? What was it like?
  - Maybe it was fun, but could you imagine never going to school? Would we learn?
- What are things that keep us consistent in our Jewish lives?
  - Davening, saying Shema before sleep, putting on Tefillin, Making Brachot/Birkat HaMazon, Lighting shabbos candles- Discuss examples of things that we ALWAYS do and couldn't imagine missing one time.
  - You can tell the kids that there are people who actually say the pesukim from the Torah that describe the Avodat HaTamid to make it as if we're bringing it everyday and keeping that consistency.
- When the Jews left Mitzrayim, they were not used to a life without rules and regulations. But what they had to learn was that Judaism isn't free from rules either- we have rules that Hashem gives us that help us be consistent.

## Choveret Chinuch Nissan 5778

### Peula #2 - Is There Such Thing as “Free Time”?

Written by Jen van Amerongen, Merakezet Chinuch BANA

**Materials:** Check Minute to Win It challenges and make sure to have what you need for Snif.

**Goal:** Have the chanichim learn that time is very important and we shouldn't waste it. As Jews, we don't really think there is such thing as total “free time”. Rav Lichtenstein presents this idea in a mashal of bread and butter. If bread is the better part of a sandwich- why don't we just eat two slices of bread? Why put on the butter? Well, Butter is useful if it helps the flavor of the bread. In Judaism, Torah and Mitzvot are the bread, the most important thing, and leisure, free time, are the butter. Of course we want to have the butter, free time too, but only if we understand that its productive and for the sake of helping our lives as Jews.

#### **Trigger: Minute to Win It**

The idea is to show kids how in a little bit of time, we can do a lot. Mix in with the “classic” Minute to Win It, Torah/Mitzvah challenges. Add your own!

- **Examples: Cookie Face.** Each person had a cookie placed on their forehead and had to get it into their mouth without touching it with their hands.
- **Stack Attack.** Stacking 36 cups in a pyramid and then back down into a single stack.
- **Movin' On Up.** In this game, the kids had to start with the blue cup on top and stack the cups one by one until the blue cup is on top again. Use 8-12 cups depending on the age and ability of those playing.
- **Ball in the Cup.** Land three ping pong balls in a single cup while standing on a chair. The trick is to not have the balls bounce out or knock the cup over.
- **Mitzvah/Torah Challenges: Dvar Torah Challenge,** print out pictures of unrelated objects and challenge the kids to come up with a Dvar Torah and give it over in 1 minute!
- **Gemilut Chasadim Challenge:** Think of a compliment for at least 10 kids/madrachim in snif
- **Pasuk Find Challenge:** Choose a pasuk from that week's parsha, or a famous pasuk and have the kids find it in a Tanakh or Chumash.

- **Bracha Bee:** Hide foods (or pictures of foods) under boxes and have the kids run to each one and yell out what bracha it is.

### **Text to Discuss:**

This mishna in Pirkei Avot talks about the urgent nature of being a Jew. There is always time to do what Hashem wants from us, and Hashem expects a lot from us.

רַבִּי טַרְפוֹן אוֹמֵר, הַיּוֹם קָצֵר וְהַמְּלָאכָה מְרַבָּה, וְהַפּוֹעֲלִים עֲצֵלִים, וְהַשָּׂכָר הַרְבֵּה, וּבַעַל הַבַּיִת דּוֹחֵק:  
מסכת אבות · פרק ב · משנה טו

Rabbi Tarfon would say: The day is short, the work is much, the workers are lazy, the reward is great, and the Master is pressing.

### **Print and discuss text with chanichim:**

- Before explaining the Mishna ask them- What do you think the mishna is talking about?
  - What is the nimshal of this mashal?
- Do you feel this way about being a Jew?
- How would you change the way you act if you had in mind this image of Hashem as a boss who expecting a lot from us?
- What is one area of your life where you can maximize how you use your time (use your time in the best way)
- What do you do with your free time?
- Whats an example of something simple you can do instead of just watching TV or chilling?
  - Learn a mishna
  - Help your parents in the kitchen or clean up
  - Watch an AlephBeta video about this week's parsha
  - Call a camp friend to ask them how they're doing

### **Additional Stories about the Value of Time Well-spent in Judaism:**

These are stories that you can add to your peula to show the kids examples of people who took their time very seriously.

