

# Sun, Moon, and the Jewish New Year

Parashat Re'eh, Deuteronomy, Chapters 11-16 | August 25, 2022

When is the Jewish New Year? It is a simple question, and it would seem to have an equally easy answer. Everyone knows that the day observed by Jews at the beginning of autumn, a day known as “Rosh Hashanah,” is the Jewish New Year. But what if it isn't? What if understanding that Rosh Hashanah is *not* the Jewish New Year is essential to understanding the complexity of Jewishness itself?

In Deuteronomy, the Torah returns to the subject of the holidays, and particularly to those that are known by Jews as the “*Shalosh Regalim*,” the three times of the year when Israelites from all over the world are obligated to convene at the Temple to celebrate together: Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot. While Rosh Hashanah is not mentioned, a careful study of the opening verses will tell us a great deal about the complexity of the calendar and why it is not a simple question at all to ask when the year begins.

We start with the beginning of Deuteronomy 16:

*Observe the month of spring, and keep the Passover unto the Lord thy God: for in the month of Aviv the Lord thy God brought thee forth out of Egypt by night.*  
(Deuteronomy 16:1)

It is with *Pesach*, commonly called Passover, that the cycle of holidays begins. Only then do we turn in verse 10 to the next holiday:

*And thou shalt keep the Feast of Weeks unto the Lord thy God...* (Deuteronomy 16:10)

Then we reach the last of the three, Sukkot, in verse 13:

*Thou shalt keep the Feast of Booths seven days, after thou hast gathered in from thy threshing floor and from thy wine press.*  
(Deuteronomy 16:13)

The order is: Passover, Shavuot, and then Sukkot; not Sukkot, Passover, and Shavuot. Passover is the first holiday of the Jewish year, and the Torah emphasizes that Passover must take place in the spring, in the month of *Aviv*—a word referencing the first grain—emphasizing that the Jewish ritual calendar begins at this time of new beginnings, of the appearance of new agricultural life. It is the month in which Passover takes place, known today as Nissan, which the Book of Exodus also insists marks the first Jewish month.

We begin the Jewish calendar year, in other words, with the month of spring, because the rebirth that takes place in nature parallels the birth of the people of Israel at the exodus. When is the Jewish New Year? Rightly understood, it is the first day of Nissan, the first day of Passover's month.

But in the preceding chapter of Deuteronomy, we are told again of the *Shmita*, the sabbatical year that always occurs at the end of a seven-year cycle. This cycle and the *Shmita* year that lies at its core, as well as the 50<sup>th</sup> year Jubilee that follows, all begin and end in the fall, on the first day of the month now known as Tishrei, on the day that we call Rosh Hashanah—words which mean, “the start of the year.” When, according to Jewish law, does the agricultural year begin for these cycles? The first of Tishrei. Thus, it would seem that the passing of the years is marked in two very different ways: one in the spring and one in the fall.

What is going on here?

The month of Passover, commemorating our people's birth, is the beginning of the **Jewish** year, because it marks the exodus from Egypt, a particularistic covenantal moment. But in the fall, on what is called Rosh Hashanah, we believe that we are marking a universal moment, the anniversary of creation itself. We begin on that day the **universal** year, and what Jews focus on in the Rosh Hashanah liturgy is, to a great extent,

not the Jewish people, but the entire world. We declare, “*bayom harat olam*,” “today, we remember the world coming into being;” “*bayom ya’amid bamishpat kol y’tzurei olamim*,” “today, therefore, all the world is judged;” and we pray for a good year ahead for the entire world.

So we have a Jewish New Year and a universal New Year. It is with this in mind that we can comprehend another aspect of how Jews mark the passage of time. The calendar of Rabbinic Judaism is primarily lunar, utilizing 12 months that follow the waxing and waning of the moon. Yet the calendar of the Jews cannot *only* be lunar, for as we have seen, the Torah also instructs us that Passover must always occur in the spring. 12 lunar months give us a lunar year of around 354 days. Because the solar cycle is longer—a bit more than 365 days—every year, the Jewish lunar cycle falls 11 days behind the solar cycle. If unchecked, this would eventually put Passover in the winter; but it *must* occur in the spring. We therefore add, every so often, a 13<sup>th</sup> month to the Jewish year; our leap years involve not an extra day but an additional lunar month. For Nachmanides, the verse that we have previously cited, “*Observe the month of spring, and keep the Passover unto the Lord thy God*,” is actually an obligation to ensure that Passover always ends up in the spring.

