

Keeping Time and Maintaining Holy Time

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Temple Aliyah

Parashat Emor

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Dr. Abigail Uhrman, a colleague of mine, recently wrote that when she sat down to write her dvar torah this week, she had to think twice about what day it was today.

That's happened to me a few times. Has it happened to anyone else?

I'll bet it has. This is a period in our lives when our routines have been disrupted, when we are forced to stay in our homes, when our encounters take place in the same place every day: in our homes, sitting in front of our computers.

But there is an antidote to that.

We don't tend to use the word "**holy**" a lot, and yet pursuing holiness, bringing holiness into our lives is the theme of last week's torah reading and this week's torah reading. "***Be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy,***" at the beginning of last week's portion (Lev. 19:2), is the organizing principle. In **so many ways**, we're taught to pursue holiness. In the "old days," when we used to have **priests** serving in the **Temple**, they would offer sacrifices. That demonstrated holiness of **person**, and holiness of **place**.

But there's another, perhaps the most prominent dimension of holiness, one that is probably obvious to most of us most of the time, a dimension that has survived three thousand years that is detailed in today's torah portion, and that is **holiness of time**. In Emor, we are taught to set aside **certain days** as



holy. These include the seasonal Jewish holidays: **Passover**, **Shavuot**, and **Sukkot**, and also **Shabbat**, which comes once a week.

As Dr. Uhrman wrote, and as we all know, if we think about it, it isn't necessarily all one undifferentiated array of days that seem to blend into one another. There is one day that continues to stand out -- if we make it stand out -- and that is **Shabbat**. And thank God for that.

Shabbat requires preparation. The cleaning, the cooking, the straightening up, the tablecloth, the setting of the table, the candlesticks, the kiddush cup -- they all contribute to a realization that this day is different. It's special. It's **holy**.

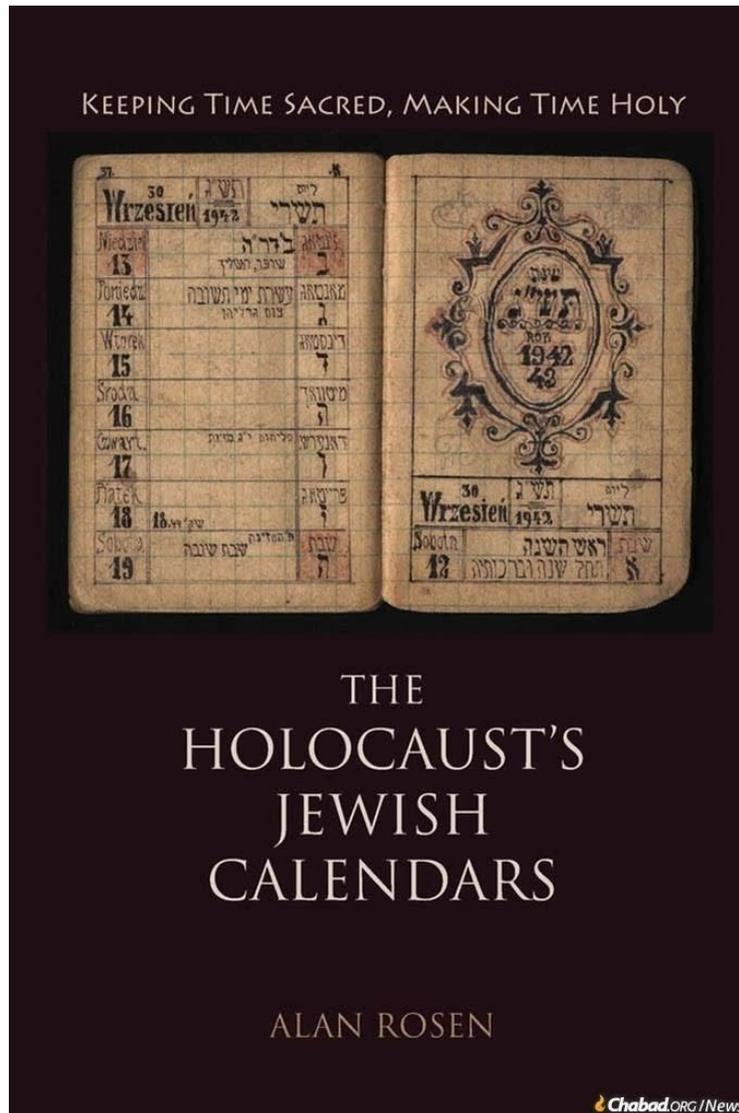
And of course there are the much less frequent holy days that we call **Yom Tov (holyday)** or **Hag (festival)**. Only a month ago, we all experienced Passover. It might have been different from Passovers past; it might have involved a different set of **people** than in the past; it may have involved different **locations** than we had anticipated; and yet, **the holiness of time** was preserved.

