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Erev Rosh Hashanah: A Question for the New Year

This year I had a chance to study with a modern Orthodox teacher, Rabbi Elie Ginsparg. We met a couple of times a month and focused on a commentary to the Ten Commandments written by the Middle Ages scholar Nachmanides. But every so often we'd find ourselves going off on a tangent. One day we'd talk about what was happening in Israel. Another, he'd ask me how Reform Jews celebrate the holidays. And on one occasion, I asked him a particularly challenging question about the Jewish calendar.

But before I asked that question, I needed him to know that I understood the basics. So I laid out what I knew: that the Jewish calendar is a hybrid, which is based on the cycle of the moon, but also remains in sync with the seasons of the year; that the new month is marked by a thin sliver of a silver crescent in the night time sky; and the reason that Jewish "days" begin at night is because that's when the moon is most visible.

I also explained the problem with our calendar, that a lunar year is about 11 days shorter than the solar year, typically lasting 354 days. This is why the timing of our holidays fluctuates so much. Sometimes coming early. Sometimes coming late. (Just never seeming to come on time.) To compensate for this difference, every couple of years we add an extra month.

And finally, in addition to the months and the years, our calendar also takes note of the most important unit of Jewish time, the seven-day week. This basic organizing principle was established by God in the story of creation, and concludes with Shabbat, a day that is more sacred than any other in the year.

So to summarize, the Jewish calendar is based around four units of time: a week that lasts for 7 days, a month that lasts for 29 ½ ish days, a lunar year that lasts in the neighborhood of 354 days, and the solar year, which is usually 365 days long. So here's my particularly challenging question: **Why is everything so darn complicated?**

Look, if I was creating the world from scratch, and the seven-day week was such an important building block, I would have made sure that the cycle of the moon lasted exactly four weeks. The way it is now, at 29 ½ days is close, but if I was God, I would

have made it perfect. Not only that, I would have ordained 28 day months, and matching time periods for both the lunar and solar orbits. Regardless of which calendar you chose, they would both be 336 days long.

Now much to my surprise, Rabbi Ginsparg agreed with me. Not only is this a sloppy system, he said, it creates uncertainty and even causes mistakes. He proceeded to share with me a text from the Mishnah, from Masekhet Rosh Hashanah, which demonstrates the depth of the issue.

The text tells of a dispute dating back to the days of the Temple, involving Rabban Gamliel, the head of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, and one of his students, Rabbi Yehoshua, over the sighting of the new moon. Here's the story:

Because a new moon comes approximately every 29 ½ days, the rabbis required two witnesses who had seen it, to travel to Jerusalem and testify before the Beit Din (the rabbinical court) about what they saw. Back in those days this was a big deal. The rabbis would welcome the witnesses and treat them royally, to make sure that people who lived on the coast (where the new moon was easier to see) would make the long trek up to Jerusalem.

Now the truth is, the rabbis were no slouches when it came to these matters. They were acquainted with astronomy and knew how the new moon would have appeared in the sky, and the time of day it would have been visible. But rather than rely on their "scientific" knowledge alone, they required the testimony of two witnesses before they would officially announce that a new month had begun.

Well on one night, Rabban Gamliel's court heard testimony about the new moon which indicated that it had appeared a day later than their scientific theories told them to expect it. But rather than send the witnesses away and wait for another report, Rabban Gamliel accepted their testimony and declared the new month.

A short while later Gamliel's student, Rabbi Yehoshua came to him with concerns. He told Gamliel that the witnesses were wrong and the ruling needed to be changed. But Gamliel held fast to his decision and the ruling stood.

A week or so later, Rabban Gamliel sent a note to his student, inviting Yehoshua to come and spend the next day with him. He told him to make sure to travel with the proper provisions: his walking stick and his wallet, so that he could get something to eat and drink along the way. (You know he sounds a little bit like my mother.)

Now to reject such an invitation from the head of the Sanhedrin would have been a grievous insult, not to mention an end to his career, so Yehoshua packed his bag, picked up his walking stick, put his wallet in his pocket and proceeded to his teacher's home. When he arrived his teacher greeted him warmly. He kissed him on his head and said: "Come in peace, my teacher and my disciple! My teacher – in wisdom; and my disciple – in that you accepted my words."

Now this is an amazing story. First of all, can you imagine, the most important rabbi of his generation makes a major mistake, in an era with no recording devices or internet, and somehow it still gets incorporated into the Mishnah and is preserved for all time? Somehow I don't think that any of our leaders would allow such a thing to happen today. But more to the point, when the leading figure of his age can't correctly identify the beginning of a month, it suggests that the elements involved are way too complicated, and God should have created a better system.

