

Reform Judaism: In 1000 Words

Jewish Time



Context

*We all live within a variety of calendars, with different rhythms and markers – the secular year, the school year, the tax year. To be Jewish is to also live within a Jewish cycle of time, marking the shape of each week, celebrating and mourning within the festival cycle, aware of the Hebrew months, experiencing the seasons through Jewish eyes. In this essay, **Rabbi Debbie Young-Somers and Rabbi Josh Levy** explore aspects of 'Jewish Time' as it is experienced by Reform Jews.*

Content

To live in the Jewish calendar is to experience our lives through the cycles of Jewish ritual, to go on multiple Jewish journeys in time. The extent to which we pay attention to these cycles, these rhythms, inevitably impacts on how much meaning they add to our lives. If we allow them to, if we are conscious of them, the journeys of Jewish time are one of our tradition's greatest gifts:

The journey of a week can be shaped by Shabbat - finding the balance of work versus rest, or creativity and repair versus acceptance of things as they are. The journey of the lunar month can honour women, and the progression of the year. The journeys of the festivals might allow us growth, change, celebration, confrontation with ourselves and our weaknesses, mourning and other mini journeys.

Specific journeys of time occur within the *omer* (counted from Pesach to Shavuot) - a journey from freedom to responsibility; the period around the High Holy Days - one of personal and relational healing; the mourning period leading up to Tisha B'Av, and the consolation that follows, by which we experience Jewish suffering and history. Larger cycles help us to bring meaning and structure to our lives - the seven year Shmita cycle, and the Jubilee every 50th year.

The way that each of us experiences and honours these journeys varies - from community to community, home to home, from individual to individual. This is true of all Jews around the world. Diverse traditions and differences in emphasis are a hallmark of festival celebration, even within families.

But what of us as Reform Jews? Do we experience Jewish Time differently?

One key difference is how many festival days we mark. This can be a source of confusion, but is not a random innovation. Rather it is an expression of values. Within the classic rabbinic tradition, if one lived in Israel, one day of festivals was observed (with Rosh Hashanah being the notable exceptionⁱ), but if one lived in the diaspora, two days were kept. Hence Pesach, biblically a 7 day festival, became 8 days, with the first two days being full festival days of no work, and the last two days (one of which was additional) the same. Sukkot followed a similar pattern.

The custom of keeping 2 days is most likely to have come about due to ancient systems of recording the new month. Judaism follows a lunar calendar, offset by the solar cycles with the occasional extra month, so as to keep festivals within the agricultural cycle. As the New Moon was sighted the word would be spread across the land, but reaching every corner of the land could take time, and sometimes the news would not arrive until the next day, placing doubt on whether the New Moon fell on one day or the next. Over time the calendar was established, and was trusted, but the tradition in the Diaspora remained to add an extra day.

What does our decision to follow practice in Israel say about Reform Judaism, beyond saying that we do not consider ourselves to be bound by halachic injunction where this is no longer justified?

Firstly, it states that we recognise advances in science as valid and valuable – we choose to embrace human achievement (the decision to act *as if* we do not know the precise calendar when we actually do is a statement of rejection of new knowledge). Secondly, it is a declaration of equality within the Jewish world – of solidarity and shared practice with the Israel that we love *and* that we should not be ‘punished’ for living outside the land of Israel. Thirdly, it honours a traditional rabbinic principle that Judaism should not be *tircha d’tzibbura* – a burden upon the community.

Today, when additional days of festivals fall on a Shabbat, the consequences can be seen in our Torah readings, which will suddenly be out of sync: those in Israel or following the Reform lectionary read the portion of Shabbat, while those in the Orthodox diaspora read the portion for the festival, picking up the Shabbat cycle the week after. This discrepancy is usually rectified within 6-8 weeks by combining and separating out different double portions.

Many of the festivals discussed in Torah are agricultural holy days, especially the three Pilgrim Festivals, which corresponded to the harvest cycle. Their development is an example of the potential for Judaism to change and evolve, a tradition that we honour in Reform Judaism. After the exile from the land and the destruction of the Temple, the core of the festivals needed re-inventing in order that they remain relevant. The ancient Rabbis cleverly layered spiritual meaning and the foundational narrative of revelation and redemption upon them. Thus Shavuot, for example, which was solely a harvest festival, became the celebration of the giving of Torah. The Reform approach to Jewish time and festivals has, similarly, grown and varied as time has passed.

What of the minor festivals and fasts in the calendar cycle? The early Reformers were appalled by Purim, which seemed to them to revel in an act of self-defence that resulted in a blood bath for our enemies. Over time the festival has cautiously been welcomed back into the calendar, and has become a source of both fun and serious reflection for communities, challenging us to discuss and challenge those elements that we are not happy celebrating. Similarly, the minor fasts, as well as the more important fast of Tisha B’Av, were discarded by the first Reform Rabbis. They were seen as being a part of the obsession with the Temple cult that should be left behind. No longer wishing to mourn the loss of the Temple, or longing to return to the Promised Land these Reformers saw no sense in observing fasts of mourning for that which they didn’t lament. While it would not be fair to say these fasts are widely observed today, many Reform communities are re-engaging with them, finding new meaning in a fast that commemorates so many horrors against the Jewish community, and allows us to acknowledge humanity’s continuing ability to commit horrors against one another. Such fasts also ask us to consider human suffering and the loss and shift in Jewish life caused by the Temple’s destruction, if not a desire to return to Temple worship.

In all of these aspects of Reform Jewish time, our practice reflects a robust, value-based approach to our religious life. What we do, how we mark the passing of time, articulates important things about who we are and want to be. This requires thought and study. We cannot find meaning in that which we know little about, and do not attempt to experience. Judaism has continually re-imagined what festivals, fasts and cycles of time mean to us. Living as a Reform Jew means continuing to be a part of this dynamic process.

Contemplation

Being a Reform Jew is not a matter of doing less, or of ‘not keeping’. Being a Reform Jew means engaging in hard work to establish what meaningful practice, theology and community life looks like.

Living in Jewish time requires us to know enough to enjoy its benefits, and to make choices about how the gifts it offers will form a part of our own lives.

In the coming year, how can we find more meaning in the journeys of Jewish time?

ⁱ Rosh Hashanah is understood to be Yoma Arichta – one ‘long day’ rather than being a festival day with an additional day ‘in case’.