**Volozhin Yeshiva:**

Reb Chaim of Volozhin, the Rosh Yeshiva of the great Volozhin Yeshiva, a student of the Vilna Gaon, wanted to ensure that the voice of Torah always be heard in the Beit Midrash, day and night. This entailed having boys study throughout the night on a rotation basis. Reb Chaim viewed the responsibility of the Beit Hamidrash to the Beit Hamikdash. The Beit Hamikdash had a continuous presence of Kohanim who were ready to work at any time of the day if necessary. The Mishna tells us there were twenty-four Mishmarot throughout the year, consisting of Kohanim families who worked for a week at a time twice a year. The Kohanim essentially 'watched over' the Beit Hamikdash, and this is the definition of the word 'Mishmar'.

- Kids might be familiar with the concept of Mishmar from school

**The Vilna Gaon:**

The Vilna Gaon, one of the greatest rabbis of the past 500 years, would sleep only four 30-minute intervals each day – a total of two hours of sleep each 24-hour period, so that he could maximize his time learning Torah. There is a legend told about him that he would sleep with a candle in his hand so that when it would come close to burning out, it would wake him up, like an alarm clock.

## Choveret Chinuch Nissan 5778

### Peula #3 - Free Choice: The Bechira Point

Written by Jen van Amerongen, Merzakezet Chinuch BANA

This peula uses some explanations and idea from this curriculum: <http://tikkunmiddotproject.wikispaces.com/Bechirah%20Points>

**Goal:** In the peula we are going to introduce the chanichim to the idea of Bechira Chofshit, by focusing on the Bechira Point, an idea discussed by Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler. This idea relates to freedom and Pesach because slaves do not have the ability to make their own decisions, but free people do. Another related idea which is more abstract and better for older chanichim, is the idea of Hashem hardening Pharaoh's heart and Bechira Chofshit.

#### **In a nutshell introduction to Bechira Point:**

**Full chapter here:**

<https://tikkunmiddotproject.wikispaces.com/file/view/Behira%20Point%20English%20text.pdf/495314892/Behira%20Point%20English%20text.pdf>

Bechira Point – “A choice point.” נקודת בחירה Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler writes that humans have free will only at the point where one’s sense of what is true meets one’s sense of what is false. We experience this as confusion and find it hard to make decisions at these points. The more we can choose a positive direction, the easier it gets in the future to choose a positive direction. According to Rabbi Dessler, everyone is born with different behira points based on both nature and nurture. However, we are completely responsible for our decisions at these behira points.

**Basically, according to Rav Dessler, we don’t have control, or free will, over the majority of things in our life: where we’re born, who our parents are, where we go to school... but we do have bechira points which are certain points in our life where we do have the opportunity to make a choice between right and wrong and the more right choices we make, the easier it is in the future.**

- **This idea might seem too complex for elementary school kids, but it can actually be taught in a way that they can understand.**

#### **Trigger: Skit from the Lion King**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O7fXfCZ4sB4>

If your chanichim are not familiar with the Lion King, you might want to provide some background- Simba ran away from home because he thought he was the cause of his father’s death, but now the kingdom has been overtaken by his evil uncle and they need him. In this scene he meets with Rafiki who tells him that he can’t control the past but he can control what to do next.

Split up the parts between Madrichim who can act out the scene well.

## Scene from The Lion King: (Source: <http://lionking.org/scripts/Script.html>)

**Simba:** You knew my father?

**Rafiki:** {Monotone} Correction-- I *know* your father.

**Simba:** I hate to tell you this, but... he died. A long time ago.

**Rafiki:** Nope. Wrong again! Ha ha hah! He's alive! And I'll show him to you. You follow old Rafiki, he knows the way. Come on!

