



THE TWO NEW YEARS & THE TWO “NEW BEGINNINGS”: NISSAN VS. TISHREI

Someday the world will have a new beginning. Messiah will come. Nations will no longer lift up swords against other nations nor will they learn the art of war anymore. Peace and prosperity will cover the earth as the waters cover the seas and the knowledge of God’s rulership over the entire world will be the spiritual heritage of all mankind.

It is surely tempting to seek the date for this global transformation. If only we knew the time of Messiah’s arrival! But much as we have struggled to find clues to the time for the fulfillment of this fundamental belief of our faith, we have been told that this information remains part of the biblical category of, “The hidden things belong to the Lord our God.” [Deuteronomy 29:28]

Moreover, the Talmud tells us it is sinful to attempt calculations predicting the end of days:

א"ר שמואל בר נחמני אמר ר' יונתן תיפח עצמן של מחשבי קיצין שהיו אומרים כיון

שהגיע את הקץ ולא בא שוב אינו בא אלא חכה לו שנאמר אם יתמהמה חכה לו

R. Samuel b. Nahmani said in the name of R. Jonathan: Blasted be the bones of those who calculate the end. For they would say, since the predetermined time has arrived, and yet he has not come, he will never come. But [even so], wait for him, as it is written, Though he tarry, wait for him.

Sanhedrin 97b

Human calculations may be mistaken. Deferred hope may lead to national despair. Better to remain with the certainty of faith that Messiah *will* come than to permit the possibility for the desolation of hopelessness brought on by unfulfilled erroneous expectations. The history of failed messiahs, most powerfully illustrated by the tragic story of Sabbatai Tzvi, surely validate the Talmudic prohibition against predicting an exact date for Messiah’s arrival.

In light of all this, it is certainly

amazing to find a Talmudic dispute centering around the date marking our final redemption — true, not by year, but even more specifically by actual month.

The source is a passage in the Babylonian Talmud, *Rosh Hashanah* (10b – 11a):

תניא רבי אליעזר אומר בתשרי נברא העולם בתשרי נולדו אבות בתשרי מתו אבות בפסח נולד יצחק בראש השנה נפקדה שרה רחל וחנה בראש השנה יצא יוסף מבית האסורין בר"ה בטלה עבודה מאבותינו במצרים בניסן נגאלו בתשרי עתידין ליגאל ר' יהושע אומר בניסן נברא העולם בניסן נולדו אבות בניסן מתו אבות בפסח נולד יצחק בר"ה נפקדה שרה רחל וחנה בר"ה יצא יוסף מבית האסורין בר"ה בטלה עבודה מאבותינו במצרים בניסן נגאלו בניסן עתידין ליגאל

It has been taught: R. Eliezer says: In Tishrei the world was created; in Tishrei the Patriarchs were born; in Tishrei the Patriarchs died; on Passover Isaac was born; on New Year Sarah, Rachel and Hannah were visited [remembered on

high to be blessed with having a child]; on the New Year [i.e. in the month of Tishrei but more specifically on the very first day] Joseph went forth from prison; on the New Year the bondage of our ancestors in Egypt ceased [six months before their actual deliverance]; in Nissan they were redeemed but in Tishrei they will be redeemed in the time to come. R. Joshua says: In Nissan the world was created; in Nissan the Patriarchs were born; in Nissan the Patriarchs died; on Passover Isaac was born; on the New Year Sarah, Rachel and Hannah were visited; on the New Year Joseph went forth from prison; on the New Year the bondage of our ancestors ceased in Egypt; in Nissan they were redeemed and in Nissan they will be redeemed in the time to come.

The dispute between these two rabbinic giants revolves around both past and future. It concerns the exact time in terms of month for the events of greatest historic importance. The creation of the world, the birth of the patriarchs [with the exception of Isaac whose birth on Passover is indisputable], and the date for final redemption share the focus of their differing opinions. And we cannot help but wonder, what motivates these scholars to choose either Tishrei or Nissan? Why does each one of them believe that the month they favor is more propitious to have been chosen by God as worthy for these major moments? And, perhaps most striking of all, why ignore the injunction against “reckoning the end” by delving into something as specific as the actual month of final redemption?

