

# Time

We have just celebrated another New Year. I was not specifically thinking of 2022, although that too. Or of *Tu BiShvat*, the Fifteenth Day of the Month of Shevat. The New Year for Trees. One of four different New Years as recorded in the Talmud ( Rosh Hashana ). Why are there so many New Years? Which got me thinking about what time means to us and why it matters.

There are so many different ways of understanding what time is. Is it the way we record the movements of the earth, sun, and stars? Or just a random human concept for convenience? If it measures the distance between objects, and there were no objects or people would time exist? Time is often referred to as a fourth dimension, along with three spatial dimensions.

In physics, time is a symbol and like length, mass, and charge, describe a fundamental quantity. Historians will say that it is the continued sequence of existence and events that occur in irreversible succession from the past, through the present, into the future.

Most of us now associate time with calendars, birthdays, fiscal tax years, and religious and secular festivals. So that time and religion are as inextricably connected to the quality of human life. But more of that later.

According to some archaeologists, there were ways of measuring time over 15,000 years ago, notches carved on bones. The Assyrians came up with the first calendar as we know it and dated the origin of the world to 4750 BCE. Every society around the world has always had its particular calendars. Wikipedia lists eighty-three currently. They divide into the lunar that tracks the passage of the moon, like Islam. Solar calendars, such as the Persian Zoroastrian that follow the sun. And the Lunisolar that combines both, as does the Hebrew calendar (as well as China and India). The advantage of the Lunisolar is that it lines up with seasons so that festivals always fall in line with seasons. And they have different ways of dealing with reconciliation, through leap years or extra months as we do.

The idea of having a specific starting date for a calendar is relatively recent. Judaism initially had no single starting point. For most of its early history, they calculated years according to the reigns of Kings. The 29<sup>th</sup> year of King David's reign, or the 31<sup>st</sup> of King Solomon's for example. Julius Caesar (born July 100 BCE) introduced the Julian Calendar in 46 BCE, more than two thousand years ago. The Alexandrian Ptolemy, born in 100 CE, introduced the first calculated calendar as opposed to relying on sighting the moon. Which Hillel 2<sup>nd</sup> adopted for Judaism

The Julian calendar was adopted by Christianity and later changed by Pope Gregory in 1582 CE. Both Christians and Muslims calculated their calendars as starting with events in the lives of their founders. The French created a new calendar starting with the French Revolution. It was only used by the French government for about 12 years from late 1793 to 1805, and for 18 days by the Commune 1871. It did not catch on! Judaism, I guess, wanting to differentiate

itself from its competitors decided to revert to the Assyrian tradition of beginning with what they calculated as Creation.

Nowadays most of the world has come to accept the current universal calendar for secular convenience. And the only variation I am aware of is that whereas Christians use BC and AD (**B**efore **C**hrist and **A**nno **D**omini) others prefer **B**efore the **C**ommon **E**ra and **C**ommon **E**ra. While most human beings and cultures retain their calendars for religious, national, and ceremonial purposes.

Coming specifically to Judaism, as I always tend to do (!) our calendar relies very heavily on the Assyrian or Mesopotamian. The names of the months of the Jewish Calendar are all derived from Babylonia. **Nisan** comes from *Nisanu*, **Iyar** from *Aru*, **Av** from *Abu*, **ELLul** from *Ululu*, **Tishrei** from *Tisri tum*, etc. And the Bible also includes some Canaanite names like *Ziv* and *Bul* that were later abandoned.

The Assyrian *Sapattu* or *Sabattu* turned in the Hebrew **Shabbat**. Babylonians celebrated every seventh day as a “holy-day”, also called an “evil-day” (meaning “unsuitable” for prohibited activities). It was also called a time for atonement which in the Biblical tradition was applied as **Zman Kapara**, a time to atone, only to *Rosh Chodesh*, each New Moon. Which it still does in our liturgy.

Even within Orthodox, traditional Judaism there are different calendars. Although we all agree on the official ones as laid down in Jewish Law, each Chasidic dynasty has its own special festive days that only they celebrate to remember both happy and sad days in the lives of their great ones. And woe to anyone who pleads ignorance as I often had to when navigating within different Chasidic communities.

There are several words for time in Biblical Hebrew. By far the most common is **ZMaN**. Which is the same root as **ZiMuN**, to invite someone to come for a special occasion or just a visit. If you think about it, the word involves two things, thinking about other people and coming together. To recognize and appreciate celebrate our lives, the lives of our community and humanity.

In many ways, it is **Zman** that is the most determining factor in Jewish religious life. It differentiates a Jewish way of life from all others, and it differentiates and identifies within Judaism itself. It marks our daily life, as Solomon said there is a time for everything, a time to live, and a time to die. There, in Kohelet ( Ecclesiastes 3) he uses another word for time, **Eyt**. Which means appropriate time rather than historical time. The modern equivalent of both words is awareness. Each day, each week, month, and year of how valuable time is and how quickly it passes ( except of course when you are suffering). At each stage, there are jogs to our memory. Hold on a minute. Are you doing the right thing? Are you aware enough of your actions and others? Are you appreciating the good things in life and our tradition?

The Talmud is full of wise sayings about important it is to be aware of time. How fragile it is. R. Eliezer said ( TB, Shabbat 53a) “Repent one day before you die.” Which could, of course, be tomorrow!

One of the most important obligations in Judaism is to study. Setting aside time each day to study is as important as setting aside time to pray or meditate. The Biblical idea of *Shmitah, The Release*, was every seven years to take a break from work and have time to study, broaden one's mind and knowledge and strengthen our spiritual lives. The Babylonian communities two thousand years ago established the annual *Kalah* gatherings and opened up the academies to everyone so that those burdened with work had time to study.

The idea of a Messiah coming to earth was that we would be freed both from political oppression and the worries of having to earn a living. That way we would all be free to study. That says Maimonides is the only difference between life in the present and when the Messiah comes. Given the hundreds of thousands of Jews who are now enabled to study all day long all year round, you might think that the Messiah has already arrived. And about time too.