{Rafiki leads Simba through the brush. Simba has trouble keeping up due to his size. The music slips into African chant.}

**Rafiki:** Don't dawdle. Hurry up!

**Simba:** Hey, whoa. Wait, wait.

**Rafiki:** Come on, come on.

**Simba:** Would you slow down?

{Rafiki is seen flitting through the canopy ahead of Simba, laughing hollowly and whooping. Simba struggles to keep up. Suddenly, Rafiki appears with his hand held up right into Simba's face.}

**Rafiki:** STOP!

{Rafiki motions to Simba near some reeds.}

{He parts the reeds and points past them with his staff.}

**Rafiki:** Look down there.

{Simba quietly and carefully works his way out. He looks over the edge and sees his reflection in a pool of water. He first seems a bit startled, perhaps at his own mature appearance, but then realizes what he's looking at.}

**Simba:** {Disappointed sigh} That's not my father. That's just my reflection.

**Rafiki:** Noo. Look harder.

{Rafiki motions over the pool. Ripples form, distorting Simba's reflection; they resolve into Mufasa's face. A deep rumbling noise is heard.}

**Rafiki:** You see, he lives in you.

{Simba is awestruck. The wind picks up. In the air the huge image of Mufasa is forming from the clouds. He appears to be walking from the stars. The image is ghostly at first, but steadily gains color and coherence.}

**Mufasa:** {Quietly at first} Simba . . .

**Simba:** Father?

**Mufasa:** Simba, you have forgotten me.

**Simba:** No. How could I?

**Mufasa:** You have forgotten who you are, and so

have forgotten me. Look inside yourself, Simba. You are more than what you have become. You must take your place in the Circle of Life.

**Simba:** How can I go back? I'm not who I used to be.

**Mufasa:** Remember who you are. You are my son, and the one true king.

{Close up of Simba's face, bathed in the golden light, showing a mixture of awe, fear, and sadness. The image of Mufasa starts to fade.}

**Mufasa:** Remember who you are.

{Mufasa is disappearing rapidly into clouds. Simba runs into the fields trying to keep up with the image.}

**Simba:** No. Please! Don't leave me.

**Mufasa:** Remember...

**Simba:** Father!

**Mufasa:** Remember...

**Simba:** Don't leave me.

**Mufasa:** Remember . . .

{Simba is left out in the fields. There is just a cloud left where his father's image was. The wind tosses the grass restlessly. Rafiki approaches.}

**Rafiki:** What was THAT? {laughs} The weather-- Pbbbah! Very peculiar. Don't you think?

**Simba:** Yeah. Looks like the winds are changing.

**Rafiki:** **Ahhh. Change is good.**

**Simba:** **Yeah, but it's not easy. I know what I have to do. But, going back means I'll have to face my past. I've been running from it for so long.**

{Rafiki whacks Simba on the head with his staff.}

**Simba:** **Oww! Jeez-- What was that for?**

**Rafiki:** **It doesn't matter; it's in the past!** {laughs}

**Simba:** **{Rubbing head} Yeah, but it still hurts.**

**Rafiki:** **Oh yes, the past can hurt. But the way I see it, you can either run from it, or... learn from it.**

{He swings at Simba with his staff again. This time Simba ducks.}

**Rafiki:** Hah, you see! So what are you going to do?

**Simba:** First, I'm gonna take your stick.

{Simba tosses Rafiki's staff to the side.}

**Rafiki:** No, no, no, no! Not the stick!

{As Rafiki picks up his staff, Simba starts running off.}

**Rafiki:** Hey, where are you going?

**Simba:** **{Shouting back} I'm going back!**

**Rafiki:** Good! Go on! Get out of here!

## Discussion Points:

- What does Simba have to do?
- Why doesn't he want to do it?
- What is Rafiki's message to Simba?
- Focus on Rafiki's message- **"Oh yes, the past can hurt. But the way I see it, you can either run from it, or... learn from it."** We don't have the ability to control everything in our lives, but we can control how we react to them and act in the future.
- Ask the kids if they can think of a time they really didn't want to do something but in the end made the right decision
- Ask for examples of when it is really hard to make the right decision
  - Ex: Bullying, cheating, telling the truth, standing up for a friend
- Introduce them to the idea of a **Bechira Point**
  - A Behira or Choice Point is a time when you have a choice concerning your actions.
  - You can either chose to do something that you have always done or you can chose to do something new.
  - You have these choices in your life every day and most of the time your choices are automatic. But you can chose to stop acting automatically and make your own decisions.

## Give them a scenario:

There's a girl in your class named Julia, who you always invite to hang out at your house before Snif on Shabbat afternoon. This past week, she invited your friends to hang out at her house for Snif, and left you out! You had to spend Shabbat afternoon reading by yourself at home. She came to school on Monday and says to you, "I'm sorry I wasn't able to have you over this past Shabbat, but could I come to you this Shabbat?"

