

Rosh Chodesh - Acharei Mot- April 30, 2022

By Judy Remz

Why do we always say “Passover is early this year, or it’s late”. Even though it always on the same day, somehow it is never on time! Perhaps this reflects that we straddle 2 calendars – the Gregorian one of our secular lives and the lunisolar one of our Jewish calendar. But what I want to talk about today is how time is ours, in fact given to us by God.

And speaking of time, some of you may know that Pam and I are birthday buddies – celebrating every year on April 29th. I like think ahead on my birthday – what do I look forward to? What do I want to do differently? What do I want to make a priority? I was very moved by Pam’s recent drash preparing us for Yitzchor on the 8th day of Pesach. In it she reflected back in time, focused on her father’s life. But today, I am taking the mirror image – I want to talk about focusing on our time ahead.

The first time God spoke to the Jewish people as a community, we received a mitzvah that had to do with the calendar and time, *hachodesh hazeh lachem rosh chadashim*, the commandment to identify the time of the new moon and the new month. The Seforno, a 16th century Italian biblical commentator, writes in explaining this commandment (Shemot 12:2): “From now on, the months will be yours, to do with them as you wish. But during the time of the slavery [in *Mitzrayim*], your time was not your own, but was rather devoted to the service and will of others. Therefore, it is the first [month], for in it began your existence as individuals who can choose.”

Being able to think of my year ahead in the way that I do is truly a sign of freedom. And this commandment seems to mean that we human beings are going to call the shots with time.

So in response to this enormous commandment and defining the calendar, our ancestors became expert observers of the night sky. So, please allow me to review how the Jewish calendar works. The month starts at the beginning of the moon’s cycle when it appears as a thin crescent which starts the new month. The moon grows until it is full, the middle of the month, and then it begins to wane until it cannot be seen. The moon remains invisible for about two days and the cycle begins again, each time taking 29.5 days 44 minutes 2.8 seconds.

Philo – the Jewish historian who wrote in the first century describes this, “At the time of the new moon, the sun begins to illuminate the moon with a light which is visible to the outward senses, and then she displays her own beauty to the beholders.”

So, back in ancient times, to determine when a new month was beginning when there was a festival (not all months), eye witnesses would bring their testimony to the Sanhedrin who would sanctify the new month. To let all the Jews know, there was a system of signal fires on the 2nd night of the month. This is outlined in Mishna Rosh Hashanah 2:2 and it describes how fires were lit from one mountain to the next, from Mount of Olives in Jerusalem up to the Galil

and west across the Jordan. Here's how they did it. They brought long poles of cedar or reeds or olive-wood and tied flax to the poles with a string. Turning this into a torch, the signaler waved it up and down until he saw the next one doing the same thing on the top of the second mountain and so, on the top of third mountain.

Sadly, this system fell apart from both inside and outside forces. The Romans wanted it stopped, convinced it was a form of rebellion. And Mishnah tells us that our cousins, the Samaritans, purposely lit and waved torches on the wrong day to muck things up.

In 359 CE, Hillel II and his rabbinical court established the perpetual calendar which is followed today. It was the last major decision before the Sanhedrin disbanded. According to this calendar, every month of the year, except for three, has a set number of days. To keep the holidays in the right season, there is a correction of a 13th month, 7 times in 19 years. Incredibly, the rules of this calendar ensure that the first day of Rosh Hashanah will never take place on Sunday, Wednesday or Friday.

So drilling down on this theme of what defines a month, let's talk about the upcoming month, Iyar, which we will prepare for in a few minutes during musaf. Iyar is derived from an Akkadian word that means "splendor". It also corresponds to the Hebrew month "Ziv," (or "light") named in the book of Kings. When googling, I found many references that offer a different explanation for the name Iyar. If you take the letters of "Iyar" it's an acronym for "Ani Hashem rofecha – "I am G-d, your healer" (Shemot 15:26).

But regardless of how the name is derived, Iyar is a month of transition. It falls between Nisan, the month of Pesach, and Sivan, the month of Shavuot. But it is not just an in between month - Iyar is the only month where we count the omer for a full month of it.

So this brings me to the Q+A part of this drash. What holidays fall in Iyar?

- The 4th of Iyar is marked in Israel as its national memorial day for fallen soldiers (Yom HaZikaron).
- Israel Independence Day is celebrated on the 5th of Iyar
- Pesach Sheni, the second Pesach, is a mandated make-up day for those who could not bring the paschal sacrifice at its appointed time. Pesach Sheni falls on the 14th of Iyar
- Lag B'Omer, the 33rd day of the Counting of the Omer, is celebrated on the 18th of Iyar.
- Jerusalem Day, the day Israel conquered Jerusalem during the Six Day War, is celebrated on the 28th day of Iyar.

So as we enter this new month, here are three things to think during the next 29 days:

- Let's find splendor (or Iyar) this month. Can you find time to reconnect with the night sky like our ancestors? For almost 2000 years, we have not needed to look to the moon to decide what month and day it is.... But when we do take in phase of the moon, isn't it

amazing to think that this is what Philo described as well as the witnesses for the month testifying to the Sanhedrin?

- Second, Pesach Sheni is truly an amazing concept. During Temple times, if you couldn't make it to the pilgrimage, you were given another opportunity on the 15th of Iyar to do so. So let's think about this for ourselves making Iyar a month to make up for something that was missed. Did we lose track of an intention or goal? Iyar says – time to realign.
- And finally, what about healing? Manna began falling to feed the Israelites on the 15th of Iyar. Manna nourished both body and soul. I read that physically it was perfect food; it caused no illnesses, no allergies. The Talmud says that manna tasted different to different people: to young people it tasted like bread; to elderly people it tasted like oil; and to babies it tasted like honey (Yoma 75b). So in Iyar, try eating challah dipped in olive oil or honey, nourishing your body and soul.

So those are my suggestions to celebrate our gift of time during Iyar and every month. Chodesh Tov – wishing all of you a month ahead of splendor, second chances and healing.