



Why Rosh Hashanah Isn't Late This Year

The first day of 5780 isn't till September 30, 2019. So is Rosh Hashanah 'late'?

The classic western summer and school year cycles are based upon the calendar named for Pope Gregory XIII. But we're talking about the Jewish New Year. What does the Catholic Church have to do with it? Let us first understand the key to the Jewish calendar.

In Exodus 12:2-18 and Numbers 28:16, G-d commands us commanded to celebrate Pesach during Nissan, which in Deuteronomy 16:1 is called the month of spring (אֲבִיב):

שָׁמֹר אֶת חֹדֶשׁ הָאֲבִיב וְעִשִׂיתָ פֶּסַח לַיהוָה
אֶלְקֵינוּ כִּי בְּחֹדֶשׁ הָאֲבִיב הוֹצִיאָה ה' מִמִּצְרָיִם
לְיֵלֶה.

A purely lunar calendar rotates without any seasonal consideration. For example, on the Muslim calendar, Ramadan falls in February one year, November another, and sometimes May. Because they are originally a nomadic people without a religious connection to a land and its harvests.

Not so Judaism. Pesach, as mentioned, must be in the spring, specifically during the קָצִיר – the grain harvest in Israel. The backdrop of Shavuot's Megillat Rut story are the barley and wheat fields of Beit Lechem (literally "House of Bread"), the period of the Omer in the Land. The Sin of the Spies of 9 Av finds our scouts bringing grapes, pomegranates and figs back to the desert, which are Israel's summer fruits; Tu B'Av (15th) is the grape harvest בְּצִיר. (An agricultural people have a specific word for each

harvest. Figs is יָאֵז, pomegranates (קָטִיף) Sukkot, the holiday of booths with palm-frond roofs and a lulav as one of the designated species, is at the time of the date harvest, the גְּדִיד. To round out our seven species, Chanukah (25 Kislev) is all about the olive oil – and the מְסִיק, the olive harvest, finishes at just that time. What a great stroke of luck for the Chashmonaim that just when they needed the oil, the fruit had been picked and freshly pressed!

The point is, when you celebrate a Jewish holiday anywhere the world you're celebrating a harvest in the Land of Israel. (We joke, but it really is all about the food.)

In days of yore, months were declared when two witnesses saw the New Moon and the Sages and/or Sanhedrin endorsed their testimony, building bonfires on the peak of the Mount of Olives and on into the Diaspora.

So how do we keep the lunar calendar from shifting out of its needed agricultural season? By factoring in the solar calendar and synchronizing them.

The Sages would walk the Land at the end of winter, the month of Adar, to check whether the grains were ripe. Had it stopped raining? Were the sheep fat and ready to be sheared? i.e. was winter over? If yes, bring on Nissan and Pesach. If no, then drop in Adar Bet to push off Pesach another month until spring arrived. It was done on a year-by-year basis until the calendar was set in the 4th century. There are many reasons for this seminal decision but a poignant one is the Roman

persecution of the Sages, who as well as teaching Torah and meting out justice also, as mentioned, were critical in setting the calendar. Setting time meant power and control over the holidays and lives of a Torah-based nation, which was exactly what the Romans were trying to destroy. So now, every 19 years, our calendar repeats, with leap years at 3, 6, 8, 11, 14, 17 and 19 and an occasional day added to Kislev or Cheshvan.

This past spring we had an Adar Bet, but even with the extra winter weeks, we had a hailstorm on the first day of Chol Hamoed Pesach. While everyone ran for cover from the sting of the ice pellets, my heart went out to the grain growers whose fields were getting flattened, destroying months of work in 20 minutes.

Only in the Land of Israel can you feel the literal nature of the *chagim*. On Sukkot, I take people to make *silan* (date honey) under palm trees in the Jordan Valley; on Chanukah, to taste fresh olive oil right out of the press. We live our *chagim* the way our forefathers did in the time of the Tanach. Connected to the Land. Nourished and grateful to G-d for our sustenance and rain in its time.

It's bad enough that in our Christian-dominated world our cottage cheese spoilage date is based on Jesus. Let us know our Hebrew calendar. It's the connector between Am Yisrael, Eretz Yisrael and Torat Yisrael.

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