Right now we are in a period of time known as the **Omer**. It's an intermediate time. It's not holy time, but it connects the holiness of Passover with the holiness of Shavuot seven weeks later. So we have another holiday to look forward to.

What's the point of these days? What do they add to our lives?

I think we can learn the answer to that from the efforts made to recover them by those who were actively prevented from observing them, actively denied access to them.

A few months ago -- it seems like years ago -- Professor Alan Rosen, an old friend of mine, visited our shul and shared the results of fascinating research he has conducted over many years.



Alan Rosen is a Holocaust scholar. He teaches at Yad Vashem and elsewhere. Over the course of his career he has studied various artifacts from the Holocaust. Of the many artifacts he's studied, perhaps the most unexpectedly fascinating of them are calendars; calendars that Jews, on their own, prepared during the war years under conditions of incredible deprivation.

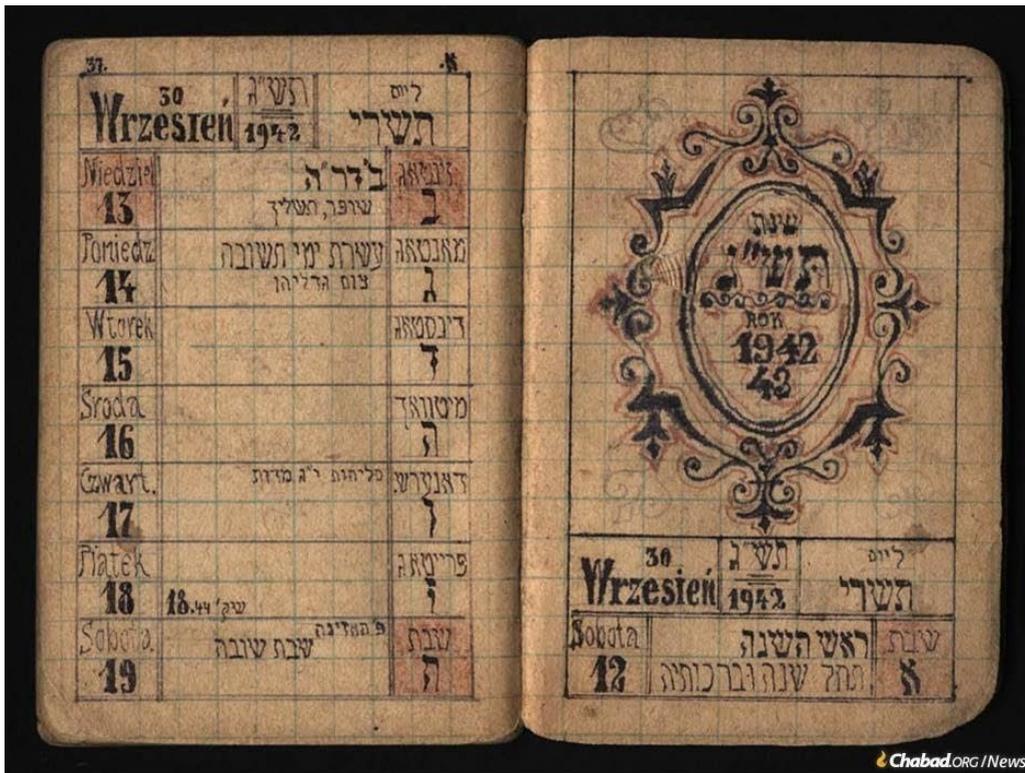
Think about it: all we have to do is to click on our computers or on our phones, and we know immediately the day, the date, the time.

Not so during the Holocaust. Jews all over Europe found themselves in hiding, in ghettos, in camps -- wondering what day it was, what month it was, what day of the month it was. It wasn't possible to print calendars. Even access to Jewish books was impossible. So what do you do in such circumstances?