The answer is implicit in something that Jewish tradition maintains is a central feature of specific times of the year. Months have their own special meaning. Seasons bring with them specific messages.

Passover is in the spring. Although Jews biblically follow a lunar calendar, it is adjusted with a leap month seven out of 19 years, precisely to ensure that Passover always remains *chag ha-aviv* — a festival of the spring. Spring is a time of love. Passover is the love story between God and the Jewish people, the story of Shir Ha-Shirim, the biblical book of the canon other than the Five Books of Moses selected for communal reading on this holiday.

The Midrash makes clear that God redeemed us in Nissan solely as an act of love. He redeemed us although we did not deserve it. He took us out of the land of Egypt even though we were still far from perfect. Passover was an unearned and unmerited redemption. And that is why it happened in Nissan, the month set aside for God’s attribute of total loving-kindness and grace.

There is another month, though, in which we are meant to deepen an awareness of God’s judgment and justice. It is the month of Tishrei in which God calls us to reflect upon actions. It is when our sins are weighed against our merits. Tishrei is the month of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Tishrei reminds us that we dare not rely on God’s love alone without also acknowledging personal responsibility. God’s kindness dares not be taken for granted; God’s compassion may not be used as exemption from our own obligations.

Where Nissan emphasizes love, Tishrei speaks of law. Where Nissan offers grace, Tishrei demands compliance. Where Nissan emphasizes *rachamim*, Tishrei stresses *din*. These are nothing other than the two aspects of divinity stressed by the two different names of God, Hashem and Elokim.

The two rabbis, Rabbi Eliezer and

Rabbi Joshua, dispute the relative importance and relevance of these two months for the Jewish people — as well as for the world.

There is a remarkable synergy between the names of these two rabbis and the ideals they espouse in this controversy. Names have profound meaning. In the words of the Bible, “As his name, so is he” [1 Samuel 25:25]. Both rabbis have a Hebrew word for God in their name. The first two letters of Eliezer are the short form of the name Elokim, God in His attribute of strict justice. Joshua — Yehoshuah — begins with the first two letters of the four-letter name of God that represents divine mercy. Rabbi Eliezer is spokesman for the month of Tishrei, the month of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the month of divine judgment. Rabbi Joshua is more attuned to the month of Nissan, the month of Passover, the month in which God chooses to defer the demands of justice to the greater blessings rooted in overriding love.

There are two ways in which the Hebrew language expresses help and deliverance.

וַיִּוֹשַׁע ה' בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל מִיַּד מִצְרַיִם — “And God delivered on that day Israel from the hands of Egypt” [Exodus 14:30] reflects on the meaning of the word *yeshua*. When Moses feared what would happen to the Israelites as the Egyptian army approached, with no seeming possibility for escape, the Lord reassured him. Moses then told his people:

אַל תִּירָאוּ הַתִּיַצְבוּ וְרֵאוּ אֶת יְשׁוּעַת ה' אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה לָכֶם הַיּוֹם — “Do not fear; stand firm and see the deliverance of the Lord that he will do for you today.” [Ibid. 14:13] — ה' יִלָּחֶם לָכֶם וְאַתֶּם תִּחְרְשׁוּן. — “The Lord will fight for you and you shall remain silent.” [Ibid. 14:14]

The word *yeshua* implies total reliance upon God. It asks nothing of man. It is divine help without human assistance. And it is what Rabbi Joshua [Yehoshuah] believed represents the most fundamental description of our relationship with the Almighty.

Small wonder that Rabbi Joshua felt it necessary to claim that the world was created in Nissan. The world could only come into existence on a foundation of love and the world can only survive as recipient of divine grace, even if unearned. The patriarchs had to be born in Nissan to emphasize that truth. The first redemption, the compassionate deliverance from Egypt commemorated by Passover, had to take place in Nissan. In Nissan we were redeemed in the past and it is in Nissan that we will be redeemed in the future as well. Redemption will come independent of our worthiness. Redemption will be mandated by God's love even if not validated by the strict standards of God's law.

