

WHY DOES THE JEWISH CALENDAR HAVE POSTPONEMENTS?

In the time of Moses, Israel was given a set of Holy Days to be observed each year. These are listed in Leviticus chapter 23. The best known of these to Christians are "Passover" and the "Feast of Weeks" or its Greek name, "Pentecost".

The Bible has instructions on when these festivals must be held or begin. Sometimes Judaism holds its version of these festivals at those specified times, but frequently it starts them at later times. This is called "postponement" of the festival. This article explains why postponements occur.

The example of Yom Kippur

In Judaism, the most important of the annual Holy Days is "Yom Kippur", or the "Day of Atonement" as translated into English.

The Bible does not tell us much about this day; there are only six verses on it in Leviticus 23. Yet it is described in verse 32 as "a sabbath of solemn rest" or "sabbath of sabbatism", meaning not just a sabbath day but a very special sabbath day. In Judaism, it is the most holy of the holy days.

In Leviticus, everyone had to "afflict your souls" and humble themselves, and avoid all work.

There are more instructions, for the High Priest, in Leviticus 16. The whole thirty four verses are dedicated to instructions for an annual ceremony to be held inside the small Tabernacle or Temple on the Day of Atonement, involving two goats, one of which was slain and the other was banished to the "wilderness". This was the only time the High Priest was allowed to enter "the sanctuary within the veil before the mercy-seat, which is on the Ark". Only a few other men were involved: those who brought the animals to be sacrificed and the two goats, and the person who took the live goat away.

There was nothing else for the rest of the nation to do on this solemn day. They had to rest and afflict their souls.

In the original writings of Moses, there were no actions which were specified to be done on the the day before Yom Kippur. However, over the years, customs have developed for this day, known as Erev Yom Kippur. These customs are now very important to devout Jews.

Details are given below, but the main points are outlined here:

On Erev Yom Kippur, the three most important events requiring action and work are:

visit, or at least call, and seek forgiveness from anyone who may have been injured or offended or wronged in the past year by you,

wave a chicken in the air while reciting proscribed verses from a Yom Kippur prayer book,

eat the large customary Erev Yom Kippur meal.

With these customs, the devotee is participating in what is considered by Judaism as significant work, and they cannot be done on a Sabbath day.

There are other customs to be performed on Yom Kippur itself, and prohibitions on certain acts, such as wearing leather shoes or putting on perfume.

More on Erev Yom Kippur Customs

(You can skip this section if you are short of time).

The Internet site ou.org explains these customs.

The day before Yom Kippur is considered to be a quasi-festival day.

* Traditionally, "all who eat on the ninth are considered to have fasted on the ninth AND the tenth." It is thus a mitzvah to eat and drink Erev Yom Kippur. This both gives us strength for the fast and substitutes for the usual Yom Tov meals, which cannot be eaten on Yom Kippur because of the fast.

* It is customary to give increased charity on Erev Yom Kippur as charity helps to repeal any evil decrees. (See the Kaparot section on the ou.org web site).

* Sins committed against another person cannot be atoned for until one has first sought forgiveness from the person he/she has wronged. Even the great day of Yom Kippur or death cannot atone for sins against fellow man.

Thus - it is customary to go visit (or at least call) friends, family, associates and any person whom one may have somehow wronged or spoken ill of in the past year and ask forgiveness.

For example, any stolen objects must be returned to their rightful owners. Any person you have spoken Loshen Hara, evil gossip, about, should be asked for their forgiveness.

* It is a mitzvah to immerse oneself in a mikvah (ritual bath) on Erev Yom Kippur. This symbolizes a person's rebirth associated with the doing of Teshuvah, return. Men have this custom universally, and women have different customs concerning mikvah Erev Yom Kippur.

* Kaparot - An ancient and mystical custom designed to imbue people with a feeling that their very lives are at stake as the holy Yom Kippur approaches.

The kaparot ceremony symbolizes our sins crying out for atonement, and as a reminder that our good deeds, charity and repentance can save us from the penalty our many sins deserve.

In its original form, a chicken (a white rooster for a male, hen for a female) was taken and waved over one's head while reciting proscribed verses which can be found in the Yom Kippur machzor (special prayer book). It was customary to then redeem the kaparot for money, which was given to

charity.

Today though, most communities prefer to place the chosen sum of money in a white cloth napkin and give it to charity following the ceremony.

* Viduy, confession, is recited at mincha, the afternoon service, during the silent Amidah. In case a person should choke and die during his pre-Yom Kippur meal, he will have least said one viduy.

