

Lunar Calendar and the Aviv Barley

What is the Correct Rendering for the Appointed Times?

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“Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Messiah.

Now I praise you because you remember me in everything
and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you.”

(1 Corinthians 11:1–2)

FIRST FRUITS OF
ZION

Proclaiming the Torah and its way
of life, fully centered on Messiah,
to today's People of God



First Fruits of Zion observes the commandment of Passover and Unleavened Bread according to the traditional Jewish reckoning of the year. Although it is true that the year was determined by examination of the barley crop and fruit trees in the Apostolic times and the Mishnaic age, it was the Sanhedrin that conducted the examination and made the determination. Only the duly ordained and recognized leadership of the Jewish community—those that sit in the seat of Moses—actually have the authority to determine New Years and calendars. If it were otherwise, each sectarian movement (such as *Karaites*) within the greater people of God would quickly splinter off, observing their own calendars based on varying interpretations of the biblical text, the seasons and moon. To see this splintering in action, one need only look back at Karaite history. Shortly after the Karaites broke off from mainstream Judaism, their movement splintered into several competing sects, each determining their own calendars according to their own understanding. The result was utter disunity. The same is true in the Hebrew Roots movement today.

The congregation in which Boaz Michael serves, *A'm Segulah* in Phoenix, AZ, attempted to keep the festivals according to the *Aviv* barley reckoning and new moon observation for two years. Boaz reports that the attempt resulted in constant uncertainty in the community. Even the *Aviv* barley reckoning was fraught with trouble as the community debated whether to set their calendar by the barley in the south of Israel, the north of Israel or even in the Phoenix area. Boaz states that the karaite method resulted in a further sense of separation from the Jewish community and fed a latent arrogance which remains deeply rooted in Messianics; namely, that we know how to do Torah better than anyone else—even better than the Jewish community. Remember that Paul, in Romans 11, exhorts the non-Jews grafted into Israel not to grow arrogant over the natural branches. He was speaking of matters of *halachah* and application. The natural branches he was speaking of were traditional Jews.

If a calendar debate like the *Aviv* barley method was raised in the Apostolic age, it seems most likely that the Master and the Apostles would have followed the majority interpretation in order to maintain continuity with the greater community. We may safely base this opinion on the Apostolic community's participation in normative Jewish tradition in general and their participation in *Shavuot* in particular. *Shavuot* makes an excellent test case.

In the Master's day, the Karaite sects (Sadducees and Bothusians) were following the more literal reading of Leviticus 23:10–16, whereby *Shavuot* occurred on the day after the 7th weekly Sabbath counting from the weekly Sabbath during Unleavened Bread. According to that interpretation, *Shavuot* should always fall on a Sunday. However, the Pharisaic reading of the same passage, colored by their traditional interpretation, rendered the calendar differently so that the day of *Shavuot* might fall on any day of the week.

Sadducean Reckoning for <i>Shavuot</i>	Pharisaic Reckoning for <i>Shavuot</i>
Minority Opinion in 1 st Century	Majority Opinion in 1 st Century
More literal reading of the Torah	Supported by the LXX of Leviticus 23 and attested to by <i>Mishnah</i> , Philo and Josephus
Less based on Jewish tradition	Based on Pharisaic, Jewish tradition

If the believers were hyper-literal, throwing off the traditions of men in order to be purists, they should have followed the Sadducean method. Yet the two times that the believers are depicted celebrating *Shavuot* (Acts 2, 21), they are depicted doing so along with all Israel. In other words, they kept it according to Jewish tradition, and they kept it according to the majority.

In matters of calendar determination, the rule of thumb in Jewish history has always been to go with the majority. The festivals are supposed to be national in scope, not individual or even local. Unfortunately, in the Hebrew Roots movement, our protestant roots are so deep that we never know when to quit protesting. Our knee-jerk reaction is usually to buck the system and do the opposite of the majority. There is always someone who is going to do it 'more biblically' than the rest of the community. There is no end to being 'more biblical than thou.' Of course, it is that impulse that led us into Torah in the first place. But perhaps we would be well advised to consider the words of the Apostle Paul when he warns the Thessalonians to avoid those who reject tradition.

In the name of the Master Yeshua the Messiah, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who walks disorderly and does not live according to the tradition [*paradosis*=Jewish tradition] you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not disorderly when we were with you. (2 Thessalonians 3:6-7)

Ostensibly, believers who are reckoning their calendars according to the *Aviv* method are doing so because they believe it is more biblical. However, the *Aviv* reckoning by barley is actually not a biblical institution in the first place. It is true that the word *Aviv* means "fresh young ears of grain." But it is also the name of the month. It is the name of the month that the Israelites came out of captivity (Ex. 13:4) and the month we are to observe the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread (Ex. 23:15; 34:18) *Aviv* is the name of the month, not the method by which the month is determined.

