

TORAH STUDY FOR CHRISTIANS

Villa Maria Education and Spirituality Center, January 20, 2016

INTRODUCTION: The Jewish Calendar; Tu B'Shevat

Although we are less than a month into the new year on the secular calendar, we are in the fifth month of the Jewish calendar, the month of Shevat. The differences between the Jewish calendar and the secular calendar are many and complex, and they reflect different cultural and religious values as well. The influential 19th C. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch said, “The Jew’s catechism is his calendar.”¹ And it is true, you can learn a lot about the Jews and Judaism by studying the calendar.

We’ll be looking at the Jewish calendar as a whole during this session and at one of the four Jewish new years, Tu B’Shevat (the 15th of the month of Shevat) in particular, since that holiday will be commemorated on Sunday evening and Monday.

THE JEWISH CALENDAR

Where do the Jews get the motivation to keep careful track of our days, months, and years? Every society does this, for sure, but what is the particular Jewish motivation? **Time is sacred** - again, this is not an insight exclusive to Judaism. Certainly our connection to the Torah, our yearning for connection to and through its teachings, is crucial to understanding our obsession with the calendar. The first of G-d’s creations is time: we read in Gen. 1:5 that by separating light from darkness, “G-d called the light day, and the darkness He called night. And there was evening and there was morning, a first day.” Later in the same chapter, we read that G-d created the great lights, the Sun and the Moon, to separate day and night, a greater light for the day and a lesser light for the night: “...they shall serve as signs for the set times (*mo’adim*)...” And, most importantly, G-d sanctified time by resting on the seventh day, thus creating the Sabbath (*Shabbat*).

The Torah tells us not merely what holidays we observe and how we are to observe them but **when** we are to keep them as well. Here are but two of hundreds of examples:

1. *Exodus 12:2*

ב הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לְכֶם רֵאשִׁית חֳדָשִׁים רְאשׁוֹן הוּא לְכֶם לְחֹדֶשׁ הַשָּׁנָה:

“This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you.”

The Israelites are told to put aside a lamb or kid on the 10th of that month (called in the Torah *chodesh haAviv* (the month of Aviv) interpreted now as “the spring season”), and then to slaughter it at twilight of the 14th of that month - this marks the observance of the first *Pesach* (Passover). That month is now called Nissan.

2. *Leviticus 23:1-2*

א וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ב דַּבֵּר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם מוֹעֲדֵי יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר-תִּקְרְאוּ אֹתָם מִקְרָאֵי קֹדֶשׁ אֵלֶּה הֵם מוֹעֲדָי:

1. A. Spier, *The Comprehensive Hebrew Calendar* (Feldheim, Nanuet, NT, 1986), pg. ix.

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“The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to the Israelites and say to them: These are **My** fixed times, the fixed times of the Lord, which **you** shall proclaim as sacred occasions.”

The rest of the chapter goes on to enumerate the Shabbat and the *mo'adim* (the set times, sacred occasions, i.e., festivals and holy periods) of the Lord. The wording of the first sentence is important: while these are G-d's fixed times, they are up to humanity to proclaim them (that is, to affix them on the calendar and to say when they begin.)

A Lunar-Solar Calendar - The Jewish calendar (also called the Hebrew calendar) is lunisolar, meaning that it calculates months by the Moon and years by the Sun. The calendar was regulated in the 4th C by Hillel II, who devised a formula based on mathematican and astronomical calculations that is still used (and by which the calendar can be calculated millennia in advance). While the Sanhedrin met (before the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 CE), two unrelated witnesses would need to travel to Jerusalem to testify that they had seen the first sliver of the Moon, upon which the Sanhedrin would declare the New Month and send out messengers to announce it. As you might imagine, this system often led to delays, problems, and inconsistencies - the Talmud contains several stories of these.

