THE HISTORY OF THE TISHREI CONUNDRUM

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Is Tishrei the first or the seventh month of the year? The Mishnah (Rosh HaShanah 1:1) states that the first day of Tishrei is the beginning of a new calendar year. However, in biblical times the month later called Tishrei (or Tishri) was considered the seventh month. Nominally, it has remained that way. But virtually all our calendars begin with Tishrei as the first month. Are they wrong?

This presents a bit of a conundrum. For if it is still to be considered the seventh month, then the question is, of which year? It cannot be the new year, which only begins on the first day of Tishrei. Therefore, it must be the seventh month of the previous year. How does a new year begin on the seventh month of the old one? The conundrum becomes even more puzzling upon further scrutiny.

Much is made of the first day of the seventh month in Scripture. Leviticus 23:24 states, In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, there shall be unto you a day of solemn rest, a memorial proclaimed with the blast of the shofar, a holy convocation. Similarly, Numbers 29:1 instructs, In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, there shall be unto you a holy convocation, a day of the blast of the shofar. Neither of these passages states that the first day of the seventh month was also the beginning of a new year.

If the first day of the seventh month was not the beginning of a new year, why were there festivities on that day? Dr. J. H. Hertz, in his commentary on the Pentateuch, points out that in biblical times seven was considered a special number. Just as the seventh day was deemed holy, so, too, were the seventh month and the seventh year, termed by Leviticus a year of solemn rest for the land (Lev. 25:4). The Jubilee year, taking place at the completion of seven cycles of seven years was sanctified as well (Lev. 25:8-10). Additionally, a Hebrew slave worked for six years and was set free on the seventh (Ex. 21:2). The first day of the seventh month was considered special, even with no connection to the new year.

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Thus, when the Psalmist declaims (81:4), *sound the shofar on the new moon*, it was on the first day of the seventh month, for only then was the shofar sounded. But was it also considered the beginning of a new year? Not at all. The term *Rosh Ha-Shanah*, which came to be used for the beginning of a new year, is found only once in all of Scripture (Ezekiel 40:1), but nothing is stated as to when it occurred, nor are there any festivities associated with it.

If the month later called Tishrei was considered the seventh month, Nisan must have been the first month. Exodus 12:2 states, *This month [Abib] (later called Nisan) shall be unto you the beginning of months of the year.* Does this establish Abib (Ex. 13:4) as the first month? The noted biblical scholar, M. D. Cassuto, explains that the verse is not now establishing Nisan as the first month of the year, for had this been the intent of the text it would read *yiheyeh lakhem*, "shall be unto you." The absence of this suggests that it was already viewed as the first month. According to Cassuto, the Israelites in Egypt had already been calculating the new year from that month, even before the Exodus.

However, the traditional rabbinic approach understood that it was only at the time of the Exodus from Egypt that the month later called Nisan became the first month of the Israelite calendar (see, for example, Sforno). Deliverance from bondage was an epoch-making event. Since it took place in Abib, it became the first month, and thenceforth it was also first in the counting of years (Num. 1:1, 33:38; I Kgs. 6:1).

But when Abib (Nisan) was considered the first month, were there any festivities on the first day to celebrate the beginning of a new year? We find no trace of such a celebration in the Bible. Only at year's end (Ex. 23:16) or at the turn of the year (Ex. 34:22) was the Feast of the Ingathering, referring to Sukkot, which takes place in the seventh month. While the Bible refers to the month of Abib as the first month, the year's end takes place in the seventh month, at the celebration of Sukkot! This indicates that the Bible itself accepts a dual calendrical system, with both Nisan and Tishrei acting as the beginning of the year. Cassuto points out that in Torah times there were two theories among the societies of the ancient Near East as to when the year began. Some claimed it was in spring, others, in the fall. Throughout Scripture, when agriculture predominated, Abib was generally favored as the beginning of the year. But in post-biblical times, a marked change occurred.
Not until the days of Ezra and Nehemiah do we hear of a celebration, rather than simply rest, occurring on the first day of the seventh month. Nehemiah 8:2 states that on that day *Ezra the priest brought the Torah before the congregation and read from it, from early morning until midday.* Ezra and Nehemiah announce to the people, *'This day is holy unto the Lord thy God, mourn not, weep not...eat what is fat and drink what is sweet, for the joy of the Lord is your strength'... and all the people went their way to make great joy* (Neh. 8:9-12). The first day of the seventh month was observed by reading the Torah. It was cast as a holy and joyous day, not unlike any of the major festivals. It was not exactly as mandated in Leviticus or Numbers, for there is no mention of the sounding of the shofar. But it was a far cry from what later became Rosh HaShanah, a day of solemnity.

