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To celebrate or not

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Years back, I posed this question to readers: Should we celebrate the onset of the secular year? I have often been asked to revisit the issue because, after all, we live by the secular calendar. “December 27” is on the Standard’s front page. We put secular dates on all manner of communications, transactions, and announcements. We celebrate our birthdays on the secular date.

A new year “is nothing more than an acknowledgement that a number has advanced by one digit,” as I wrote in those days in this season. What, then, is wrong with celebrating New Year’s?

Adding weight to the argument is the possibility that there is a precedent for doing so. Rosh Hashanah, our very own “new year’s day,” is actually the first day of our seventh month; it is our “July 1,” not our “January 1.” (See Leviticus 23:24.) Our “January 1” falls in the spring on the first of Nisan (Aviv, actually, its original name), but we mark it as just the start of an ordinary month, not as “the beginning of the months…, the first of the months of the year for you” (see Exodus 12:2). Instead, we wait six more months to celebrate a “new year,” and we even date each year from that point.

There are various reasons given for why this is—including an assertion in the Talmud that “the first day of the seventh month” was always the start of “the new year for years” (see the very first mishnah in the Babylonian Talmud tractate Rosh Hashanah); the first of Nisan was merely “the new year for kings.” There is nothing in Exodus 12:2 or anywhere else in the Tanach to support that conclusion. Based on the dating systems in both Kings 1 and II and Chronicles I and II, however, it is reasonable to assume that Israel’s kings used the first day of each new year to mark the start of another regnal year. Thus, while the first of Nisan rightfully could be called “the new year for kings,” that is only because it was also the first day of the actual year.

As I see it, that posed a problem for the exiles in Babylon. Marking a “new year for kings” could only bring sadness and increase despondency among the exiles—and a sense of abandonment by God—because there was no longer a Jewish king or a Jewish nation.

For good reason, as I see it, the first day of the seventh month was seen as a better fit for a “rosh hashanah.” Leviticus 23:24 calls it “the day for remembering the blowing of the shofar,” but the reason for the day is otherwise undefined. Whatever meaning it may have had before the First Exile, it clearly had lost it by then. The displaced Jews, therefore, had a Torah-mandated celebration without definition while others around them were joyously celebrating Arah Tishritum, the “month of beginning,” dedicated to the sun god Shamash.

This created a situation fraught with religious peril. The exiles already had adopted the names of the Babylonian months. The Babylonian Tishritum, for example, became our Tishrei; Ululu became Elul; Sabatu became Shevat; and Nisanu became Nisan, etc. Not to recast “the first of Tishrei,” then, risked letting the exiles adapt Shamash’s celebration to their otherwise undefined festival.

A solution was easily found, according to my theory. The first day of the seventh month was followed nine days later by Yom Kippur. So the first day of “the month of beginning” was transformed into Rosh Hashanah and made an adjunct of Yom Kippur, to be observed by meditation, reflection and prayer in preparation for that sacred day. The Jewish version of the day was also devoid of many (but perhaps not all) aspects of the Shamash celebrations. Shamash—probably the most ethical deity in the pagan pantheon—was known, after all, as the god of justice and giver of the law (so Hammurabi claimed), who judged people after their death.

The only evidence we have, slight as it is, for how “the first day of the seventh month” may have been marked before the exile is by how it was marked immediately after it. Nechemiah 8:10-12 tells how on the day we call Rosh Hashanah (but neither he nor anyone else in the Tanach does, with the possible exception of Ezekiel [40:1], himself a prophet of the exile) Ezra the scribe read the Torah to a throng of the repatriated people. The people, having lived in exile, knew nothing of the Torah, so they wept when they heard its words. (Why Ezra chose that day to read the Torah to the people is for another column.)

That was not how the day should be celebrated, Nechemiah told them. ‘‘Do not mourn and do not weep…Go eat delicacies, and drink sweet drinks, and send portions (v’shilchu manot) to whoever has none….Do not be sad, for the rejoicing of the Lord is your strength….’ And all the people went to eat and to drink, and to send portions (ul-shalach manot), and to make great joyous celebration….” (Apparently, the “shalach manot” aspect eventually was transferred to Purim.)

Simply stated, then, the Rosh Hashanah we celebrate in fact may have emerged from the earlier secular “month of beginning” celebration (which also took place on the first day of Babylon’s seventh month, supposedly because it was when the world was created, which is how we see it, as well: “Today is the birthday of the world, according to the Rosh Hashanah liturgy).

Rather than making celebrating “New Year’s Day” acceptable, however, it points up the peril of doing so because our calendar, as the Torah sets it out, was distorted in Babylon. Our calendar is almost invisible these days, as it is. How many people, for example, know their Jewish birthdate, much less what today’s date is on our calendar?)

Then there is this: It is the Gregorian calendar that makes January 1 New Year’s Day, meaning the calendar established by Pope Gregory XIII 437 years ago. The new year is not just “2020”; it is A.D. 2020, Anno Domini 2020, the “year of our lord” 2020.

In fact, New Year’s Day, “the eighth day of Christmas,” is technically known in Eastern Christian calendars as the Feast of the Circumcision (the Catholic Church changed the name in 1960 to “the Solemnity of Mary”). Guess whose b’rit that refers to.

The calendar Gregory XIII revised was commissioned by Julius Caesar somewhere around 46 B.C.E. There was nothing religious about it until Dionysius the Humble, a Scythian monk, added this to the numbers in 525 C.E.: “anno Domini nostri Jesu Christi,” or “the Year of Our Lord Jesus Christ.” It took another 300 years for that change to fully catch on; it remains in use to this day.

Gregory XIII’s calendar change was done for practical reasons, not religious, that is true. The Julian calendar overestimated the length of a solar year by 0.0078 days, or 11 minutes and 14 seconds. By Gregory XIII’s time, the Julian calendar was off by 12.7 days. His calendar nevertheless has a religious orientation, as can be seen by the continued use of A.D. instead of C.E. (Common Era).

It also can be seen in how and when nations adopted it. Catholic nations did so almost immediately. Protestant countries, for the most part, viewed it as a Catholic religious change, and so resisted changing for 100 years or more. Britain, which abhorred anything coming from Rome, stuck with Caesar’s calendar for another 170 years. Japan and Egypt waited about 300 years to do so. The Balkan states and Russia, which followed the Eastern rite, did not sign on until February 1918. Most Muslim states tolerate it, because it is the calendar the rest of the world uses (which is also our excuse), but they prefer their own.

Jewish law tells us to avoid even the most innocent behavior if there is merely the appearance of apostasy in it. BT Avodah Zarah 12a offers several examples of such innocent behavior: bending before an idol to remove a splinter from one’s foot, or picking up a dropped coin. Also included is any action that could give the appearance of kissing an idol, such as stooping to drink from a spring in which an idol has been placed, and drinking from fountains shaped like people.

These may sound silly, but there is nothing silly about them.

We live in a world in which appearances are everything. Just because we live by the secular calendar does not mean we have to celebrate doing so.

We have our own holidays and festivals. I am not saying not to celebrate secular New Year’s. Before we celebrate someone else’s festival, however, let us relearn how to celebrate our own special days. Shabbat shalom, Chag Urim sameach (what is left of Chanukah), and happy Rosh Chodesh Tevet.