

Why Is Chanukah so “Early” and Passover so “Late” this Year?

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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 feel early this fall. Who ever heard of Chanukah at Thanksgiving? Then, Passover won't begin until the night of April 14, which some may call “late.”

How can this happen? If the Jewish holidays have been early in 2013, why will they be so much later in 2014? Well, here's the catch: 5774 is a leap year in the Jewish calendar. In our religious calendar, the leap year adds an entire month, not just a day.

This year, more than ever, we are aware of the vicissitudes of the Jewish calendar. Popular emails have circulated to explain the so-called “Thanksgivukah.” I suspect, though, that more than a few eyes have glazed when you got to the part that says Jewish leap years add an extra month seven times in every nineteen years. That's right: Almost one-third of the time, the Jewish calendar has thirteen, not twelve months. However, 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. Even so, we 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. Now, what does that mean?

When teaching, I have often asked, “What is a month?” Because of our fixation with the secular calendar, most of us think that a month is one-twelfth of a year, divided arbitrarily. If we think about it, though, we will reflect that the word “month” is based on the word “moon.” A month is the time the moon takes to encircle 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 spherical, 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, which the ancients marked by accustomed astronomical patterns, known to most of us through the signs of the zodiac. In fact, ancient synagogue floors often feature mosaics of the zodiac calendar.

The people who fixed the secular calendar were quite faithful to the solar year, but they abandoned the lunar month. If the first of January or September or any other such month happens to fall on the new moon, that coincidence is a mere 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 a calculator, so I'll try to simplify the matter. A year, of course, has 365 and a quarter days. The moon takes just over 29 days to circle the Earth, so a Jewish month has either 29 or 30 days. Twelve lunar months add up to about 354 days, or approximately eleven days less than a year. 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 Passover is designated as a festival of freedom and rebirth in springtime, Hanukkah as the festival of lights in the depths of winter, and Sukkot as the fall harvest.

Therefore, even in biblical days, our ancestors realized that some years would need to have twelve months and other years, thirteen. At first, they would determine the number of months each year, based on agricultural conditions. 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 Hodesh, 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 Seder at the full moon.

You may be interested to know that the "leap month" is actually a repeated month of Adar, in the very late winter. Adar occurs twice in a leap year: Adar aleph and Adar Bet.

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 a month that is designated for happiness? Actually, though, there is a more important reason that this month is doubled. Adar comes right before Nisan, the month of Passover. The most important reason for the leap year is to assure that Passover will always be celebrated in the spring. In fact, the first *mitzvah* or commandment in the Torah is to begin counting the months of the year in springtime, for Passover.

Sadly, though, we don't celebrate Purim twice in leap years, once in each Adar. Usually, when we have the choice to do something either sooner or later, our Jewish tradition teaches us to advance occasions of joy. The observance of Purim in a leap year is an exception. Purim must always be observed one month before Passover, as the two holidays are linked in a spring festival season. Therefore, we celebrate Purim in the second month of Adar; and, as a result, we may consider that month to be the "real" Adar, while this first month of Adar is the leap month.

Mordecai Kaplan, one of the greatest rabbis of the twentieth century, taught that American Jews should participate fully in two cultures, American and Jewish. Therefore, we should celebrate

Thanksgiving and the Fourth of July with fervor, just as we observe Sukkot and Purim. The truth, of course, is that 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. This year, though, more American Jews than ever will celebrate Chanukah, as they will already be gathered for Thanksgiving. Don't be shy about putting that Chanukiah on the table with the turkey; and you may even want to serve sweet potato latkes instead of the usual.

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 every day 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.