

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [306]

Since the Master Does Not Know This, There Are Probably Other Matters That the Master Does Not Know Insights into Babylonian Talmud Rosh Hashanah 20b



Background to Our Story

Shmuel



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Ketubot Part 1. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page 338

Shmuel was a first-generation *amora* who was born and ultimately passed away in Neharde'a. A child prodigy, he was famous not only for his Torah knowledge, but for his secular learning as well. The Gemara is replete with stories of his expertise in such areas as language, medicine, astronomy, and the natural sciences.

Shmuel traveled to Eretz Yisrael to study with the students of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi. The Gemara records that he treated Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi's eye ailment there, and that Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi regretted that he was unable to find an opportunity to ordain him. After his return to Babylonia, Shmuel was appointed as one of the judges of the community in the Diaspora.

Together with his colleague Rav, Shmuel raised the standard of Torah study in Babylonia to an advanced level that prompted thousands of students to remain there rather than travel to attend the academy in Eretz Yisrael. Shmuel viewed Babylonia as second in sanctity to Eretz Yisrael and ruled that it is prohibited to leave it to travel to other locations in the Diaspora. He also established a close friendship with King Shapur I of Persia, a benevolent monarch who was tolerant of religious diversity in his kingdom. Shmuel lived to an advanced age, leaving behind two daughters, both of whom were famous for their wisdom and modesty.

Hebrew calendar



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hebrew_calendar

Determining the new month in the Mishnaic period

The Tanakh contains several commandments related to the keeping of the calendar and the lunar cycle, and records changes that have taken place to the Hebrew calendar. Numbers 10:10 stresses the importance in Israelite religious observance of the new month (Hebrew: ראש חודש, Rosh Chodesh, "beginning of the month"): "... in your new moons, you shall blow with the trumpets over your burnt-offerings..." Similarly in Numbers 28:11. "*The beginning of the month*" meant the appearance of a new moon, and in Exodus 12:2. "*This month is to you*".

According to the Mishnah and Tosefta, in the Maccabean, Herodian, and Mishnaic periods, new months were determined by the sighting of a new crescent, with two eyewitnesses required to testify to the Sanhedrin to having seen the new lunar crescent at sunset. The practice in the time of Gamaliel II (c. 100 CE) was for witnesses to select the appearance of the moon from a collection of drawings that depicted the crescent in a variety of orientations, only a few of which could be valid in any given month. These observations were compared against calculations.

At first the beginning of each Jewish month was signaled to the communities of Israel and beyond by fires lit on mountaintops, but after the Samaritans began to light false fires, messengers were sent. The inability of the messengers to reach communities outside Israel before mid-month High Holy Days (Succot and Passover) led outlying communities to celebrate scriptural festivals for two days rather than one, observing the second feast-day of the Jewish diaspora because of uncertainty of whether the previous month ended after 29 or 30 days.

The accuracy of the Mishnah's claim that the Mishnaic calendar was also used in the late Second Temple period is less certain. One scholar has noted that there are no laws from Second Temple period sources that indicate any doubts about the length of a month or of a year. This led him to propose that the priests must have had some form of computed calendar or calendrical rules that allowed them to know in advance whether a month would have 30 or 29 days, and whether a year would have 12 or 13 months.

The fixing of the calendar

Between 70 and 1178 CE, the observation-based calendar was gradually replaced by a mathematically calculated one.

The Talmuds indicate at least the beginnings of a transition from a purely empirical to a computed calendar. Samuel of Nehardea (c. 165-254) stated that he could determine the dates of the holidays by calculation rather than observation.

According to a statement attributed to Yose (late 3rd century), Purim could not fall on a Sabbath nor a Monday, lest Yom Kippur fall on a Friday or a Sunday. This indicates that, by the time of the redaction of the Jerusalem Talmud (c. 400 CE), there were a fixed number of days in all months from Adar to Elul, also implying that the extra month was already a second Adar added before the regular Adar. Elsewhere, Shimon ben Pazi is reported to have counseled "those who make the computations" not to set Rosh Hashana or Hoshana Rabbah

on Shabbat. This indicates that there was a group who "made computations" and controlled, to some extent, the day of the week on which Rosh Hashana would fall.