- What is your automatic reaction?
  - You can angrily say, "Nope."
  - You can start a fight and yell at her for not inviting you this past week
  - You can just ignore her and walk away
  - You can laugh and say sarcastically, "Really? You think I want to have YOU over?"
  - You can lie to her and say you're not having friends over this week

- Take a minute to put yourself in Julia’s place
  - Maybe her parents only let her have a few friends over because their house is not so big and they have their Grandfather over who they don’t want to be disturbed.
  - Maybe she was planning on having you over the next Shabbat and just couldn’t have you come this past week.
  - Maybe she genuinely just forgot to invite you because she had a big test on Friday that she was thinking about all week.
  - Maybe she tried sending you a text but her phone wasn’t working so well this week.
- Would you have the same automatic reaction?
- This is a Bechira Point
  - Everything leading up to this point you can’t really control- You can’t turn back time and make sure that Julia would’ve invited you. And you can’t know why she didn’t invite you. **But, you do have control at this moment!** Bechira means taking a moment to stop and think and see that you have the ability to control your reaction, you don’t have to be angry at Julia. Once you think it over you the choice between right and wrong becomes a little more clear. And when you’re in the same situation next time, it will even be easier to make the right decision.
- Challenge the kids to think of other examples of “Bechira Points”

**Additional activity: Automatic Reaction**

- Hold up the photos and ask the kids to say their automatic reaction to what’s going on.
- Then give them one minute to think about it, what else could be happening, and how can they change their reaction?



## Additional Learning Points on Bechira for Older Kids (or Madrichim!)

### Hashem Hardening Pharaoh's Heart:

This article discusses that Hashem hardening Pharaoh's heart actually gave Pharaoh free choice to make a decision about letting Bnei Yisrael go.

- [https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/460242/jewish/Why-Didnt-Pharaoh-Release-the-Israelites.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/460242/jewish/Why-Didnt-Pharaoh-Release-the-Israelites.htm)

This idea is formulated by **Ramban**: [https://www.sefaria.org/Ramban\\_on\\_Exodus.7.3.1?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Ramban_on_Exodus.7.3.1?lang=bi)

### Brachot 33b: Everything is in the hands of Heaven, except for fear of Heaven:

ואמר רבי חנינא הכל בידי שמים חוץ מיראת שמים שנאמר (דברים י, יב) ועתה ישראל מה ה' אלהיך שואל מעמך כי אם ליראה

Tangentially, the Gemara cites an additional statement by Rabbi Ḥanina concerning principles of faith. **And Rabbi Ḥanina said: Everything is in the hands of Heaven, except for fear of Heaven.** Man has free will to serve God or not, as it is stated: **“And now Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you other than to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all of His ways, to love Him and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deuteronomy 10:12).** The Lord asks man to perform these matters because ultimately, the choice is in his hands.

אטו יראת שמים מילתא זוטרתא היא והא"ר חנינא משום ר' שמעון בן יוחי אין לו להקב"ה בבית גזזיו אלא אוצר של יראת שמים שנאמר (ישעיהו לג, ו) יראת ה' היא אוצרו

The verse says: What does the Lord your God ask of you other than to fear the Lord your God. The Gemara asks: **Is fear of Heaven a minor matter** that it can be presented as if God is not asking anything significant? **Didn't Rabbi Ḥanina say in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai: The Holy One, Blessed be He, has nothing in his treasury other than a treasure of fear of Heaven, as it is stated: “Fear of the Lord is his treasure” (Isaiah 33:6).** The Lord values and treasures fear of Heaven over all else.

אין לגבי משה מילתא זוטרתא היא דאמר ר' חנינא משל לאדם שמבקשים ממנו כלי גדול ויש לו דומה עליו ככלי קטן ואין לו דומה עליו ככלי גדול:

The Gemara responds: **Indeed, for Moses fear of Heaven is a minor matter. As Rabbi Ḥanina stated: It is comparable to one who is asked for a large vessel and he has one, it seems to him like a small vessel** because he owns it. However, one who is asked for just a **small vessel** and he does not have one, **it seems to him like a large vessel.** Therefore, Moses could say: What does the Lord your God ask of you other than to fear, because in his eyes it was a minor matter.

