

## Calendars (2)

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**I**N [PART 1](#) WE considered our own calendar and the ancient calendars it was derived from. We now wish to consider the Hebrew calendar, but before doing this let us take a brief look at the Islamic calendar.

### The Islamic calendar

The Julian and Gregorian calendars, although they include months, or lunar cycles ('moonths'), are basically solar calendars. The Islamic or Arabian calendar is strictly lunar—one might almost say 'lunatic'! It has 354 days (compared with the solar calendar of 365 days), or 355 days in eleven years out of a cycle of thirty years. The great feasts of Islam, such as Ramadan, therefore rotate through the seasons over the years.

The Islamic calendar starts from the flight of the prophet Mohammed from Mecca to Medina, the flight being called the Hijrah, or Hegira, which occurred in the year we call A.D. 622. However, one cannot calculate what year it is by Islamic dating simply by subtracting 622 from the Gregorian date. Since the Islamic year is shorter, 100 Islamic years take up only ninety-seven Gregorian or solar years.

Having recounted in [Part 1](#) the pagan origins of our everyday calendar, with its peculiar history and features, perhaps it feels more strange and foreign than we had previously thought. After that, and our brief review of the Islamic calendar, perhaps the Hebrew calendar will not seem so strange.

### The Hebrew calendar

The basic feature of the Hebrew calendar is the regular and uninterrupted procession of weeks. The days are numbered rather than given names, beginning with the first on our Sunday and continuing to the seventh, Shabbat, the sabbath, on our Saturday.

Actually all days are counted as starting at sunset on the evening before, when the first three stars appear in the sky (if it is clear). This feature is most noticeable on the eve of Shabbat, especially in Israel but also in Jewish communities abroad. Jewish offices and shops start closing down quite early on Friday afternoon, and everyone who can do so moves homeward to prepare for the sabbath. Similarly, on Saturday

evenings, although the very Orthodox mourn the passing of Shabbat, there is generally a very relaxed, almost carnival, atmosphere.

The second main feature is that the Hebrew calendar is lunar. It is saved from rotating through the seasons in the mad fashion of the Islamic calendar by adding extra months called 'intercalary months'. An extra thirty days are added to the end of seven of the years in a cycle of nineteen years. The long years fall either two or three years apart; they never follow one after the other.

The regular year has twelve months of alternately thirty and twenty-nine days, ending with the month of Adar with twenty-nine days. When the extra month is added, Adar extends to thirty days, and the extra month, called Adar B (Bet) or VeAdar, has twenty-nine days. Thus the regular year has a total of 354 days (like the Islamic year) and the VeAdar year has 384 days.

The regular years may have as few as fifty sabbaths, but the leap years have four or five more. The Jewish prayer book has fifty-four weekly portions (*parashot*, plural; singular *parashah*) rather than regular daily readings. The weekly portions vary between one and six Bible chapters each from both the Law and the Prophets, a total of from two to twelve chapters. So in leap years all the portions are read separately, but in regular years some are grouped together.

In addition to the leap years, two of the months are 'swing months', which may have twenty-nine or thirty days. They are Heshvan (8) and Kislev (9), and they serve to help keep the lunar Hebrew calendar in line with the solar year. Because of these features, the Hebrew months oscillate in relation to our Gregorian calendar, each falling within two of our months. Thus the first month, Nissan or Aviv, with thirty days, falls within the March-April period. The next month, Ziv or Iyar, with twenty-nine days, falls within our April-May, and so on (see the [chart](#) overleaf).