Rabbi Eliezer, the man whose very name emphasized God's identity as strict judge and ruler, could not abide a theology rooted in the message of Nissan. True, at the very outset of our history as a people, we may not have been wise enough to be worthy. We may not yet have sufficiently absorbed God's teachings to *earn* redemption, so the Almighty was willing, for a time, to ignore our deficiencies. He chose, in our early youth, to overlook our failings and to redeem us in Nissan — solely out of love — in the expectation that with the passage of time we would mature sufficiently so that we might finally earn by our own actions what had previously been granted to us as gift.

The redemption of Passover, Rabbi Eliezer admits, came in Nissan but

surely the final messianic redemption — just as the creation of the world as well as the birth of most of our patriarchs — will be a Tishrei experience. In the spirit of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, our deeds will be carefully weighed to decide if we be found worthy. The world itself was created on that premise in Tishrei so that we forever know it is we who must join with God in order to ensure its survival.

Rabbi Eliezer saw God as partner to our own efforts. Remarkably, that is presaged in the second part of his name. *Ezer* means help — but it is the kind of request for assistance which assumes personal effort as well. The first time we meet the word in the Torah is when God informs us that he will create an *ezer k'negdo* for Adam, “a help-meet opposite him” [Genesis 2:18]. Adam was not meant to face the challenges of the world alone. God granted him support. But help is no excuse for personal abdication of responsibility. Eve was not meant to replace Adam but rather to assist him.

So too with regard to God, the Psalm of David calls out:

שְׁמַע ה' יְהוָה עֲזֵר לִי — Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me; O Lord, be my helper. [Psalms 30:11].

We ask God to be our helper, not our sole support. We ask for God's love, but only as reward for our commitment to live up to our obligations to the very best of our abilities.

Tishrei or Nissan are the metaphors used by the Talmudic rabbis who differ about our roles in the drama of the major historic events of our history. And if we might have failed to grasp what these sages really had in mind in their dispute, there is another passage in the Talmud that clarifies

beyond doubt the ultimate meaning of their controversy.

In the tractate of *Sanhedrin*, we are taught:

אמר רב כלו כולו כל הקיצין ואין הדבר תלוי אלא בתשובה ומעשים טובים ושמואל אמר דיו לאבל שיעמוד באבלו כתנאי ר' אליעזר אומר אם ישראל עושין תשובה נגאלין ואם לאו אין נגאלין אמר ליה רבי יהושע אם אין עושין תשובה אין נגאלין אלא הקב"ה מעמיד להן מלך שגזרותיו קשות כהמן וישראל עושין תשובה ומחזירין למוטב.

Rav said: All the predestined dates [for redemption] have passed, and the matter [now] depends only on repentance and good deeds. But Samuel maintained: it is sufficient for a mourner to keep his [period of] mourning. [Israel's sufferings in the exile in themselves sufficiently warrant their redemption, regardless of repentance.] This [very same] matter is disputed by Tannaim: R. Eliezer said: if Israel repent, they will be redeemed; if not, they will not be redeemed. R. Joshua said to him, if they do not repent, will they not be redeemed! [Of course they will, even if they do not deserve to be redeemed.] [Rabbi Eliezer responded] But the Holy One, blessed be He, will set up a king over them, whose decrees shall be as cruel as Haman's, whereby Israel shall engage in repentance, and he will thus bring them back to the right path [so that repentance will in fact be the reason for their final redemption].

Sanhedrin 97b

The argument between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua for choosing either Tishrei or Nissan was apparently just another way of couching their views about the role of repentance as requirement for redemption. Rabbi Joshua saw messianic fulfillment as a sequel to Passover. The undeserved love shown in the biblical story will similarly be sufficient to bring about the glorious end of days. Nissan will

once again be the key to the final chapter of our history. Rabbi Eliezer, however, believed that our destiny demands our full commitment and cooperation. We have struggled so long throughout our long exile with the hope that we will have earned our final redemption. The end of days will be a divine response to our collective repentance on Tishrei.

Indeed, we cannot know the year of Messiah's coming. However, to decide on the month is to make us aware of the extent of our responsibility. The dispute between the two rabbis deserves a final answer. Who is right? Which view has achieved the approbation of the sages?