Features of the Hebrew Calendar -

1. **Days** - Like the standard secular calendar, a day is defined by a single rotation of the Earth on its axis - however, Jewish days begin at sundown (see Gen. 1:5 above!)
2. **Months** - The months were named according to those of the Babylonian calendar. Some contain 30 days, others 29, and two (Cheshvan and Kislev) contain either 29 or 30 depending on what day of the week the following year's month of Tishrei would begin. (This is because Yom Kippur cannot fall adjacent to Shabbat; therefore its month - Tishrei - must be “fixed.”)
3. **Years** - The year contains 12 months, but in order to assure that Pesach is observed in the springtime, as the Torah specifies, seven times out of 19 years (on the 3rd, 6th, 8th, 11th, 14th, 17th, and 19th years), a leap **month** - Adar I (Adar is the month of Purim, a very happy holiday, and the month before Nissan, when Pesach is celebrated) - is added. We are celebrating the year 5776, traditionally that number of years since Creation; however, few people (including Orthodox Jews) believe that the world, let alone humanity, was created 5,776 years ago (who really knows how long “a day” was during the Creation of the World?) Also, as I've often said, most Jews don't use AD and BC to designate secular years, since these refer to the divinity of Jesus, but use CE (Common Era or Christian Era) and BCE instead.

TU B'SHEVAT (the 15th of Shevat)

Just as the rabbis could “proclaim” the festivals, so too could they add holidays, therefore there are several special days on the Jewish calendar that do not appear in the Torah. Some are described in the Talmud, while others were instituted due to post-Talmudic historical events. Post-Biblical holidays include the fast day of *Tisha B'av* - the ninth day of the month of Av, which commemorates the occurrence of several tragic historical events, most notable the destruction of both Holy Temples - and minor fasts (as opposed to the major fast day - *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement), mostly tied to events leading up to the destruction of the

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Temple. *Hannukah*, which I discussed last session, is post-Biblical but is mentioned in the Talmud. Others are in reference to later historical events: *Yom HaShoah* is the day of remembrance of the Holocaust; *Yom HaZikaron* is a memorial day for those who died in Israel's wars; *Yom HaAtzma'ut* celebrates Israel Independence Day.

The Talmud tells us that there are four new years on the calendar: the first of Nissan, as the Torah specifies; the first of Tishrei (when we celebrate Rosh Hashanah, the all-around, multipurpose new year, also called the new year for kings, since the year of their dominion was counted from the first of Tishrei); the first of Elul (the month before Tishrei, used as the new year for cattle, so that they can be properly tithed); and Tu B'Shevat (the new year for the trees, since it was important to know how old a tree was for the purpose of tithing - a fruit tree's produce could not be eaten at all in the first or second year, on the third year, its fruit was brought to the Temple, and it could only be harvested for food in the fourth year and onward).

Tu B'Shevat has evolved into a kind of Jewish Earth Day, a time to celebrate trees and to sample the produce of *Eretz Yisrael* (the Land of Israel). Starting in the Middle Ages, it also became a time for Jewish mystics to commemorate the mystical ties of the people to G-d and to the Holy Land, thus bringing them closer to spiritual perfection. They instituted a *seder* (a meal of several steps, akin to the Passover *seder*) in which they evoked the emanations of G-d through the eating of ten specific fruits of the Holy Land and drinking four cups of wine, making blessings on each. The wine progresses from white to red by mixing the cups, symbolizing the flow from the dormancy of nature in the winter (the white wine/grape juice) to its vibrancy in the spring (the red wine/grape juice), and from the flow of masculine to feminine. These emanations of G-d were illustrated by means of the cosmic Tree of the Sefirot, which they saw as the blueprint for the creation of the world. By blessing and then partaking of the wine and produce, they sought to evoke the four kabbalistic worlds of creation of the physical, natural world and of the spirit. These four worlds - action/*asiyah*, formation/*yetzira*, thought/*beriyah*, and spirit/*atzilut* - are symbolized by the fruit and nuts eaten [1. inedible outer shell/peel, 2. no shell but inedible core, 3. edible throughout, and 4. no fruit (pure spirit)].

While Tu B'Shevat is a relatively minor holiday, and is not observed by most Jews, sadly, it is a quite embodied one that reminds us of our ties to nature and to G-d.

Questions:

1. What values do you feel are embedded in the calendars that you use?
2. How do our holidays and observances reflect our belief systems?
3. Do you believe there are too many, too few, or just enough holidays to express the milestones of the year?
4. If you could add a holiday, what would it commemorate? Are there any you would get rid of?