Well, certain people took pen to hand and wrote out calendars by hand -- often at great risk to their lives.

There are three that I want to show to you.

The first is the beautifully calligraphed one on the cover of the book.



It was written by Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Scheiner, a Chasid of Neustadt, in Poland. In early 1943, after two months hiding in the forest, he and his wife and four children found refuge in the home of a Pole who had been an employee of his. They hid behind a wall in the home that he and the former

employee built. While in hiding, Rabbi Scheiner prepared a calendar, and here is the first page of it. This is a tri-lingual calendar, with words in Hebrew, Yiddish and Polish. Holidays were color-coded. Shabbat and holidays were pastel red. Rosh Chodesh and Hol Hamoed had the square half colored in. Lag b'Omer (which occurs this coming week, on Monday evening and Tuesday) was marked with a single stroke of the red pen: to distinguish it from an ordinary day and also from a holy day.

Now, that makes sense. What might not make sense is that he did the same thing with Christian holidays. This is “startling, unexpected, and unparalleled in any other wartime Jewish calendar.” (Rosen) Christian holidays are also filled in with red and, on every Sunday, the box with the day's Polish name and date is completely colored in as well.

(There are no half-shaded boxes on the Gregorian side.)

Why would he do this?

It could be a gesture of goodwill toward the Matjas family. At great risk, they provided sanctuary to six people. They even provided the materials for the calendars.

The family was liberated in January 1945 by the Red Army, and they returned to their home to find that they were the only survivors of their hometown (Pinczow).

The second is a calendar prepared by an unknown Jew in Poland. Before us is a photograph of the calendar.

MEMORANDUM OSOBISTE

Nazwisko

Adres

Telefon

P. K. O.

Nr. roweru, motocyklu
lub samochodu

Marka i Nr. aparatu fotogr.

Nr. losu loteryjnego

Nr. polisy ubezpieczeniowej

W razie wypadku proszę zawiadomić:

1939 • STYCZEŃ • 1939

NIEDZIELA

1

Nowy Rok

*Mobiliarzy
6 cyfrowy*

743.
PONIEDZ.

2

Makariego

15.01

WTOREK

3

Daniela

ŚRODA

4

Tytusa

CZWARTEK

5

Telesfora

17.02 17.01

PIĄTEK

6

Trzech Króli

SOBOTA

7

Lucjana

T. 1

- 5 -

Notice that it is a Kodak pocket calendar from 1939. That's all that was available to this Jew. A four year old calendar. But he took it, and on Thursday, the 5th of January he wrote in Hebrew letters: "The Tenth of Teveth." That became the first day of the year for him. The tenth of Teveth was the day on which the Babylonians began their siege of Jerusalem. It's a half-day fast day in the Jewish tradition.

Think about the significance of that: he's deliberately choosing to begin the year not on January 1st, but on the 10th of Teveth. **It's a "conscious choice" to link the start of the calendar with the commemoration of past Jewish catastrophe as well as with a strategy of responding to it.** (Rosen)

Although Dr. Rosen does not use the term, I view this as an act of "spiritual resistance" -- as I do the act of turning Sobota into Shabbat -- even though there's no red ink there -- and ignoring "Sunday" -- even though it is in red.

Using this 5 year old Kodak calendar was challenging for two other reasons: look closely at the left side of the calendar. Notice that there is a word in the center of every box. Don't ask me to pronounce them, but they are the names of the days of the week in Polish. But what about the words at the bottom of each box. Does anyone have any idea what they refer to?