Remarkably, Maimonides in his major work of Jewish law, *Mishneh Torah*, clearly chose to side with Rabbi Eliezer:

כל הנביאים כולן צוו על התשובה ואין ישראל נגאלין אלא בתשובה. וכבר הבטיחה תורה שסוף ישראל לעשות תשובה בסוף גלותן ומיד הן נגאלין שנאמר והיה כי יבאו עליך כל הדברים וגו' ושבת עד ה' אלקיך ושב ה' אלקיך וגו':
All the prophets commanded [the people] to repent. Israel will only be redeemed through teshuvah. The Torah has already promised that, ultimately, Israel will repent towards the end of her exile and, immediately, she will be redeemed as [Deuteronomy 30:1-3] states: "There shall come a time when [you will experience] all these things ... and you will return to God, your Lord ... God, your Lord, will bring back your [captivity]."

Maimonides, Laws of Repentance, 7:5

For those of us who believe that the modern-day return of the Jewish people to Israel as well as the reestablishment of the Jewish homeland after almost two millennia of exile carry the seeds of final redemption, there is one last insight into the dispute between the two

rabbis which still bears consideration.

Until now we have understood the view of Rabbi Joshua as linked specifically to the month of Nissan. What is somewhat strange in the Talmudic text in *Rosh Hashanah* further explaining his source for the belief that all the patriarchs were born in Nissan is the following:

ר' יהושע אומר מנין שבניסן נולדו אבות שנאמר (מלכים א ו, א) ויהי בשמונים שנה וארבע מאות שנה לצאת בני ישראל מארץ מצרים בשנה הרביעית בחדש זיו בירח שנוולדו בו זיותני עולם.

R. Joshua said: Whence do we know that the patriarchs were born in Nissan? Because it says, and it came to pass in the four hundred and eightieth year after the children of Israel were come out of the land of Egypt, in the fourth year in the month of Ziv [I Kings VI, 1] — that is, the month in which the brilliant ones [zivtanei] of the world were born.

Rosh Hashanah 11a

Rashi immediately addresses the problem. The month of Ziv is not another name for Nissan. It is in fact Iyar, the month following. How can Rabbi Joshua prove a point for Nissan from a text that really doesn't refer to it? A suggested answer is that Nissan speaks also of the season, the spring equinox of three months to which Iyar is central. The time of love that is linked to Passover and Shir HaShirim includes Iyar and that, too, is what Rabbi Joshua had in mind with his emphasis on Nissan.

Perhaps, then, contemporary Jewish history validates the view of Rabbi Joshua. Yom Ha-Atzmaut is observed on the fifth day of Iyar. Yom Yerushalayim is on the twenty-eighth of that same month. Both are still in the period of love, the time — just as Passover — which demonstrates that even when we are not yet deserving

of redemption by our deeds, the Almighty may grant us undeserved gifts before our complete repentance.

Yet Maimonides decided Rabbi Eliezer was right.

Perhaps here is another example of the classic formula regarding a dispute between two rabbinic giants that *elu v'elu divrey elokim chayim* — these and those, both of the words of the living God. Both rabbis were right. How can that be? How can opposing views be correct?

Redemption, in the words of our prophets, has two moments. There is *atchalta d'geulah*, the first stage of redemption, and there is *geulah shlemah* — the complete and final redemption. Rabbi Joshua and Rabbi Eliezer made no distinction between them. They assumed the same date for both. God, however, chose to begin the process of redemption in the season of Nissan, in the month of Iyar, even before the Jewish people were truly worthy of Yom Ha-Atzmaut and Yom Yerushalayim. These were momentous illustrations of God's compassion, of God's kindness, of God's love for his children despite their imperfections. Yet, as Maimonides pointed out, complete redemption requires complete repentance. God wants us to earn Messiah's coming. The firm conviction that Messiah will come is a belief not only in God's grace but in our own potential for greatness. Messiah will come because we will deserve his arrival. The certainty of Jewish repentance is the corollary to our faith in Moshiach.

Let us thank God for the fulfillment of the Nissan/Iyar stage of redemption in our own lifetimes. And let us hopefully help to hasten the day of the Tishrei completion when our teshuvah serves to usher in the *geulah shlemah*.