* It is customary to wear white on Yom Kippur. This is symbolic of the angels and of spiritual purity. Many married men wear a kitel, which is also worn upon burial (and by many men at their wedding) as a reminder of the day of death and repentance.

* Though not usually worn at night - the talit (prayer shawl) is worn for Kol Nidre, is kept on for the entire evening service, and is left unfolded at the synagogue to be adorned again the next morning.

Potential conflicts

With customs spread over two days, the situation becomes complicated for a Judaism devotee.

The date of Yom Kippur is given in Leviticus 23 as the tenth day of the month. Over the years the new moon falls on every day of the week, i.e. it sometimes can and does happen on a Sunday, sometimes on a Monday, sometimes on a Tuesday, sometimes on a Wednesday, sometimes on a Thursday, sometimes on a Friday, and sometimes on a Saturday.

What happens if the first day of the month falls on a Friday, so that Yom Kippur is on a Sunday, and consequently Erev Yom Kippur is on a Saturday?

The devotee would be faced with a conflict: whether to not do those essential Erev Yom Kippur actions, thus avoiding working on the afternoon of the weekly Sabbath, or whether to do them to comply with the Erev Yom Kippur customs but transgress the work prohibitions for the Sabbath.

Either way, some laws or traditions will be violated..

Avoiding conflicts

The requirement to make this lose-lose decision does not arise for the devout Judaist because the Judaism calendar, the only calendar approved by the Sanhedrin (which no longer exists), never has Yom Kippur falling on a Sunday.

How did this fortunate situation arise? Just coincidence?

No, it was a beautiful example of lateral thinking. If the dates in the calendar give problems, make a new calendar.

The approved calendar avoided obvious conflicts by adjusting the starting date of the seventh month, known as "Tishri" or "Tishrei", to a different day such that conflicts no longer exist. If the actual start of the month, i.e. the day of the new moon, would result in difficulties with customs, the official start of the month is "postponed" to avoid the conflicts. Usually the postponement is one day, but can be two days. In some cases, the solution is to postpone the whole month, but that is another matter for another article.

The situation then is that if the start of the month were on a Friday, so that Erev Yom Kippur would be on a Saturday, then the official start of the calendar's month of Tishri is "postponed".

In this example, the first day of Tishri is "postponed" one day to Saturday. One day is sufficient to avoid religious conflicts. Yom Kippur is then on a Monday, and Erev Yom Kippur is on a Sunday, when the work of its customs can be done happily.

In the postponement process, the time and date of the actual astronomical new moon is unaltered, it remains at the same inconvenient time, but the official first day of Tishri is declared to be one day later, or sometimes two days later if there is still inconvenience with a one day postponement. Thus Tishri 1 is on the day of the new moon whenever convenient, but otherwise on the second day of the lunar month, or rarely on the third day of the lunar month.

How is a postponement achieved in practice?

Add a day or two

A one day postponement is easily done by adding one extra day to a month earlier than Tishri, so that the start of Tishri is naturally pushed back by a day. In the Jewish calendar, Tishri is the first month of the Jewish year, so the postponement is achieved to having the extra day(s) inserted in the previous Jewish year.

A fixed table of 19 Jewish years

The Jewish calendar is a fixed block or table of nineteen years, with each year being itself fixed. When year 19 of the 19 year block ends, the whole 19 years are repeated starting with year 1, the same year 1 which happened 19 years earlier. The fixed calendar includes times for sunsets, new moons, etc. and, considering that it was issued long ago, these are quite accurate, with errors of not more than hours. Note that, even with mild errors today, the devisers of this calendar must have known in advance when a new moon would occur.

Adding an extra day to a month before Tishri so that Tishri will be postponed by a day requires that the non-amended start of Tishri be known in advance. If it is not known beforehand that there will be a conflict, it is not known whether to insert a day.

That they knew in advance when a new moon would occur is certainly reasonable considering that new moons have been studied, recorded and predicted by all major ancient civilizations, such as the

Egyptians, Babylonians, Greeks, and Chinese. Israel had intimate connections with the Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, and Greeks.

Example of a postponement

As an example of a postponement, consider the following.

If, in a particular year, the new moon for the start of Tishri is known to fall on a Friday, as it did on Friday 22 September 2006, the first day of Tishri is "postponed". The calendar has been constructed so that the first of Tishri is shown as Saturday 23 September 2006, or more correctly, the Gregorian translation of the Jewish Calendar which itself uses Babylonian names for months. (September 2006 is in year 5767 in the Jewish system, being year 10 in the 19 year table.)

