

Two Leap Years at Once

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Perhaps you've noticed: Beginning with Purim this year, the Jewish holidays will be late. Conveniently, the Jewish Food Festival can be held before Passover this year. Rosh Hashanah won't be until October.

But how can a holiday be late, exactly? Rosh Hashanah takes place every year on the first day of the month of Tishri. Passover begins on the fifteenth of Nissan. Hanukkah never starts one day earlier or later than the twenty-fifth of Kislev.

Well, the Jewish holidays sure will feel late this year, even if they can't really be late. Take Chanukah, for example. This past December, we missed some of the "Christmas rush" at the malls, because Hanukkah came early in the month. In 2016, though, we'll get no such reprieve, as we won't even light the first candle until Christmas Eve.

How can this happen? This year, we have a leap year in the Jewish calendar, just as in the secular calendar. In our religious calendar, the leap year adds an entire month, not merely a day. By coincidence, February 29 falls during our Jewish leap month.

We all know that 2016 is a leap year. Few among us, though, were aware that 5776 has an extra month. Perhaps that's because leap years occur in our secular calendar once every four years, whereas Jewish leap years add an extra month seven times in every nineteen years. However, the more significant reason for our ignorance of the Jewish leap year is that not many of us are in tune with the Jewish calendar. Each year, if we're good, we look up the dates of the Jewish holidays and put them on our secular calendars, to make sure that we don't make any other important plans for those days. That's especially important around here if one of the High holy Days falls when the Razorbacks are playing. Even if one did learn, unhappily, that Rosh Hashanah fell on the first day of deer hunting season, that person might not know the Hebrew date of the holiday.

We can benefit, though, from greater knowledge of our Jewish calendar. We can better prepare ourselves for our Jewish holidays if we know their fixed dates. And we can draw significant meaning from becoming more innately aware of the cycle of the Jewish year.

Our Jewish calendar is both a lunar and a solar calendar. Our Jewish months are “real” months. On the other hand, the secular calendar offers a more authentic year. Confused?

When teaching, I have often asked, “What is a month?” The word “month” is based on the word “moon.” A month is the time the moon takes to revolve around the Earth, just as a year is the period required for the Earth to travel around the sun. Ancient peoples did not know the Earth to be a sphere, or that the moon is its satellite, or even that the Earth rotates around the sun. However, they did observe that the moon has regular phases. They also were quite aware of the cycle of seasons and with the astronomical phenomena that follow those seasons in a consistent rhythm. In ancient times as today, a month is a cycle of the moon, from new moon, waxing to full, then waning, and returning to a new moon again, which signals the beginning of another month. A year, then as now, is a full cycle of the seasons, marked by the accustomed astronomical patterns, known to most of us through the signs of the zodiac.

Those who fixed the Gregorian calendar were quite faithful to the solar year, but they abandoned the lunar month, arbitrarily dividing it into twelve months. If the first of January or September or any other such month happens to fall on the new moon, that’s a fluke. From time immemorial, though, the Jewish calendar has been loyally connected to the moon and almost as faithful to the sun and seasons.

Basing a calendar on both the sun and the moon is not easy. To understand why, you may be tempted to reach for your phone’s calculator app, so I’ll try to simplify the matter. The moon takes just over 29 days to circle the Earth, so each Jewish month has either 29 or 30 days. The days of twelve lunar months add up to about 354 days, or approximately eleven days less than a solar year of 365 and a quarter days. If our Jewish year always had twelve months, then, the years would be too short. Pretty soon, we would be celebrating Passover in the winter, Hanukkah in the fall, and Sukkot in the summer. That would be a problem, since these holidays are so closely associated with their seasons.

Therefore, even in biblical days, our ancestors realized that some years would need to have twelve months; and other years, thirteen. At first, if the month before Passover were too wintry, the Jewish court would add another month on short notice. Some time later, probably in the fourth century, the rabbis fixed the cycle of nineteen years, seven of which have thirteen months.

Specifically, tradition attributes the calendar to the work of Rabbi Hillel II in the year 358-9. His calendar, now over sixteen hundred years old, has proven to be in keeping with the most modern findings of science.

Following the Jewish calendar, therefore, keeps us in touch with the natural patterns of the universe. Our months begin with new moons. Our years keep pace with the seasons' alternation.

The Jewish calendar's acknowledgment of lunar patterns may have special significance for women, as the female body follows a monthly cycle similar in length to that of the moon. In fact, for centuries, Rosh Chodesh, the new moon, has been celebrated as an observance of women.

Awareness of the Jewish calendar can enhance the spirituality of all Jews, male and female. During the month of Elul, before Rosh Hashanah, we can look up into the sky, and watch the moon wax and then wane. As we do, we contemplate the fact that we must be ready to greet the new year, and to examine our souls, when the next new moon arrives. Then, two weeks later, Sukkot begins with the full moon, so we may have light in the Sukkah if we dine after dark. Again, in the spring, as Passover draws near, we may look to the heavens and watch the moon expand to fullness. We shall gather for our Seders at the full moon.

I mentioned that February 29 happens to fall during this year's leap month. The month is known as Adar I, or Adar aleph. The following month will be called Adar II, or Adar bet. Why has this month been chosen as the one to have twice?

This month of Adar has a slogan: "Be happy, it's Adar." The reason for our joy is the holiday of Purim, celebrated on the fourteenth. What better month to double than one designated for happiness? Actually, though, there is another reason that this month is doubled. Adar comes right before Nisan, the month when Passover is celebrated. The most important reason for the leap year is so that Passover will always be celebrated in the spring, as required by this week's Torah portion. Therefore, the extra month is added at this season, to make sure that Passover will come at the right time.

Mordecai Kaplan, one of the greatest rabbis of the twentieth century, taught that American Jews should participate fully in two cultures, American and Jewish. Most of us are much more knowledgeable participants in American life than in Jewish culture. We possess far greater awareness of the secular year and

the mores of our land than of the calendar, and even the observances, of our own people.

In the months and years ahead, may we all gain enhanced awareness of the cycles of the moon and the sun, and be inspired by God's celestial creations. Let us increasingly integrate the natural phenomena of new moons and changing seasons into the fabric of our everyday lives. Let us look to the heavens for inspiration to prepare for our holy days and festivals. Then, more and more, may we live our lives by our sacred Jewish calendar.

Amen.