Nowhere does the Bible indicate that the month is to be determined according to the ripening of the barley (*Aviv*). There is no prescribed ritual for checking the barley or determining when full ripening has occurred. Instead, the entire barley checking matter is loosely based upon the custom of intercalation, inserting a month or day in

the calendar, reported in the Babylonian Talmud in Sanhedrin 11a-13a. Therein we find discussion along these lines:

Our Rabbis taught: A year may be intercalated [by the Sanhedrin] on three grounds: on account of the premature state of the corn-crops [barley]; or that of the fruit-trees; or on account of the lateness of the [season]. Any two of these reasons can justify intercalation, but not one alone... [The grain and fruit of the following] three regions [are taken as the standard] for deciding upon the declaration of a leap-year: Judea, Trans-Jordania, and Galilee. The requirements of two of these regions might determine the intercalation, but not those of a single one. All, however, were glad when one of the two was Judea, because the barley for the Omer was obtained [by preference] in Judea.
(*b.Sanhedrin 11b*)

Therefore, it seems a bit odd for believers and Karaite Jews to take an iconoclast posture against the traditional Jewish calendar by breaking with the rest of the Jewish Community, all for the sake of keeping Jewish tradition which only appears in the Talmud.

A similar case might be made regarding the determination of the New Moon. The Torah does not provide any details on determining the New Moon or what qualifies as a New Moon. Those details come only from the Pharisaic traditions reported in the *Mishnah*. How strange, then, that some among us would discard the traditional Jewish reckoning of the calendar in order to observe a different traditional Jewish reckoning of the calendar. What is our real motivation? Is it to be more biblical, or to be more iconoclastic? Probably the latter.

In the days of the Master, there were several competing calendar systems, just as it is in our own day. The Essenes kept a solar calendar. The Jubilee calendar is different yet. But the vast majority of world Jewry followed the Pharisaic reckoning (which was the *Aviv* barley reckoning as determined by the Sanhedrin). It is of great importance to note that despite the presence of several attractive, anti-traditional, minority-opinion calendars which were readily available, Yeshua and the Disciples kept the festivals in concert with the majority of Israel. (One possible exception being His early *seder*—but that was in view of the extenuating circumstance of his immanent crucifixion.) The same Pharisaic authority over Israel that checked the ripeness of the barley to determine the year during the Apostolic age is the same authority that gave us the fixed calendar we now use. If the Apostolic community abided by the traditional, majority determination of the calendar, why wouldn't we?

In regard to matters of Jewish tradition, Paul tells us to, "Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Messiah. Now I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you." (1 Corinthians 11:1-2) He goes on in verse 11 to admonish the Corinthian congregation to conform their *halachah* with other synagogues. If we are to imitate Paul and Yeshua, we must also practice the traditions that they practiced. Their traditional observance was generally consistent with Pharisaic interpretation. Paul himself was a Pharisee. The set calendar as we have it is an institution of ancient Pharisaism. It was instituted by Hillel 2 to unify Israel in the absence of a Sanhedrin and to answer some of the difficult questions that are posed when addressing the Scriptures for proper application. We feel that we are in line with the modeling and injunction of Paul in following the traditional calendar. The

Master was silent on the calendar debates of His day. Neither Yeshua nor the Apostles even offer a rebuke regarding calendar issues, with the exception of Paul's rebuke to the Galatians for "closely watching days and months and seasons and years."
(Galatians 4:10)

Since, it is our heart to follow Yeshua's example and He simply kept the rendering of the majority, perhaps it is appropriate that we do the same. When we see other ways of reckoning the calendar that seem to make more sense than the majority reckoning; when the moon seems out of sync with the calendar date or the season seems out of sync with the month, we might be tempted to correct the calendars ourselves. But this isn't really our job. It is the job of the authority over Israel, whether that authority be a new Sanhedrin or Messiah Himself. If there were a functional Sanhedrin today that was recognized as authoritative by the majority of Israel, and they examined the barley and determined that Passover should fall on March 25th this year, that would be wonderful. In that event, we would certainly readjust our calendars. These calendar irregularities serve to heighten our anticipation of Messiah's coming as we all look forward to the restoration of all things, including the restoration of the reckoning of the calendar.

Lastly, let us be mindful to not judge one another for differences of opinion in calendar observation. If our brothers and sisters deem it appropriate to reckon the calendar in a different manner than that of traditional Judaism, we wish them all blessings and peace in that endeavor

May it be so, speedily, soon and in our lifetimes when the *Mashiach* returns and we will recline at the *seder* with Him and eat of the *pesach* again in His Father's Kingdom, next year in Jerusalem.

The First Commandment

Exodus 12:1-2

Rashi reckons Exodus 12:2 as the Torah's first formal *mitzvah* (commandment). It is the first commandment specific to the community of Israel. He notes that this commandment is significant in that it is delivered to both Aaron and Moses, but he also notes that there is a dual interpretation to the commandment.

