



Mosaic Religion and the Religious Mosaic An Approach to the Jewish Community for Christian Seminarians

Script 18: The Jewish Calendar and Holidays Part 1

Rather than bury the lead, let's begin with the end in mind. The Jewish calendar is based on the lunar cycle of the phases of the moon yet adjusts so as not to stray far from the Gregorian or solar calendar. In that way the Jewish holidays which set the rhythm and are the driving force of the calendar never move from the season in which they occur.

Rabbi Jill Hammer, the Director of Spiritual Education at the Academy for Jewish Religion, reflects on the intersection of Jewish history and myth together with the annual cycle of nature within the Jewish calendar. She notes, "The generations of architects of the Jewish calendar deeply understood this." The Jewish calendar serves to bring the Jewish people together to mark the time in unison, to forge and to strengthen Jewish community.

While the Gregorian calendar was created more than 400 years ago in 1592, the Jewish or Hebrew calendar was created more than 2,000 years ago. As a lunar calendar, with the moon rotating around the earth every 29 ½ days, a Hebrew month is counted as either 29 or 30 days. There are twelve months in a Jewish year. However, since twelve lunar months add up to approximately 354 days, and we need to keep pace with the Gregorian calendar--the solar years—we have a Jewish leap year in a regular cycle of seven out of every nineteen years. Our leap years add an extra month on the calendar, not just an extra day.

The first month on the calendar, Nissan, occurs in early spring.¹ The highlight of the month is our celebration of Passover, on the 15th to 22nd days of Nissan. Jews commemorate the Exodus from Egypt, our redemption from slavery, and the barley harvest. Passover is one of three pilgrimage festivals, three agrarian festivals when the Israelites would gather at the Temple in Jerusalem.

From the barley harvest we begin to count from the second night of Passover for the next 49 days which takes us to the next major holiday--Shavuot, or Pentecost. This period is known

¹ Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, actually takes place on the first day of the seventh month on the calendar, the month of Tishrei.

as the Counting of the Omer, a sheaf of grain. On Shavuot, the 6th and 7th days of the month of Sivan, we celebrate receiving our sacred Torah at Mt. Sinai where we enter into covenant with God. As the second of the three pilgrimage festivals, we also celebrate the wheat harvest.

In between Passover and Shavuot, taking us from Nissan to the month of Iyar, and then Sivan, there are a number of modern commemorations:

- Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Day, honoring the memory of six million Jews who died in the Holocaust;
- Yom Hazikaron, Memorial Day, remembering the fallen soldiers of the modern State of Israel; and
- Yom Ha'atzma'ut, Independence Day, celebrating the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

Following Sivan is the month of Tammuz. If you are trying to get your bearings at this point, Tammuz generally falls somewhere in or near July on the Gregorian calendar. The 17th of Tammuz, the day on which the walls of Jerusalem were breached leading to the destruction of the Temple, is the beginning of a three-week period of communal mourning. This day is one of the minor fast days on the Jewish calendar. Minor fasts run from sunrise to sundown, unlike major fast days that run from sundown on the previous evening through sundown on the following day. On the major fast days, Jews traditionally refrain from both eating and drinking for twenty-five hours.

This period of mourning leads to the month of Av and the day known as Tisha B'Av, literally the ninth day of the Jewish month of Av. On this day we remember the destruction of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem as well as other days of destruction and persecution of Jews throughout history. Tisha B'Av is a major fast day.

Following Tisha B'Av come seven weeks of consolation on the Jewish calendar. At this point you may be starting to detect an ebb and flow of the calendar, both to track with nature, and to take us from celebration and joy, to mourning and despair, and then back again. We need this time of consolation, putting us in a more positive emotional state in preparation for the self-reflection that comes with the upcoming high holy days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. After Av is the month of Elul, announcing our time to prepare for Rosh Hashanah. We will explore Rosh Hashanah and the complete cycle of Jewish holidays in the fall and winter in Part 2 of "The Jewish Calendar and Holidays."

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