

Monthly Feature
- Rabbi Shmuel Goldin

**Begin at the Beginning:
But Where's the Beginning?**

The question should be simple enough to answer...

When does the Jewish year begin?

The problem is, however, there is no clear “beginning” to the Jewish year. While other faith traditions identify one yearly date as their year’s commencement; the Jewish calendar contains numerous Rashei Shana, dates identified as “Heads of the Year.” Our year is apparently “multi-headed,” featuring a number of possible “beginnings.”

We might be tempted to suggest that this phenomenon reflects our people’s famed inability to agree with each other on anything. The truth, however, is much more profound. The Jewish year’s multiple portals reflect the natural cycles around us that “begin” at different times of the year. As the Spring season approaches, for example, the 15th day of the month of Shevat is recognized as the “Head of the Year” for trees. With the arrival of Fall, the first day of the month of Elul is identified as the “Head of the Year” for domesticated animals. The list continues...

By reminding us that we share the globe with all of God’s creations, our yearly passage helps counteract our innate self-centered view of the world. We are alerted to the fact that we are not alone. The natural world surrounding us has independent value. Our year must mirror its presence and importance, as well.

The question, however, remains. When does our year begin? Accepting that the various Rashei Shana of the year mark the multiple “beginnings” surrounding us, when is the Jew’s Rosh Hashana? What exact calendar date marks the beginning of our yearly journey?

At first blush, the answer to this question would seem evident. Clearly, our year begins in the Fall with the two-day Biblical festival that opens the month of Tishrei. Designated in Rabbinic sources as Rosh Hashana, the Head of the Year, this festival launches a period of deep personal introspection and is universally seen as the Jewish year’s beginning.

Surprisingly, however, another viable calendar candidate presents itself for the year’s beginning. Centuries before the rabbis label the first days of Tishrei as Rosh Hashana, the Torah itself openly refers to the month we are about to enter, the Springtime month of Nissan, as the “first of the

months of the year.” In addition, the Torah relates that God launches the Jewish calendar on Rosh Chodesh Nissan, the first day of this “first month” of Nissan, immediately prior to the Israelites’ Exodus from Egypt. This momentous act initiates the Divine transmission of mitzvot to the Israelites. Finally, Nissan prominently features the Festival of Pesach, which marks the onset of the Jewish national journey. Based on this clear biblical testimony, Rosh Chodesh Nissan is a logical candidate for the Jewish year’s beginning.

A quandary, therefore...

Which date shall we choose as the beginning of our year? Should we view our yearly cycle as beginning in the Fall season, with the month of Tishrei; or does the year begin now, exactly six months later, in the Spring, with the onset of Nissan?

Apparently, we are not meant to choose, at all. So complex is the Jew’s place in the world that his yearly passage must include two Rashei Shana. His personal yearly cycle begins, not once, but twice, a year.

The Rashei Shana of Tishrei and Nissan speak with very different voices...

The Tishrei Rosh Hashana liturgy

proclaims: “On this day the world came into being. On this day He (God) makes all creatures of the world stand in judgement.” The universal tone struck by this statement courses through the entire festival. God is the God of all creation; we loudly declare. The entire world, not just the Jew, is judged on this holy occasion. As each Jew traverses this uniquely personal festival, he is meant to do so with an acute awareness of his shared humanity with those around him. All of God’s creatures have inherent value in the eyes of their creator; all of mankind has its place and its role to play in God’s world.

If the Rosh Hashana of Tishrei is universal, however, the Rosh Hashana of Nissan is specific. Nissan celebrates the birth of the Jewish nation and the establishment of its unique relationship with God. The central festival of this month, the Festival of Pesach, marks God’s hand in history, as he leads his “Chosen People” towards freedom and nationhood. Nissan reminds the Jew of his distinctiveness, of the exceptional place that he occupies in God’s world, and of the role that he alone is meant to play in that world.

Evidence of the philosophical distinction between these two Rashei

Shana is seen in a technical Talmudic mandate. Legal contracts that are dated according to the reign of non-Jewish kings, say the rabbis, must reflect the 'universal' Rosh Hashana of Tishrei. Contracts, on the other hand, which reference the reign of Jewish kings, are dated according to the 'Jewish' Rosh Hashana of Nissan.

The message delivered by the structure of our calendar could not be more powerful or profound...

With the Jewish Nation's birth, one might have thought that its specific Rosh Hashana would replace the universal Rosh Hashana on its calendar; that the Rosh Hashana of Nissan would supplant the Rosh Hashana of Tishrei. This is clearly not the case. Both Rashei Shana remain in place. Together they create a critical balance, essential to each Jew's self-definition. Centuries before the Exodus and the birth of Jewish nationhood, Avraham, the progenitor of the Jewish people, confronts his surrounding society by describing himself as a Ger V'Toshav, a "stranger and a citizen." The Jew may be a "stranger," he may be unique, his role may be distinctive and apart; but he is nonetheless a "citizen," a participating member of the world community. He fulfills his divinely

ordained role only when he plays out his uniqueness against the backdrop of the surrounding world; only when he sets an example of holiness for others.

This year, as we prepare to mark our specific Rosh Hashana of Nissan, echoes of the universal Rosh Hashana of Tishrei ring loudly in our years. Rarely has humanity's connectedness and shared vulnerability been as apparent to us as it is today, in the face of the health crisis sweeping the globe. While we certainly have every right, in fact the obligation, to offer particular prayers for our own health and the health of our people; prayers for "others" cannot be absent from our lips. This is a crisis shared with the world, and our heartfelt concern must be for all who are in pain.

The Rosh Hashana of Tishrei and the Rosh Hashana of Nissan both remain for the Jew. We experience two beginnings to our year, six months apart from each other. And the balance that these two occasions create in our yearly journey sensitizes us to the delicate equilibrium we must achieve in our role as an Ohr La'goyim, a "light unto the nations." We must simultaneously remain a part of and apart from surrounding society, as we strive to partner with God in the sanctification of His world.