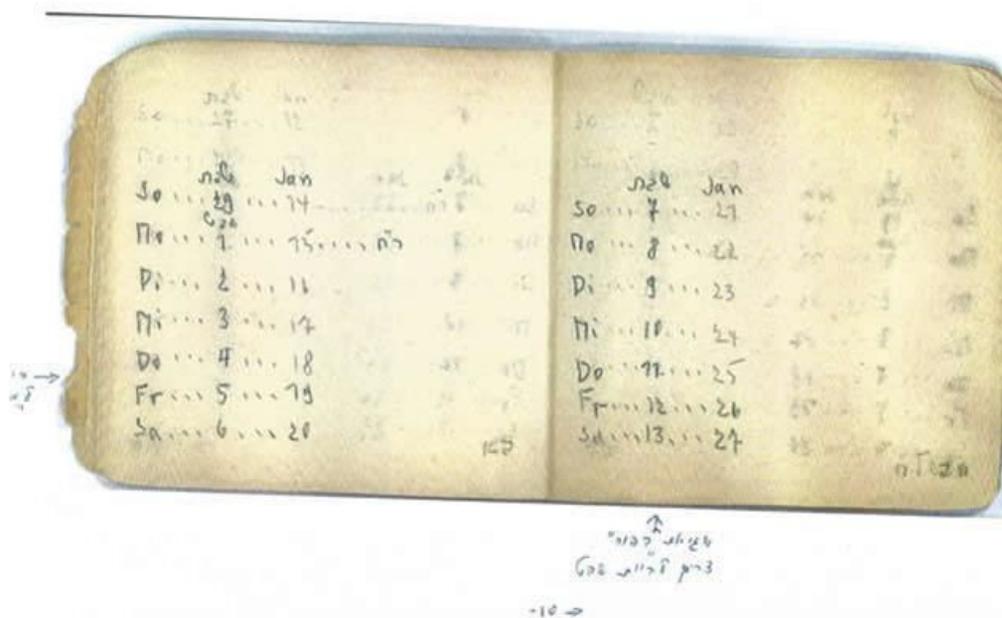
The answer is that on each day of the year, the name of the **Catholic saint** associated with that day is given. Think how challenging it must have been to use this calendar: every single day, you're reminded of the world in which you're living, the culture in which you are imprisoned.

There's one more unbelievable challenge to using this calendar: the numbers on the left side of each page, which give the day of each Gregorian month, are not correct! In 1944, the Tenth of Teveth did fall on a Thursday, but it was January 6th, not January 5th.

So the user or users of this calendar had to ignore, and to disregard, the Gregorian dates on this calendar, and just focus on the far left, giving the day of the week, and the far right, giving the Hebrew date. Extraordinary!

Interestingly, except for Adar, all Hebrew dates are in Arabic numerals. In Adar, Hebrew letters are used. As we know, in Adar, everything is topsy-turvy.

The third calendar is the calendar of **Sophie Sohlberg**.



Sophie Sohlberg grew up in Munich, Germany. Born in 1923, she was forced, as a teenager, to leave her school and attend a Jewish school. That gave her a Jewish education. She then, from 1941-43, worked in a Labor Camp in Germany, then was deported on April 19, 1943, the eve of Passover, 5703, to Auschwitz. While there, she composed a calendar for 5704 (1943-44), and then the one we see here, for 5705 (1944-45). Some time in the fall of 1944, the previous one disappeared, but this one has survived.

Now I said that she composed this calendar in Auschwitz. When I say that, it sounds like I'm living in a fantasy world. How could this be? How could it be that someone in Auschwitz, in the empire of death, could create a calendar? How could she keep it? Why would she do so? What would be the point of keeping track of Hebrew dates, of the *parshiot* of the week? After all, there was no Torah reading in Auschwitz, whether on Shabbat or on any other day. What difference did it make that one Shabbat was the week on which Bo was read, and the next the Shabbat on which B'shalach was read? What difference did it make?

It obviously made a lot of difference to Sophie Sohlberg. We know this because she didn't just leave behind this calendar, beautifully and delicately written. We know this because she survived. Not only did she survive, but she is still alive.

She kept this calendar safe, against all odds, during the time she was in Auschwitz, up until the time she was forced to go on a death march to Ravensbruck (which she has marked with a marginal note on the left side of the photograph of the calendar above), and from there to Neustadt-Glewe, and from there to Israel.

Sophie Sohlberg lives today in Jerusalem.

I think that the point is clear. Maintaining the calendar is the only way to distinguish *bein kodesh l'khol*, between the holy and the profane. Maintaining the calendar allows one to impose holiness on what is otherwise devoid of it.

And those holy days do more: In Dr. Uhlberg's words, they remind us that we are "part of something greater—an unfolding story, an historical past, and a religious tradition that extends to our current moment and far into the future."

“In the unprecedented moment through which we are living, ... the structure and spirit of our calendar [can] allow us to find hope, comfort, and meaning.”
But only if we allow it to do so.

Shabbat shalom.