Now for those of you who are good listeners, you might be thinking about a second question: Why was this story placed in a section of the Mishnah called Rosh Hashanah? And the answer: The month that Rabban Gamliel made the mistake in, was this month – Tishrei, which means that this is a story about the year they got Rosh Hashanah wrong. But even more than this, if Rosh Hashanah was celebrated on the wrong day, so were Yom Kippur, Sukkot and Shmini Atzeret.

By the way, this also means... that note that Rabban Gamliel sent to Rabbi Yehoshua, it wasn't just a request to stop by for a visit. Oh no, it was an invitation to celebrate Yom Kippur with him. And for Yehoshua to accept that invitation and arrive on time, it meant that, instead of fasting and praying on the day that *he knew* was Yom Kippur, he would have to be on the road, traveling, eating and drinking.

And just in case you think that Rabban Gamliel somehow didn't realize that he had made the wrong decision, listen again to how he greeted Yehoshua. He said: "Come in peace, **my teacher** and my disciple! *My teacher – in wisdom*" (He's saying: Yehoshua, I know that you were right about the date of the new moon); "*and my disciple – in that you accepted my words.*" (Despite my mistake, he says, you respected my authority as the head of the Beit Din.)"

Friends, this is a radical text. Once again, here's the leading rabbinic authority of his age speaking to a younger colleague. Not only does he acknowledge that he made a mistake, he also admits that, because of his error the entire Jewish community sinned; they failed to observe Yom Kippur. But even more than this, he's also saying that preserving the authority of the Beit Din is more important than getting the date right. I

don't know about you, but that sounds like one conceited Rabbi to me. I wonder how God felt about all this?

Well actually there's no need to wonder, because there's another Mishnah, in Masekhet Nedarim that gives us the answer. It tells of a clash between heaven and earth. The angels above were gathered for Rosh Hashanah. They were beginning their celebration when one of them looked down and saw that the children of Israel were all at home. The angel couldn't believe what he was seeing. It's Rosh Hashanah, for crying out loud, and here they were celebrating alone. So he turned to God to see what should be done. God looked down, saw His people asleep in their beds, turned back to the angel and said: "Don't worry. Go home. We'll wait till they're ready for us. We'll try again tomorrow."

Rather than anger or rage at the sin of His people, God takes the error in stride, as if, perhaps it's not such a big deal. And you know what? It isn't. If God had wanted everything done exactly His way, He would have given us a calendar with four week months and a 336 day years. There would have been no opportunity for mistakes. No errors. No mess ups. But instead, God gave us a system so complex that mistakes are inevitable. And actually, that's okay. Because God didn't put us here *just* to do things His way, He put us here to do things our way, to find our own path, to create something new, to make something beautiful, to build something unexpected. If God was only interested in rule followers, then way back then, when Adam and Eve ate that fruit, our story would have been over.

Deep in the heart of this text there's an affirmation of human value and worth. Not only are we God's partner on this planet, He's appointed us Senior status. Our role is not to be subservient to a perfect God and a perfect law, but to make it our own, to use it to craft something beautiful, maybe even something better.

And that, of course, is the role of religion, not to give all the answers, but to provide us with a good framework so that we can answer the questions of life for ourselves. And if we act with integrity and get something wrong, if live with sincerity and make a mistake, God will find a way to be as forgiving with us, as he was with Rabban Gamliel.

Ask any religious school student and they'll tell you that Rosh Hashanah is a celebration of the birthday of the world, the day on which the work of creation began. But the Midrash, (Vayikra Rabba) tells a slightly different story. It says that the work of creation actually began on the 25th day of Elul, five days ago. And that would make today, the sixth day. Of course, on the sixth day we're still celebrating the story of creation. But the creation that God wanted us to celebrate is of humanity. Yes, today is our human birthday, and if you look hard enough, you'll see that God is celebrating right along with us.

Friends, in this new year 5777, may we give God even more reasons to celebrate. May we see the beauty that lies within our Jewish tradition. May we live with honor and integrity. May we strive for our highest potentials. May we accept that the world God gave us really isn't perfect, and that we'll make mistakes along the way. May we be as forgiving of others as God is of us. And may we ever be conscious of those holy sparks of the Divine that God implanted within us, and in all of God's other creatures. Amen.