Something else occurred in Nehemiah's time that is worthy of note. In his commentary on the book of Nehemiah 1:1 (Soncino Press), Dr. J. J. Slotki states that Nehemiah reckoned the months as beginning with Tishrei when he referred to Kislev as being in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes. That Nehemiah regarded Tishrei as the first month may be inferred from a comparison with Neh. 2:1, where he speaks of Nisan as still being in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes. If the year began on Nisan, the date in 2:1 would be the twenty-first year of the reign; otherwise, the events recorded in the second chapter would antedate those recounted in the first chapter. Accordingly, Nehemiah was acquainted with the practice of reckoning the year from Tishrei.

Thus, in Nehemiah's time, it was already the practice to regard Tishrei as the first month of the year. What brought about this shift from Nisan as the primary first month in the Torah to Tishrei as the beginning of the year in Nehemiah? One can only surmise that the major reason was the changing economic climate. Whereas in Torah times there was the primacy of agriculture, in the later post-exilic biblical era, this was giving way to a more mercantile economy which tilted towards the fall as the beginning of the year. Thus, Nisan diminished in importance whilst Tishrei gained the upper hand.

This change is reflected in the Mishnah (*Rosh Ha-Shanah* 1:1), where the first of Nisan is set as the new year for Israelite kings and festivals. But since the monarchy ceased to exist in pre-Mishnaic times, the first of Nisan was the new year in practice solely for the festivals. This may be seen as following the chronological order of the three major festivals. First, historically, came
Passover in Nisan. Two months later Shavu’ot (the giving of the Ten Commandments) was observed. Later came Sukkot, commemorating the end of wandering for many years in the wilderness.

On the other hand, Tishrei was set as the new year for the counting of years, of the sabbatical year, of the Jubilee, and also for calculating when a tree was planted (in respect to the rule of orlah) and the tithing of vegetables. One might have expected that items such as tree planting and vegetable tithing would have the new year fixed in Nisan, springtime, when vegetation comes to life. But Nisan, which held sway in previous years, gave way to Tishrei, which was gaining in prominence, even in regard to agricultural matters.

During this time, the first day of Tishrei (called Tisritum, meaning "to begin" in Babylonian) was transformed into Rosh Ha-Shanah. It was no longer significant merely because it was the first day of the seventh month. It was now the new year of years. It was no longer simply a holy and joyous day, as in the time of Nehemiah, but also a day of judgment, Yom ha-Din, as the Mishnah (Rosh Ha-Shanah 1:2) states: All that came into the world pass before Him like legions of soldiers. This was the day when the fate of all was inscribed, a day of apprehension and awesomeness, yom ayom ve-nora.

The sages went even further. In a discussion as to when the universe was created, in Nisan or Tishrei, they sided with Rabbi Eliezer, who claimed that the universe came into being in Tishrei: Be-Tishrei nivra ha-olam (TB Rosh Hashanah 27a). Thus the first day of Tishrei marks the beginning of all beginnings.

The first of Tishrei evolved from being the first day of the seventh month in biblical times, to becoming the beginning of all beginnings, celebrated as a day now called Rosh Ha-Shanah. Is it plausible, or even possible, to say that the universe and all creation occurred in the seventh month, since neither months nor years nor time existed before then? The conundrum respecting Tishrei can hardly be resolved unless Tishrei, which marked the beginning of creation and the beginning of a new year, is also cast as the first month of the year. Are those who list Tishrei as the first month on our calendars all that wrong? The pragmatic present condition – Tishrei as the beginning of the calendrical year and Nisan as the beginning of the festival year – makes everybody right, which itself may be regarded as part of the Jewish tradition.