

When Does the New Year Begin?

Parshat Tazriah/Shabbat Hahodesh
 Leviticus 12:1 - 13:59/Exodus 12:1-20
 Ezekiel 45:16 – 46:18



Ezekiel is the prophet of the Babylonian exile. Living by the Tigris and Euphrates River during the period after the destruction of the Holy Temple, he brought hope and vision to the Jewish people by speaking of their return to Zion and describing the rebuilding of their Temple in Jerusalem. Scholars, however, were deeply troubled by this description since the rules and rituals that he recounts appear to be at odds with the ones stated in the Torah. Some scholars suggested that Ezekiel was describing the building of a third temple whose Messianic rules of conduct would be different from the ones in the Torah. Others sought to ban his book from the Jewish Biblical Canon.

Like the special Torah portion which we read on Shabbat Hahodesh, Ezekiel describes the celebration of Passover. Both the prophet and the Torah say that this holiday occurs in the first month of the year. There are, however, significant differences in the way Ezekiel describes Passover and what is found in the Torah. As we approach the celebration of Passover, Shabbat Hahodesh reminds us that it is time to begin the serious preparations for Passover and the Seder.

Ezekiel 45:18-19, 21

Thus says the Eternal God: On the first day of the first month, take a young bull of the herd without blemish and purify the sanctuary. Let the priest take some of the blood of the sin offering and put it on the doorposts of the Temple, on the four corners of the altar's base and on the posts of the gates of the inner court...The fourteenth day of the first month shall be your Passover and during the seven day festival, unleavened bread shall be eaten.

Exodus 12:2-3, 7

This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. Speak to the whole community of Israel and say on the tenth day of the month each of them shall take a lamb to a family.....they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the house in which they are to eat it.

Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 13b and 30b

R. Judah said in the name of Rav: Truly, there is a man whose name should be remembered for blessing. He is Hananiah ben Hezekiah. But for him, the Book of Ezekiel would have been suppressed, for its words contradicted the Torah. What did he do? He had three hundred kegs of oil taken up to him and he sat in an upper chamber until he so expounded them [that the contradictions were reconciled].

Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:1

There are four New Years. On the first of Nissan is the New Year of kings¹ and for festivals². On the first of Elul is the New Year for tithes of cattle³. Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Simon say, "It (the New Year for the

¹ No matter when the King took office, the month of Nissan marks the beginning of his second year of office.

² The holiday counts the holidays from Passover which is in the first month of the year. That means Rosh Hashanah is in the seventh month of the year.

tithe for cattle) is on the first of Tishri.” On the first of Tishri is the New Year for years, for the Sabbatical year, for the Jubilee year, for planting and for the tithe of vegetables. On the first of Sh’vat is the New Year for trees according to the ruling of Beit Shammai. Bet Hillel say, “On the fifteen thereof.”

Rabbi Jerachmiel Danziger, Yismach Yisrael Commentary on the Haggadah (paraphrase)

Rosh Hashanah and Pesach represent the two polar opposites within the divine attributes and in the sephirotic chart. The *Zohar* (3:309a) says, “One pushes away with the left hand and draws near with the right hand – this is *Rosh Hashanah* and *Pesach*.” *Pesach* is the right hand of God⁴, which brings about repentance through love, while *Rosh Hashanah* is the left hand, which inspires repentance through firmness and judgment.⁵ The right arm is also associated with love, and at the beginning of the counting of the *omer*, the first day is associated with *hesed sh’b’chesed*⁶.

The beginning of Passover then is associated with pure divine love and compassion. This divine love has a transformative affect on us. By contemplating God’s tremendous love for us we will be brought to a state of humility and self degradation; this in turn will inspire fear of heaven and a return to God. We become a fitting utensil for receiving Divine Love.

