

Is there a Connection between Yom HaShoah & Yom HaAtamaut?

*Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt
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The Jewish calendar, which is the subject of the latter part of this week's Torah portion, Parashat Emor has many quirks. It is a lunar calendar. Yet unlike other calendars based on the cycle of the moon, such as the Moslem calendar, it has corrections so that it remains in sync with the solar means of reckoning time so that the seasons do not get out of kilter.

Like the Gregorian calendar, it has leap years, only instead of adding a day, it is a month that is added. And instead of coming in the predictable once every four years fashion, it occurs seven times every nineteen years, which comes out to once every 2 – 3 years.

The High Holidays come at the end of summer – which, from my perspective, means only one thing. It ensures that rabbis do not get a true summer vacation. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are immediately followed, five days later, barely giving us a respite or time to rest or catch our breath, by another holiday, Sukkot.

All of which I take to be incontrovertible proof that this week's Torah portion is to be believed. The Jewish calendar had to have come from God. No human, and certainly no rabbi would have developed and created such a rigorous schedule. I am sure that God had His reasons.

But the more recent additions to the calendar, those that were created after the Bible were clearly determined by humans, and therefore allow us to understand the thinking that went into their being added to the holiday cycle.

The date of Tu B'Shevat, which is not mentioned in the Bible, but is a holiday instituted by the rabbis of the Talmud was chosen because it coincides with the planting season in Israel. Purim and Chanukah, holidays not mentioned in our Torah portion, and created after the time of Moses are associated with the historic events they recall.

And this Shabbat, which is the 18th day of the counting of the Omer, the biblically ordained mitzvah to count the days between the holiday of Passover and Shavuot, is the Shabbat which comes between Yom HaShoah, the day which commemorates what happened to the Jewish people during the Holocaust and Yom HaAtzmaut, Israel's Independence Day, a day which is preceded by Yom HaZikaron, the Memorial Day for Israel's fallen soldiers.

One of the things we Jews who live in the Diaspora do not experience and therefore cannot fully comprehend is the impact of these days. If you come to shul on the High holidays and build a sukkah in your home, you may know the joy of the new year and of Sukkot and the festive nature of Simhat Torah. You can feel the excitement and anticipation of Passover if you go to a kosher supermarket the weeks before the holiday.

But it is difficult for those of us who live outside of the land of Israel to truly understand and experience the meaning, the intensity and the emotion of these three important days on the Jewish calendar, days which, for obvious reasons, have only been on our calendar since the middle of the 20th century. They do not penetrate our consciousness in a way that it does in Israel, where the entire country is absorbed in observing these days. We American Jews are probably more aware of May Day and Cinco de Mayo than we are of when Yom HaShoah, Yom HaZikaron and Yom HaAtzmaut fall.

Yom HaAtzmaut occurs on the 5th of Iyar, the date on the Jewish calendar when the state of Israel declared its independence in 1948. And in line with my opening premise about the quirks of the Jewish calendar, adjustments are made so that it does not fall on Shabbat.

But why was the 27th of Nisan chosen as the day to commemorate the Shoah? Was there something historical associated with this day? Was it chosen because of its proximity to Israel's Independence Day?

It was the subject of much debate in the Knesset a few years after the establishment of the State of Israel. Every day of the year throughout those dark years when one out of every three Jews was killed has a unique aspect to it, and so, in certain respects, any day could have been chosen.

Part of the reason the 27th of Nisan was chosen has to do with the full name of the holiday. It actually is not just Yom HaShoah, but Yom HaShoah ve'HaGevurah, which means Day of the Holocaust and of Heroism. Some suggested making it a part of the 10th of Tevet, or Tisha B'Av, or some other sad day already on the Jewish calendar. But the Holocaust was deemed to be too significant and unique an event to be subsumed in an existing holiday. There were those Orthodox traditionalists who resisted altogether adding any Jewish holidays to the calendar.

Furthermore, it was important to the early founders of the State of Israel that not just the greatest destruction of the Jewish people be remembered, but also the heroism and resistance of those who bravely and courageously fought the Nazis be linked to our day of remembrance.

With this in mind, there was a push to choose the date when the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto broke out, the first night of Passover in 1943. Needless to say, it would be unfathomable for Yom HaShoah to take place on or during Passover. As a result, after much debate, and strong opinions expressed by various segments of the community, a time during the counting of the Omer, which is already, since the time of the Talmud, a time of semi-mourning, and mid-way between the time of the beginning of the uprising and its conclusion, was chosen. The result was that Yom HaShoah comes a week before Yom HaAtzmaut, forever juxtaposing the two events in our national consciousness.

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg explains that while the two days and two events – the Nazi liquidation of the Jews and the founding of the State of Israel paradoxically are not related, yet share a strong connection. He has written, "Yom Hashoah occurs one week away from Yom Ha'atzmaut, and

nothing could more profoundly capture the fundamental relationship of the Holocaust and Israel than that positioning. The State of Israel is not a reward or a product or an exchange for the Holocaust; it is a response. The Jewish people responded to the total assault of death by an incredible outpouring of life. The survivors came and rebuilt their lives. Jewish life was made precious again. The great biblical symbol that, according to the prophets, would someday prove that the covenant had endured is the reestablishment and repopulation of the land of Israel."

Speaking earlier this week at the ceremony at Yad VaShem Prime Minister Netanyahu spoke of the connection between the world's indecision and refusal to act at a time when lives could have been saved and the existence of the State of Israel. He said, "I hope that the lessons of the past will be learned and that the desire to avoid confrontation at any cost will not lead to a deal that will exact a much heavier price in the future...In any event, the people of Israel are strong. When faced with an existential threat, the situation of our people today is entirely different than it was during the Holocaust. Today, we have a sovereign Jewish state..."

"On the eve of the Holocaust, there were Jews who avoided crying out to the world's nations out of fear that the fight against the Nazis would become a Jewish problem. Others believed that if they kept silent, the danger would pass. They kept silent and the disaster struck. Today, we are not afraid to speak the truth to world leaders, as is written in our Bible: "I will speak of your testimonies before kings, and I will not be ashamed...listen, for I will speak noble thoughts; the opening of my lips will reveal right things.

"Unlike our situation during the Holocaust, when we were like leaves on the wind, defenseless, now we have great power to defend ourselves, and it is ready for any mission. This power rests on the courage and ingenuity of the soldiers of the IDF and our security forces. It is this power that enabled us, against all odds, to build the State of Israel."

And so on this Shabbat which pivots between Yom HaShoah and Yom HaAtzmut, may we recall the victims of the Holocaust and may we sanctify their memory by devoting ourselves to ensuring the security of the state of Israel.

Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt
Congregation B'nai Tzedek
Potomac, MD
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potomacrebbe@bnaitzedek.org