This month shall be the beginning of months for you; it is to be the first month of the year to you. (Exodus 12:2)

But how is it to be understood? There are actually two different commandments that traditional Judaism derives from this verse. The first is numbered among the 613 *mitzvot* (see *Mitzvah* List), and it is the commandment to sanctify (declare) the New Moon. The second is the commandment to reckon the month of the Exodus as the first month of the year. We will look at both of these commandments in some detail.

(Comments from First Fruits of Zion Torah Club V.5)

To Sanctify the New Moon

Exodus 12:2

It is a positive commandment incumbent upon the Sanhedrin or sole authority over Israel (i.e. Messiah) to determine the new month by sanctifying the New Moon.

The biblical calendar is a lunar calendar. The first day of the biblical month is called *Rosh Chodesh* (*asj atr*) which means First of the New Month. A *Rosh Chodesh* occurs when the first crescent of the New Moon appears in the sky. Note that the biblical *Rosh Chodesh* is not the same as the English “New Moon.” Rather the *Rosh Chodesh* is ordinarily the first visible crescent of the new lunar cycle.

In ancient times, the *Rosh Chodesh* crescent moon was determined by observation. Fixed calendars were not in use except among certain sectarians. Therefore it was necessary that the community of Israel have consensus on when the New Moon occurred. Otherwise those who lived in different areas, or were less careful in their observations of the sky, would have their calendars out of synchronization with one another.

This issue is especially crucial in Exodus 12 because God is about to give the whole community of Israel several date-specific commandments. Consider the situation with the Israelite community in Egypt. If one group of Israelites believed that the New Moon should be calculated differently, or if another group had missed sighting the Moon the first night and therefore were off one day, it would have been disastrous. Their houses would not have been marked with the blood on the appropriate night. They would have missed the Passover and the Exodus.

For this reason, the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron saying, “This *chodesh* (renewal) shall be the beginning of months for you...” (Exodus 12:2) He thereby determined the first day of the month, synchronizing the community’s calendar.

God showed Moses the moon in its first crescent (*chodesh*) and said to him, “When the moon renews itself [like this] it will be the beginning of the month for you.” (*Mechilta* 1)¹

Moses was perplexed about the precise determination of the re-appearance of the moon and did not know what size the moon must appear for it to be sanctified. Therefore God showed him with a finger, so to speak, the moon in the sky, and said to him, “When you see it like this, sanctify it.” (*Rashi* on Exodus 12:2)²

The commandment to determine the first day of the month by sighting and declaring the New Moon is called “the sanctification of the New Moon.” It is referred to as “sanctification” because the New Moon, when declared, is set apart. It is a semi-festive day with special Temple rituals.³

The inferred commandment of “sanctifying the New Moon” is addressed only to Moses and Aaron. Were it addressed to the entire community, the determination of the calendar would be arbitrary and subject to all sorts of discrepancies. For that reason,

¹ Cited by Rashi, Sapirstein Edition, pg. 106.

² Ibid.

³ Numbers 10:8, 29:6

this commandment has always been regarded as a function of the Sanhedrin, i.e. the leadership of Israel.⁴

The *Mishnah*⁵ details the ceremony whereby the Sanhedrin used to “sanctify the New Moon.” Witnesses who sighted the New Moon crescent traveled immediately to the Sanhedrin (Jerusalem, Yavneh, etc.). The members of the Sanhedrin would cross-examine the witnesses to insure that they had indeed sighted the New Moon. Then they would declare, “It is sanctified.” Word would be passed to the rest of Israel by signal fires and messengers that the new month had begun.

However, in the Fourth Century, the Roman government officially forbade the Sanhedrin from convening and determining the New Moon. The Jewish community throughout the *diaspora* was left to their own devices for determining the calendar. The result was uncertainty over festival days, discord between communities and general chaos. A cloudy day could change the day one celebrates Passover! As a result, the method of determining the moon by observation alone fell into disuse. Astronomical projections were made to fix the calendar in advance. Rabbi Hillel II created a fixed calendar that all Israel could use.

Therefore, until a court of law with authority over all Israel is reconvened, the calendar of Rabbi Hillel II is the standard for determining New Moons, biblical months and the biblical festivals. It is not a perfect system, and occasionally discrepancies arise between the Jewish calendar date and the actual phase of the moon, but it is the universal standard set in place by the lawful and recognized authorities over Israel. It needs to suffice until a singular authority over all Israel arises that can correct it. Hopefully this will happen soon when the soles of Yeshua’s blessed feet rest again upon the Mount of Olives. In that day, the commandment originally given to Moses and Aaron to sanctify the New Moon will be reinstated.

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⁴ Various splinter groups such as the Essenes and Karaites determined their own calendars independently of the Sanhedrin, but in so doing, they severed themselves from the broader community and eventually made themselves irrelevant.

⁵ M. Rosh Hashanah