Questions for Discussion

1. How is the passage in the book of Ezekiel different from the special Maftir reading for Shabbat Hahodesh? Compare the two selections above. What is the nexus of religious encounter in each of these passages? Where is the doorpost on which the people are supposed to place blood?
2. If the book of Ezekiel contradicts the Torah, as it appears from the passages above, why do you think this chapter was chosen as the Haftorah for Shabbat Hahodesh? Why did the rabbis want us to conclude from such contradictions?
3. Why do we count the holiday calendar from the month of Nissan? If the month of Nissan is the first month of the year, why do we call Rosh Hashanah the Jewish New Year? What does choosing Nissan (as opposed to Tishri) as the first month of the year say about our world-view as Jews? How are the themes of these two seasons: Passover and the High Holy Days different from one another?
4. Think about a typical year in your life. Are there other beginnings or New Years besides January 1? What are they? How many New Years do you mark in the course of a typical year? How do you mark these other occasions? Rewrite the Mishnah from tractate of Rosh Hashanah in terms of your life. What would it sound like?
5. What is the connection between repentance and Passover in the book of Ezekiel? What is the difference between repentance out of fear and repentance out of love? Which type of repentance is more effective in changing a person? Why?

³ Tithing, like taxes was based on a particular date in the calendar. You figured out how much you owed based on everything born or grown after that date. This applied to cattle, plants, vegetables and trees.

⁴ The right arm of God is a reference to the *sephirah* of *hesed*, Divine Love, which is symbolized by the arm of God, while the left arm of God is *gevurah*, might or *din*, judgment.

⁵ *Rosh Hashanah* brings about repentance through fear and judgment while *Pesach* brings about repentance through divine love and kindness as presented in the story of the Exodus from Egypt. The purpose of both of these holidays is *teshuvah*, return to the divine, though they accomplish their goals in different ways.

⁶ The second day of *Pesach* (the second *Seder*) is the day on which we begin the counting of the *Omer*. Each of the forty-nine days in the *Omer* is associated with a different combination of the *sephirot*. The seven lower *sephirot* are represents each week in the counting of the *Omer* and each day of each week also represents one of the seven *sephirot* as well. *Chesed sh’b’chesed*, then, is the week of the *sephirah* of *chesed*, while the first day of that week is day of *hesed*. The second day of counting would be *gevurah sh’b’chesed* and so on....

How to use Torah Table Talk

1. *Read the sheet out loud to one another. Discuss what it has to say.*
2. *Focus on the text in the box. It is taken from Biblical, post-biblical and modern Jewish sources. What does it mean? How does it make you feel?*
3. *Try to answer the questions following the text.*
4. *This is not a test and there are many correct answers and interpretations to each question. Share your ideas with one another. Be open and honest in sharing your ideas.*

Torah Table Talk is a weekly e-publication of Rabbi Mark B Greenspan sponsored by the Oceanside Jewish Center on Long Island, New York. If you would like to subscribe to Torah Table Talk please send an e-mail to Tabletalk@oceansidejc.org or contact Rabbi Mark B Greenspan at Haravmark@Optonline.net. Readers are invited to sponsor a weekly edition of Torah Table Talk.

Announcing a New Haggadah Commentary

I am pleased to announce that I am in the process of publishing a new commentary on the Haggadah as I do each year. This will be the fourth year that I have translated a traditional commentary on the Haggadah that heretofore was unavailable to non-Hebrew readers. This year's commentary is called the *Yismach Yisrael*. It is a Hasidic commentary by Rabbi Jerachmiel Danziger the leader of the Alexander Hasidim in Poland during the second half of the nineteenth century. This year's commentary has been a challenge to translate but it has been worth the time and effort that I put into it. If you would a copy of the Haggadah please send me your address and a check for \$15 to cover costs. Checks should be made out to the Rabbi's Discretionary Fund at The Oceanside Jewish Center, 2860 Brower Avenue, Oceanside, New York 11572. If you would prefer, I can send the text as attached PDF file. Be warned – it will be over 100 pages. By the way, if I am mailing it, I will try but I cannot promise to have it to you before the Seder – I will make every effort to do so.

***“All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”***