The Jewish calendar is thus based on both the moon and the seasons. The duality of our calendar reflects the complexity of Jewish identity. For the rabbinic tradition, if the Jewish calendar is linked to the lunar cycle, it is because the moon itself is an embodiment of the Jewish people. The calendar was bestowed upon the eve of the exodus. It occurred immediately following the penultimate plague of darkness, which embodied the defeat of the sun, which was the chief god in the pagan pantheon of ancient Egypt. The embrace of the lunar calendar is thus linked with the birth of the Jewish people, with Jewish particularism, and with the mystery of Jewish chosenness. Moreover, in the moon’s cyclical disappearance into darkness and subsequent reemergence, the sages saw the ultimate symbol of the eternal people.

At the same time, Judaism insists that chosenness is never a reason for arrogance. Judaism never lets us forget that we, as a people, are at the center of God’s

plan, but God’s plan is not merely for us, but for all the Earth. Therefore, Jewish time is both lunar and solar, because if the introduction of the lunar calendar is a symbol of Jewish particularism, its link to the cycle of the sun reminds us that the Jewish worldview is both particular and universal. The two, of course, are intertwined; and here, a story about the moon provides a metaphor.

Astronaut Gene Cernan once recounted how he suddenly had a stunning religious experience when looking at the Earth from the surface of the moon. As he put it:

The Earth doesn’t tumble through space; it moves with logic and certainty and with beauty beyond comprehension... It’s just too beautiful to have happened by accident. There has to be somebody bigger than you and me that put it all together. There’s no question in my mind that there’s a Creator of the universe. There’s a God up there. Someone—some being, some power—placed our little world, our sun and our moon where they are in the dark void.

A man stands on the moon and comes to cognize our Creator. In a similar sense, the Jewish people, symbolized by the moon, are chosen to impact the worldview of humanity, so that ultimately all the Earth will see itself as created by God. Seen through the prism of modern cosmology, an interesting scientific parallel also emerges. The moon, as we know, orbits the Earth and can be seen as an insignificant astronomical addendum to the Earth. Yet scientists, while pondering what has been called the “Goldilocks Paradox”—why only Earth seems to have the conditions that are “just right” for the emergence of sentient life—have discovered that a large part of the answer to why Earth is uniquely well-suited to life has to do with the moon. Astronomer Jacques Laskar once put it this way:

We owe our present climate stability to an exceptional event, the presence of the Moon.

Building on this, physicist Fred Heeren tells us the following:

Without an extra-large moon orbiting at the right distance from us, scientists predict that Earth would be subject to a runaway greenhouse effect, as on Venus, or a permanent ice age, as Mars would experience if it had more water.

So the moon is separate from the Earth and much smaller than the Earth. It orbits the Earth. But without the moon, the seasons of the Earth would not exist. A minuscule moon, so vanishingly small when compared to the planets of our solar system, is positioned in a manner crucial to the survival of the human race. Likewise, the Jewish people, a minuscule nation when compared to other peoples, swirling in the solar system of societies and civilizations, is perfectly positioned to have a critical moral impact on humanity.

John Adams, the American Founding Father, put it this way:

I will insist that the Hebrews have done more to civilize Men than any other Nation. If I were an Atheist and believed in blind eternal Fate, I should Still believe that Fate had ordained the Jews to be the most essential Instrument for civilizing the Nations. If I were an Atheist of the other Sect, who believe or pretend to believe that all is ordered by Chance, I Should believe that Chance had ordered the Jews to preserve and propagate, to all Mankind the Doctrine of a Supreme intelligent wise, almighty Sovereign of the Universe, which I believe to be the great essential Principle of all Morality and consequently of all Civilization.

Jews unite in Judaism particularism and universalism. As we prepare to mark Rosh Hashanah in just over a month, we will pray for all the world, but we will do so as Jews—through the traditions of our ancestors, and according to the laws of our covenantal faith, pondering the miracle of our own history, and yearning for blessed year for humanity.

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*Discussion Questions:*

1. The Jewish holidays are closely tied to natural phenomena, like the changing of the seasons and the cycle of the moon. What does this teach us about Judaism's attitude toward the natural world?
2. Rabbi Soloveichik explores how the biblical festivals balance Jewish particularism with universalism. Do rabbinically-instituted holidays, like Purim and Hanukkah, similarly provide a balance between these dual values?

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