

Insights into Halacha

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The Rarest Year of Them All (part three)

As detailed in previous installments in this series, our current year, 5785, is not only a rare one, but calendarically speaking, actually the hands-down rarest of them all. 5785 is classified as a HaSh”A year in our calendars. This abbreviation is referring to Rosh Hashana falling out on Thursday (HEI), both months of Marcheshvan and Kislev being SHALEIM (SHIN - 30 day months instead of possibly 29; these are the only months that can switch off in our set calendar), and Pesach falling out on Sunday (ALEF).

A HaSh”A year (a.k.a. PEI-HEI-SHIN) is the rarest of years, and out of the 14 possibilities in Tur’s 247-year calendar cycle, this year type occurs on average only once in about 30.19 years (approximately 3.3% of the time). Indeed, at times there are 71 years (!) between HaSh”A years. The last time this year type occurred was 31 years ago in 5754/1994. The next time will be 20 years hence in 5805/2044. The next several times after that are slated to be 27 years further, in 5832/2071 and then a 51 year gap in 5883/2122.

The reasons and rules governing the whys and whens this transpires are too complicated for this discussion; suffice to say that when the Mishna Berura discusses these issues he writes EIN KAN MAKOM L’HA’ARICH, that this is not the place to expound in detail, which is certainly good enough for this author.

Obviously, such a rare calendar year will contain many rare occurrences. This series article sets out to detail many of them. Perhaps as we get nearer to the actual events, we will discuss them in greater detail. Let’s continue on our journey through our unique year.

Marcheshvan–Kislev Calculations

A bit of background is in order to explain the significance of Marcheshvan and Kislev both being SHALEIM this year.

As is well known from Chazal, and actually millennia later corroborated by NASA, the Lunar Month is 29 days, 12 hours and 793 chalakim (or 44 minutes and one cheilek; a cheilik equals three and one-third seconds, an 18th of a minute, or an 1080th of an hour). In the times of Chazal, based on eyewitness accounts of the New Moon, any month could have had 30 days (called a CHODESH MALEI or SHALEIM - full month) or 29 days (referred to as a CHOSESH CHASEIR). In our 19-year cycle

Jewish calendar established by Hillel II (Hillel Nesiah; a 13th or 14th-generation descendant of Hillel HaZakein), every other month, alternates between 29 and 30 days. Whereas the Gregorian calendar maxim might be “Thirty Days has September, April, June, and November”, but in the Jewish calendar the colloquialism would probably be “Thirty Days has Tishrei, Sh'vat, Nissan, Sivan, and Av. However, Tevet, Adar, Iyar, Tamuz, and Elul only have 29 days.”

An easy way to tell if the month you are in has 29 or 30 days is by seeing how many days of Rosh Chodesh the following month has. If it has two days of Rosh Chodesh, that means the first day of Rosh Chodesh is actually the 30th day of the preceding month. This means that the preceding month (the one you are currently in) is a CHODESH MALEI. If the following month only has one day of Rosh Chodesh, then the preceding month only has 29 days and is categorized as a CHODESH CHASEIR.

For example, the date of the first day of Rosh Chodesh Elul is actually 30 Menachem Av. Hence Av is a MALEI. Even so, since the last day of Av is connected to the month of Elul, as it is the the first day of Rosh Chodesh Elul, there are halachot how the date is supposed to be written in official documents. Take our date of LAMED AV. Halachically it is to be written as

ROSH CHODESH ELUL, SHEHU YOM SHLOSHIM L'CHODESH MENACHEM Av. On the other hand, if it is a one day Rosh Chodesh, the date is simply the 1st of that month.

Wild Cards?

As you probably realized, there were two months missing from the “adage of the months”. Marcheshvan and Kislev were not mentioned. The reason is that there is no hard and fast rule regarding them. They are the only months that can either have 29 or 30 days depending on the year. Some years both are CHASEIRIM; other years both are M'LEI'IM, and others Marcheshvan is CHASEIR and Kislev MALEI. What is a given, is that this is one of the changing variables in our set calendar. As mentioned previously, in 5785 both months are MALEI – making this a SHALEIM year.

This actually had interesting ramifications this year.

Our fascinating journey detailing the many remarkable facets of our rare year will IY”H be continued...

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch famously wrote that “The Jew’s catechism is his calendar.” It is this author’s wish that by showcasing the uniqueness of our calendar year and its rare minhagim, this series will help raise appreciation of them and our fascinating calendarical customs.

This author wishes to thank R' Yosef Yehuda Weber, author of 'Understanding the Jewish Calendar,' for being a fount of calendrical knowledge and for his assistance with this series.

For any questions, comments or for the full Mareh Mekomot / sources, please email the author: yspitz@ohr.edu

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Disclaimer: This is not a comprehensive guide, rather a brief summary to raise awareness of the issues. In any real case one should ask a competent Halachic authority.

Rabbi Yehuda Spitz's English halacha sefer, "Food: A Halachic Analysis" (Mosaica/ Feldheim) containing over 500 pages featuring over 30 comprehensive chapters discussing the myriad halachic issues pertaining to food, is now available online and in bookstores everywhere."

Editor's note: An additional unique point about 5785 is noteworthy because it might be the only time it ever happens. This year is written as HEI' TAV-SHIN-PEI-HEI. The SHIN matches SHALEIM, the PEI matches P'SHUTA, and the HEI matches the Thursday Rosh HaShana. I haven't found another year that has that match.