PARASHAT HACHODESH: Why do we call this coming month “Nisan”?

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This Saturday, March 29th, we will begin the month of Nisan at night. We will read this Shabbat, the Perasha of the week, Pequde. We will take a second Sefer Tora to read *ha Chodesh haze lakhem*, that is, a text from the book of Shemot (Exodus) chapter 12 announcing the coming of the month of Nisan: “This month will be for you the first month … of the months of the year “. In the Hebrew calendar, there are 12 months (or 13 when there is a leap year, and a second month of Adar is added every 3 years or so). In the Tora the names of the months are designed with ordinal numbers: first month, second month, third month, and so on. The month of Nisan is the first of the 12 months of the year. For those familiar with the ordinary Gregorian calendar, there is something unusual here: January is the first month of the year, and it is also the first month of the year; that is, January, the new year begins. In the Hebrew calendar, however, the year starts in the seventh month of the year, the month of Tishri, and the first month of the month is Nisan.

The month we call today “Nisan” was designated by the Tora as the first month of the year because it is the month of Pesach. When we count the months, we remember the great miracle of our redemption. So when we say: “the third month,” we are saying “the third month, counting from Nisan, the month of our redemption.” Something similar, although in the opposite sense, happens with the days of the week. We count the days of the week in Hebrew, as in Portuguese, with ordinal numbers: the first day (□□□□□ □□□), Sunday, the second day (□□□ □□□),

Monday, etc. And every time we count the days, we do it in reference to Shabbat. When we say in Hebrew “Monday,” we are saying, “Today is the second day, counting toward Shabbat” (□□□□ □□□). So every time we mention a day of the week, we remember Shabbat.

Today, although we continue counting the days of the week with ordinal numbers, we no longer count the months with their ordinal names, but we say Nisan, Iyar, Tishri, etc. Why? These names are not Hebrew names! In fact, these were the names of the months in ancient Babylon (and then in Persia, as they appear in Megillat Esther).

The big question is: why did we Jews abandon the Biblical names of the months and adopt the non-Jewish names of the months of Babylon?

Ramban (12, 2) explains that this has to do with a prophecy of Yirmiyahu (Jeremiah). Yirmiyahu had the difficult task of announcing that if the people of Israel persisted in their abandonment of the Tora, the Bet haMiqdash and Yerushalayim would be destroyed, and the survivors would be taken prisoners to Babylon. But Yirmiyahu also comforted the people, announcing that HaShem would miraculously bring them again from Babylon to the land of Israel. This great miracle occurred in 538 BCE, when, as the last Pesuquim of the Tanakh says, the Persian emperor Cyrus Koresh announced that HaShem revealed to him and ordered him to rebuild the Bet haMiqdash in Yerushalayim. Miraculously, Koresh also invited all the Yehudim who wanted to return to Israel under his protection.

Yirmiyahu prophesied the destruction and exile of Israel (chapter 16: 9-13) and also the return of the Jewish people to their land. And he said (16: 14-15) that when this happens, when HaShem would bring the Jewish people back from Babel to the land of Israel: “… it will no longer be remembered [only] that HaShem took us out of the land of Egypt, but it will be said that HaShem brought back the children of Israel [to their

land] from the land of the north (= Babel) and from all the countries where I [HaShem] exiled them."

Our sages understood that the memory of the redemption of Babel would completely replace the memory of the redemption of Egypt. In fact, no event in Jewish history is mentioned and remembered as many times as our deliverance from Egypt. There are dozens of Mitzvot, not only Pesah but also Shabbat, Tefillin, Shema, etc., that remind us of Egypt's departure. But surviving the Babylonian exile was a miracle of Biblical proportions. So, what do we do then with the Prophet Yirmiyahu's indication: to remember the great miracle of the redemption of Babel? Ramban explains that to follow Yirmiyahu's words, we count the months of the year with the Babylonian non-Jewish names. Thus, whenever we mention the Babylonian name of one of our calendar months, we automatically remember our exile in Babel and "YETSIYAT BABEL," our miraculous redemption from that captivity.