

A RUSHED CALENDAR

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WE SET THE calendar by looking at the sky. Jewish holidays are cosmic—they emerge from the meeting point of the divine and the human. God has given us holy times, and we enact them.

The Mishnah delineates the process by which stargazing becomes calendar setting. We look up and search the sky, and then bring testimony regarding the moon to a group of judges who determine the precise date for the start of the new year.

Additionally, several times a year, messengers must usher out from the judges and spread the word about the new month. They do this in Elul, and then again in Tishrei:

משנה ראש השנה א:ג

על אֶלוֹל מִפְּנֵי רֹאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה, וְעַל תִּשְׁרֵי מִפְּנֵי
תַּקְנַת הַמוֹעֲדוֹת.

Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:3

Regarding Elul because of Rosh Hashanah, and regarding Tishrei, to establish the festivals (Yom Kippur, Sukkot, and Shemini Atzeret).

Isn't this a bit excessive? The Gemara in Rosh Hashanah 19b asks: If we send out messengers to proclaim the new moon of Elul, the final month of the year, why send them again so soon? The answer: We need this second testimony on the chance that this year Elul will be a longer month than we expected. Perhaps this Elul will contain thirty days, rather than the usual twenty-nine. In rabbinic Hebrew, this phenomenon is called *hodesh me'uberet*, a “pregnant month.”

But a pregnant Elul has never happened, we are told. Not since the time of Ezra:

תלמוד בבלי ראש השנה יט:

וכי תימא דלמא עברוה לאלול
והאמר רבי חנינא בר כהנא אמר רב:
מימות עזרא ואילך לא מצינו אלול מעובר!

Talmud Bavli Rosh Hashanah 19b

And if you say perhaps the court added another day to the month of Elul,

didn't R. Hinnana bar Kahana say Rav said:

From the days of Ezra and onward, we have never found that the month of Elul had an additional day!

Elul has never had an extra day, not since the times of Ezra—not since we have been keeping track. But that doesn't mean it never will. The Gemara responds that an additional day was never required, but if it had been then we would have added it. Just because something has never happened doesn't mean it never will.

From this simple, seemingly dry legal statement about calculating the calendar we learn to hold all of the possibilities of a new year. We are forced to keep open minds. Things may happen this year that have never happened before in history. This year may bring some genuine firsts. We cannot close ourselves off, but instead must create systems and live lives that allow for new possibilities, even realities that have never before emerged.

This is not magical thinking. The Talmud reminds us that all months have the possibility of needing an additional day. There is a difference between the impossible and the possible-but-hasn't-happened-yet. It is our job to look for and appreciate that difference as we move through the world.

And move through the world we must. We can never simply rely on last year's calendar. This complex system for setting the holiday calendar requires us to venture out and take in the world around us. It demands that we pay attention, that we notice, and that we adapt our behavior according to what we see. This holy calendar is alive, and responsive.

The Jewish calendar offers us a balance between structure and spontaneity, between reliability and surprise. We need the structure offered by the calendar. It keeps us organized and allows us to function as one community. It gives us boundaries as we mark time with clear distinctions. The Jewish cycle of time places particular importance on the transition from one year to the next. Tishrei—the first month of the new year—is our grand reset, when even God reaches down to offer us forgiveness. And yet there remains this lurking possibility that Elul might be one day longer this year.

This additional day blurs our entire system. While all other days fall clearly into one year or the next, there is one confusing day—a day that is maybe the thirtieth of this year's Elul, or perhaps the first of next year's Tishrei—that makes ambiguous when one year ends and the next begins. The end of the year and the start of the next marks a categorical reset of our lives—this is when we get our clean slates; and yet our Rabbis wonder, worry, and grapple with the possibility that the line isn't always clear.

In fact, the entire month of Elul plays a similar role. Elul blurs the starkness of the boundary of Rosh Hashanah. With Elul's introduction of the *shofar* and then *Seliḥot*, the cycle of the new year truly begins with the last month of the old. The years seem to overlap. There is no option to stop the ride. No amount of fear or apprehension can keep us from entering the next year—from the onset of Elul, we are already on our way in.

The past few years have been heavy on the blur. We have been surprised moment after moment, month after month, by things we may have suspected were theoretically possible but never expected to see with our own eyes. The only way to live through such a time is to act as witness: to continually force ourselves to go out into the world, to collect testimony, and to allow this testimony to change the way we live.

As we learn to balance the polarity of stability and flexibility, our Jewish calendar continues to offer us incredible gifts. Each holiday carries with it stories and customs that open us up to divine wisdom and the energy of the season. We hold onto the enduring

stories and rituals, while seeking to see more clearly the ways in which the world—and we ourselves—are ever-changing. Each holiday functions both as an anchor and as a lens through which to see more clearly the beauty and pain of our current moment.

“לֹא מָצִינוּ אֶלּוּל מְעוּבָר” - There never was a full, thirty-day Elul.” We never get all the time we need. We will never be able to entirely do the work of Elul within the bounds of the month. It will always feel *haser*, lacking, too short. We will always enter into the next year feeling a little unsatisfied. But that's okay—there is another full year of holidays ahead of us. There is time. ♦