Even though postponements were an innovative solution devised long ago, everyone is happy with them still: devout Jews can keep the traditions of the elders and still appear to be in compliance with Leviticus 23 and other chapters, each and every year.

But isn't that observing Yom Kippur on the eleventh of the month instead of the tenth as directed in Leviticus 23?

Visual sightings

The Sanhedrin took care of that long ago too. At some time in the past, and likely after the time of Christ, they declared that a new moon was what and when they declared it to be. They introduced a system which abandoned the calculated new moon, which was known long in advance and could not be "postponed", and they replaced it with one whereby they or approved observers supposedly looked for a new moon crescent. When one was allegedly sighted on a convenient day, a new moon was declared and signalled across the nation. This was always either in synchronism with the actual new moon, or after it, and of course never before it. Happily, a declaration never happened on any day that made it difficult to observe the traditions.

Of course, this method is open to manipulation, whereas the calculated new moon method cannot be.

With "observation" of a moon crescent on or after the actual new moon, declaration in advance was impossible, by definition. Of course this made planning by business people impossible, who probably continued with the practice of the Egyptians, the Babylonians, etc in pre-calculating the dates of new moons.

However, the system with observation by official observers, meant Tishri 1 was never on an inconvenient actual new moon.

Of course, in reality, both the astronomical new moon and any observation of a post new moon crescent, over a long period, fall on all days of the week, including those inconvenient for Judaic customs. If the observations of the astronomical new moon were true and unbiased, they too would

include every day of the week over a long period of time, which would make it difficult at times to conduct religious traditions. Adding postponements when needed to avoid embarrassing cultural difficulties was a shrewd move, even though of questionable ethics.

Sometimes No postponements

Note that the start of Tishri is not postponed in every one of the nineteen years in the fixed table.

The preference is to not use postponements. They are used only when religious observance would be otherwise difficult.

In 2002, for example, the new moon was at 5.10 am on the seventh of September. The Rabbi Hillel calendar had Tishri 1 on the same day, no postponement. That day was a Saturday, which is fine for keeping all of the customs without conflict. No postponement either in 2009, when it also falls on a Saturday.

Other Causes of Postponement

Judaism has more holy days than just those of Leviticus 23. Postponements were incorporated into the 19 year table for conflicts relating to days other than Yom Kippur.

Judaism has customs attached to the weekly Sabbath and its preparation day, and the annual festivals and their preparation days. Another important month for customs is six months earlier than Tishri, and has the Babylonian name Nisan. The Passover season with its many customs is in this month.

It is difficult for observance of their customs if two holy days occur side by side, e.g. Friday and Saturday or Saturday and Sunday.

Tishri 1 falling on a Friday or Sunday is particularly nasty. If on a Friday, there are double holy days for the Festival of Trumpets (Lev 23:24), the Day of Atonement, the first day of the Festival of Tabernacles (Lev 23:34), and the Last Great day or eighth day of the Festival of Tabernacles (Lev 23:36). If on a Sunday, Yom Kippur is ok but the others are still double holy days.

These problematic situations have been avoided by constructing the 19 year table calendar, utilizing postponements as required, so that devotees are never faced with the conflict.

Passover postponed too

The fixed table of 19 years has leap years with additional months and non-leap years. Some months have different numbers of days depending on their positions in the 19 year cycle, but one of the things that is fixed is the number of days between Nisan 1 in one year and Tishri 1 which begins the next year.

Because of that fixed number of days, if either Passover season or the Tishri season is postponed, the

other is also postponed.

Postponement without customs

There are Christians who observe the annual festivals of Leviticus 23, but who do not insert postponements because they do not follow the Jewish traditional customs. Conflicts then do not arise.

There are also other Christians who observe the holy days of Leviticus 23, and who do not follow the traditions of the elders, but they use the Jewish calendar with its postponements.

As strange as it may sound, unlike the Jews who postpone only when there would be a conflict with Judaism traditions, these Christians who do not keep the traditions postpone too, to be on the same days as the Jews.

The question of a conflict with Judaism customs for them does not arise because they do not practice those traditions. Yet they go along with the postponements, exactly as if they practice the traditions and have religious conflicts. Weird. The Rabbis keep the correct non-postponed days if they can, but these people are quite happy to observe the postponed days for no justifiable reason.