### Month names

I have mentioned alternative names for those first two months. The Bible names only four months: the first and second, and the seventh and eighth. The first, spelled 'Abib' in the AV

COMPARATIVE CHART OF THE HEBREW CALENDAR						
	Hebrew month	Meaning	No. of days	Equivalent months	Important days	Information
1	AVIV (later became NISSAN)	Green ears, or Spring	30	March-April	15-21: Pesach (Passover)	"Latter [finishing] rains"; start of the warm season
2	ZIV (later IYAR)	Flowering, or Splendour	29	April-May	18: 33rd day of the Omer	
3	SIVAN		30	May-June	6: Shavuot (Feast of Weeks or Firstfruits; Pentecost)	
4	TAMMUZ		29	June-July		
5	AV		30	July-August	9: Destruction of the Temple	
6	ELUL		29	August-September		
7	ETHANIM (later TISHRI)	Bountiful, or Reward	30	September-October	1-2: Rosh Hashanah (Head of the year) 10: Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) 15-21: Succot (Feast of Tabernacles)	
8	BUL (later HESHVAN or MARCHESHVAN)	Showers	29 or 30	October-November		"Former [opening] rains"; start of winter
9	KISLEV		29 or 30	November-December	25: Hanukah (Festival of Lights)	
10	TEVET		29	December-January		
11	SHEVAT		30	January-February		
12	ADAR		29 or 30	February-March	14-15: Purim (Lots; Festival of Esther)	
13	ADAR B VE-ADAR		29	February-March		Intercalary month

Note: There is no 'correct' way of transliterating Hebrew words into English. Some spellings given here may differ from those seen elsewhere.

but pronounced 'Aviv', as in the name of the city Tel Aviv, means 'green ears' or 'spring'. It is also referred to in Nehemiah 2:1 and Esther 3:7 as **Nisan (Nissan)**, which is its name today. Those books came after the Exile in Babylon, and the present names of the months are all post-Exilic.

The second month, named **Zif** or **Ziv** in the Bible, is now known as **Iyar**. Its Biblical name means 'flowering' or 'splendour'.

The seventh month in the Bible, **Ethanim**, coming in autumn and meaning 'bountiful' or 'reward', is now called **Tishri**. The eighth was **Bul**, meaning 'showers', and referring to the 'former' or first rains of the winter, is now called **Heshvan**.

The month here called Heshvan starts with the guttural 'h', which in some sources is shown as 'ch'. This month is also termed Marcheshvan, the 'Mar' prefix meaning 'sorrowful', because no festivals fall in that month. As in the month Aviv, the letter shown in the AV as 'b' is pronounced in Hebrew as 'v'. The greatest discrepancy between spellings in the AV and modern Israeli usage is for the ninth month, Chisleu in the AV (Neh. 1:1; Zech. 7:1) and Kislev as in this article, which follows Israeli usage.

### Festivals

The Hebrew calendar has two parts with great festivals in each, the main ones being in the months we have already mentioned. Nisan (or Aviv), in the spring, is the beginning of the year as mentioned in the Bible. Six months later comes Tishri (or Ethanim), the beginning of the civil year and of sabbatical years. Just one month earlier is the new year for tithing.

In the first half of the year come two of the great festivals. On the 14th Nisan is the Passover, Pesach, commemorating the deliverance from Egypt. Then, seven weeks later, comes the festival of Firstfruits, in Hebrew Shavuot, meaning 'Weeks', also known as Pentecost, that name being derived from the Greek and meaning 'Fiftieth'.

The second half of the year starts on the first day of Tishri, the Day of Remembrance, Rosh Hashanah, 'the Head of the Year', the start of the civil year. On 10th Tishri comes the most solemn day, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Five days later comes the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths, in Hebrew Succot, which lasts for a week. Those three weeks in Tishri, falling in the September-October period, are referred to as the High Holy Days.

### Other Jewish calendars

The calendar of mainstream Judaism was, and is, as we have seen, a lunar one. The adoption of different calendars was a major cause of separation of the Samaritans and, much later, of the Karaites, a Jewish sect founded in A.D. 765 in Persia, which rejected the Jewish Talmud (commentaries on the Law).

The group who were responsible for the Dead Sea Scrolls also broke away from the mainstream Judaism of their time (the Roman period) and adopted a solar calendar. Their year had 364 days, exactly fifty-two weeks, so that the great festivals always fell on the same day of the week each year. It is not now known how they made up for the loss of 1¼ days each year, though some scholars guess that they would have added an extra month every twenty-fourth year.