There is a tradition, first mentioned by Hai Gaon (died 1038 CE), that Hillel II was responsible for the new calculated calendar with a fixed intercalation cycle "in the year 670 of the Seleucid era" (i.e., 358–359 CE). Later writers, such as Nachmanides, explained Hai Gaon's words to mean that the entire computed calendar was due to Hillel b. Yehuda in response to persecution of Jews. Maimonides (12th century) stated that the Mishnaic calendar was used "until the days of Abaye and Rava" (c. 320–350 CE), and that the change came when "the land of Israel was destroyed, and no permanent court was left."

Taken together, these two traditions suggest that Hillel b. Yehuda (whom they identify with the mid-4th-century Jewish patriarch Ioulos, attested in a letter of the Emperor Julian, and the Jewish patriarch Ellel, mentioned by Epiphanius) instituted the computed Hebrew calendar because of persecution.

In 1178, Maimonides included all the rules for the calculated calendar and their scriptural basis, including the modern epochal year in his work, Mishneh Torah. Today, the rules detailed in Maimonides' code are those generally used by Jewish communities throughout the world.

The Secret of Intercalation



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Rosh Hashanah. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page 340

This piece of Gemara is one of the hardest and most complex in the entire Talmud. This is because it deals with different aspects of the secret of addition. There was a special court that fixed the calendar. Unlike the other courts, its deliberations were done only by a small group of Sages, never more than seven, and never before an audience. The traditions and considerations of this court were therefore clouded in great secrecy, to the extent that even as great a Rabbi and astronomer as Shmuel did not know all there was to know about these principles.

Sometimes that court gave certain explanations for their rulings while hiding other, secret reasons for what they did (see Rambam). Even as late as the generations of the *ge'onim*, there were Sages of Eretz Yisrael who had hidden traditions that were not publicly known.

For this reason, this section of Gemara, which includes certain details from this encompassing system of the secret of addition, is difficult to understand.

Based on this piece of Gemara, disputes also arose with regard to setting the Jewish date line. The Rambam, after offering his explanation of the section, admits that he encountered difficulties that he could not resolve. Even Rav Hai Gaon, who had an oral tradition from the heads of the academies, writes in his responsa that he did not find a satisfactory solution that fits the whole section's flow and the astronomical facts.

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Rosh Hashanah 20b

אמר שמואל: כִּי לֵנָא לְתַקּוּנֵי לְכוּלָּהּ גּוּלָּהּ.
אמר ליה אבא אבבה דרבי שמלאי לשמואל: ידע מר האי מילתא דתנא בסוד העיבור: נולד קודם תצות
או נולד אחר תצות?
אמר ליה: לא.

אמר ליה: מדקא לא ידע מר – איכא מילי אחרוניתא דלא ידע מר.

Shmuel said: I am able to fix the calendar for the entire Diaspora.

Abba, the father of Rabbi Simlai, said to Shmuel: Does the Master know the meaning of this statement, that was taught in the *baraita* of the compilation entitled The Secret of Intercalation: there is a difference whether [the moon] was in conjunction before midday or in conjunction after midday?

He [Shmuel] said to him: No, I do not know what this means.

He [Abba, the father of Rabbi Simlai] said to him: Since the Master does not know this, there are probably other matters that the Master does not know.



Explaining the Story - What is going on in our story? (Explain the sequence of events)

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

Bonus ? What do you think Shmuel meant by saying “I am able to fix the calendar for the entire Diaspora”?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Bonus ? Why didn't Shmuel know the meaning of the statement taught in the *baraita The Secret of Intercalation*?

Extra Bonus ? What did Abba, the father of Rabbi Simlai hint to Shmuel, in a respectful way?

“The Twist” – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from These Texts



Don't tackle ambitious projects if you cannot confront more modest ones.



In our story, Shmuel, the great amora of Nahardea, is ready to tackle the huge project of fixing the Jewish calendar for the entire diaspora for eternity. His student, Abba, the father of Rabbi Simlai, shows him that he is not ready to take on such an ambitious project since he doesn't understand the meaning of a particular statement dealing with the secret of intercalation. Abba, the father of Rabbi Simlai (the student) kindly teaches Shmuel (the master) a lesson in humility: work your way up gradually, tackling smaller projects, before you are ready to take on bigger and more complex ones. And overall, don't brag, if you don't wish to invite immediate rebuff and rejection.