## **Extra Material:**

### **Freedom in Israel:**

**Law of Return-** <http://www.jewishagency.org/first-steps/program/5131>

In 1950, Israel's Knesset passed a remarkable law, beginning with a few simple words that defined Israel's central purpose: "Every Jew has the right to immigrate to this country..."

With the inception of the State of Israel, two thousand years of wandering were officially over. Since then, Jews have been entitled to simply show up and request to be Israeli citizens, assuming they posed no imminent danger to public health, state security, or the Jewish people as a whole. Essentially, all Jews everywhere are Israeli citizens by right.

In 1955, the law was amended slightly to specify that dangerous criminals could also be denied that right.

In 1970, Israel took another historic step by granting automatic citizenship not only to Jews, but also to their non-Jewish children, grandchildren, and spouses, and to the non-Jewish spouses of their children and grandchildren. This addition not only ensured that families would not be broken apart, but also promised a safe haven in Israel for non-Jews subject to persecution because of their Jewish roots.

### **Jewish Democratic State-**

<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/values-of-a-jewish-and-democratic-state>

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/jewish-or-democratic-israels-former-top-judge-reflects-on-values/>

## **Passover's Freedom Is Control Over Time**

**By Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks**

Celebrating Passover, as we've just been doing, I've been reminded of a very odd feature of the biblical story.

Jews read the books of Moses not just as history but as divine command. The question to which they are an answer is not, "What happened?" but rather, "How then shall I live?" And it's only with the exodus that the life of the commands really begins.

According to Jewish tradition, the first command the Jewish people ever received was the line in Exodus 12: "This month is to be for you the first month." We interpret this as the command to establish a calendar, with its Sabbaths and holy days and special seasons.

Let's study this the way Jews do, which is by asking awkward questions. Here is the obvious question: Why was this the first command? The Israelites were still slaves in Egypt. They were longing for freedom. They were about to begin the long journey across the desert. Why did they need a command about calendars and holy days? What has a diary to do with liberty?

To this, one Jewish scholar offered a brilliant answer. What, he asked, is the difference between a free human being and a slave? We tend to think that it has to do with labour, toil, effort. A slave works hard. A free person does not. But in actuality, some free people work very hard indeed, especially those who enjoy their work.

The real difference, he said, lies in who has control over time. A free human being works long hours because at some stage he or she has chosen to. A slave has no choice, no control over time. That, he said, is why fixing a calendar was the first command given to the Israelites. It was as if God was saying to them: if you are to be free, the first thing you must learn to master is time.

It's a fascinating insight, and one that still seems to hold true. Some years ago there was a study to discover the most stressful occupation. It turned out not to be the head of a large business, football manager or Prime Minister, but rather: bus driver. In 2011 the list was headed by airline pilots, fire-fighters and taxi drivers. These are people always struggling with time against factors not under their control. The least stressful? Bookbinder. Binding books soothes the soul.

Without arguing the point in detail — we all think ours is the most stressful occupation — it is an insight we often overlook. When I was studying economics in the 1960s, the received wisdom was that with automation, we would all be working 20-hour weeks and our biggest problem would be what to do with all our leisure. In reality, the working week has grown longer, not shorter. And with emails, texts, smartphones and the like, we can be on call 24/7. In terms of stress and control over our time, are we freer than we were, or less so? My guess is, less so.

Part of the beauty of Judaism, and surely this is so for other faiths also, is that it gently restores control over time. Three times a day we stop what we are doing and turn to God in prayer. We recover perspective. We inhale a deep breath of eternity. Nor do we rush our meals. Before eating, and afterward, we say a blessing. That too allows us to focus attention on simple pleasures, turning our daily bread into momentary epiphany.

Ask any time-management expert for the most important distinction, and she is likely to answer: the difference between the important and the merely urgent. Under pressure of time we tend to ignore the things that are important but not urgent. That is why the Sabbath is a life-saver. It's time dedicated to the things that are important but not urgent, like eating together as a family, or celebrating together as a community, or simply giving thanks. These are the things that flood a life with unexpected happiness. On the Sabbath — unless you are a rabbi — stress has no chance at all.

Religious ritual is a way of structuring time so that we, not employers, the market or the media, are in control. Life needs its pauses, its chapter breaks, if the soul is to have space to breathe. Otherwise, we may not be in Egypt, but we can still be slaves.