Like mainstream Judaism, their year was divided into two halves, marked by special ceremonies at the beginnings of the first and seventh months. For both groups the great festivals were held on the dates given in Scripture, as outlined above. But, due to the different lengths of months and years in the two calendars, those basic dates would fall on different days, making the split between the groups decisive and final.

Thus, according to one of the Dead Sea Scrolls, a clash occurred between two persons mentioned fleetingly in several of the commentaries and identified only by titles. In this reference, the sect's 'Teacher of Righteousness' was disturbed, or even actually attacked, by a certain 'Wicked Priest' during the observance of the solemn Day of Atonement according to the sect's calendar. It would not have been the Day of Atonement according to the 'Wicked Priest' if he observed a different calendar.

### Special days

There are a number of other special days scattered throughout the present Jewish calendar. Some are ancient, and some modern, such as Independence Day and a day recalling the Holocaust. Perhaps only two of the more ancient ones need to be mentioned here.

One is celebrated in the month of Kislev (December) and is called the Festival of Lights, or Hanukah. It commemorates the rededication of the temple in 164 B.C. under the Maccabees, after its desecration by the Greek Seleucid tyrant Antiochus IV.

The other falls on 14th Adar or Adar B (February-March) and is called Purim or the Feast of

Lots. On it the Biblical book, or rather scroll, of Esther is read. It is much favoured by children, and tends to be a joyous, even light-hearted, celebration.

#### Israel today

In Israel today three calendars are recognised for everyday use: the Gregorian, which is now accepted almost worldwide, the Hebrew calendar, and the Islamic, those last two marking the religious festivals. There are other calendars in use by minor religious sects.

The Hebrew calendar starts from the presumed or traditional date of Creation. Thus the year beginning 16 September 2004 by the Gregorian calendar is the year 5765 in the Hebrew calendar. The only newspaper published in English in Israel, the *Jerusalem Post*, referred to that fact, having a quiet joke at the expense of our calendar, when it ran an advertising slogan: "Step into the 58th century—visit Israel!".

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(Concluded)

## From the Editor's postbag

### Comments on items received from readers

#### Victory at Trafalgar

Elsewhere in this magazine I draw attention to the importance of Admiral Nelson in ensuring that Britain retained control of the seas during the Napoleonic Wars ("Norwich scenes", p. XXII). The greatest of his victories was the one in which he lost his life, Trafalgar, on 21 October 1805.

By coincidence, a reader has sent me a photocopy of a facsimile of part of *The Times* newspaper for 7 November of that year containing a report by Rear-Admiral Collingwood (Nelson's deputy and successor) on the battle.

He draws attention to the General Order made by Collingwood the day after the battle, as follows:

"The Almighty God, Whose arm is strength, having of His

great mercy been pleased to crown the exertion of his Majesty's fleet with success, in giving them a complete victory over their enemies, on 21st of this month: and that all praise and thanksgiving may be offered up to the Throne of Grace for the great benefits to our country and to mankind:

"I have thought proper that a day should be appointed of general humiliation before God, and thanksgiving for this His merciful goodness, imploring forgiveness of sins, a continuation of His divine mercy, and His constant aid to us in the defence of our country's liberties and laws, without which the utmost efforts of man are nought; and direct, therefore, that [a day] be

appointed for this holy purpose".

Collingwood's report also witnesses to a belief in God's hand at work both in giving victory to the British fleet and in preserving it afterwards:

"it pleased the Almighty Disposer of all events to grant his Majesty's arms a complete and glorious victory"; "the same good Providence which aided us through such a day preserved us in the night, by the wind shifting a few points, and drifting the ships off the land".

The second quotation refers to the fact that many of the British ships were damaged in the battle and could easily have been driven onshore by the wind had it not changed direction.

Looking back, it is possible to see how a British victory in the