

The Hebrew Corner

With all the interest in the coming blood moons and solar eclipses, and the significance of their falling on Jewish feast days, it is a good time to discuss the Hebrew calendar, which is the calendar of the Tanach, and the basis of this calendar on the moon, which in Hebrew is yareach (יָרֵחַ, yah-RAY-ahch), and the sun, in Hebrew shemesh (שֶׁמֶשׁ, sheh-MEHS). The relationships of some of the biblical feasts to this calendar will also be a topic for discussion.

The Gregorian calendar, named after Pope Gregory, is the calendar used in the United States, Europe, and much of the rest of the world. The year of this calendar is strictly based on one revolution of the earth around the sun, and so known as a solar year. There are 12 months to this year, and although the name month is derived from moon, the months do not synchronize with the cycles of the moon as it revolves around the earth, and vary in length from 28 to 31 days. This is then an example of a solar calendar.

The calendar of the Tanach differs from this in several ways. There are still 12 months to most of the years, but the beginning of each month falls strictly on the new moon, so that the lunar cycle is preserved. The Hebrew name for new moon, is chodesh (חֹדֶשׁ, CHOH-dehsh), which is also the word for month. The new moon is the point on the path of the moon around the earth where the moon is dark and not

visible, or only visible as a narrow crescent, because it is between the sun and the earth. This happens once about every $29 \frac{1}{2}$ days. In the Hebrew calendar, the months alternate between 29 and 30 days to preserve the phases of the moon and so the lunar cycle. This means that the normal year of the Hebrew calendar is 354 days, or about 11 days less than the solar year. The question may be asked, “do the seasons get out of balance with this type of calendar?” The answer is no, because this is not strictly a calendar based on the moon. Historically, this calendar was kept in alignment with the seasons in the land of Israel by periodically extending the year, under the authority of the Sanhedrin, a Jewish council, by an extra month after the month of Adar. The Sanhedrin would use agricultural signs such as the delayed appearance of ears of grain in the barley crop, to determine that an extra month, named Veadar, should be added before the beginning of the next sacred year. This calendar was later standardized so that the extra month is added on a 19 year cycle in years 3, 6, 8, 11, 14, 17, and 19 of the cycle. This keeps the first month of the sacred year, the month of Nisan at the start of spring. This was ordained by God to be the start of the new year, by commandment to Moses stated in Exodus 12:2, prior to the start of the 10th and final plague on Egypt, commemorated by the Passover feast. This calendar then is an example of a lunisolar calendar.

Many of the feast days designated in the Tanach, fall on either new moons or full moons. The Passover feast, which in Hebrew is pesach (פסח, PEH-sahch) falls on Nisan 14, and so is

at the time of full moon. This feast commemorates the night that the destroying angel of the Lord, who was sent to kill the first born male of every household in Egypt, passed over the homes of those Israelites who had placed the blood of the sacrificial lamb on their doors as instructed by God, described in Exodus 12:3-30. The Feast of Tabernacles (or booths), an eight day feast, starts on Tishri 15, proclaimed by God as a sabbath, also at the time of full moon. It commemorates the time when the Israelites lived in booths in the wilderness after God had brought them out of Egypt. Observance of this feast is commanded by God to the Israelites in Leviticus 23:33-43. In addition, the feast of Purim, begins at the time of full moon on Adar 14. It is a two-day feast commemorating a time described in the book of Esther (Esther 9:18-32), a time of joy for the Jewish people, for the plot of Haman to kill all the Jews in Persia had been foiled, and they triumphed over their enemies who wanted to kill them. Purim (פּוּרִים, poo-REEM) translated into English is lot, as in casting of lots.

The lone feast that begins on a new moon is Rosh Hashanah (ראש השנה, ROHSH hah-SHAH-nah), or in English, head of the year, begins on Tishri 1 and lasts two days. This is also known as the Feast of Trumpets, designated as a sabbath day by God, and proclaimed by the blowing of the shofar (שׁוֹפָר, SHOH-fahr), as described in Leviticus 23:23-25. Tishri 1 is also the start of the Jewish civil new year.

The fixing of the biblical calendar to the cycles of the moon and the sun is in keeping with God's purpose stated in Genesis 1: 14-19:

“And God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for days and years, and let them be for lights in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth: and it was so. And God made two great lights; the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night; he made the stars also. And God set them in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth, and to rule over the day and over the night, and to divide the light from the darkness: And God saw that it was good. And the evening and the morning were the fourth day.”

The majesty and wisdom of God are reflected in the heavenly bodies that we see day and night, and reveal God's purpose and plan in action. May we all become more aware of this by increasing our knowledge in the Hebrew calendar and the feast days of the Lord. Blessings to all.