

From the Rabbi's Desk  
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## Stories with a Twist [317]

### You Do Not Have a Mistake Greater Than This! Insights into Babylonian Talmud Rosh Hashanah 30b



#### Background to Our Story

##### Testimony to Determine the Start of the Month



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Beitsa – Rosh Hashana. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Pages 245-246

The Jewish calendar is based to a large degree on the lunar cycle, which is approximately twenty-nine and one half days. The Jewish calculation of months is based on the appearance of the new moon. However, certain times of the year must also correspond to certain seasons, which are related to the solar year.

The task of setting calendar events, including the Festivals, was primarily given to humanity, through the witnesses who observed the occurrences and through the court, which accepted and authorized their testimony and fixed the dates of the Festivals. Through this process, the court and the Jewish people became partners with God. Additionally, it ensured the centrality of Eretz Yisrael, where the court was located and from where the calculations were made.

Establishing the Festivals in one central location creates many obstacles. The witnesses must reach the court, their testimony must be examined, and the decisions of the court must be made known to the residents of Eretz Yisrael and the Diaspora.

Technical communication difficulties, as well as intentional sabotage perpetrated by those with ulterior motives, required the establishment of a complex system of laws in order to ensure a single, accurate calendar. The Sages established a second Festival Day in the Diaspora both to safeguard against possible errors due to faulty communications and to stress the centrality of Eretz Yisrael.

#### The Levites Song



The Levite Choir and Orchestra. By Rabbi Yehuda Shurpin

A highlight of the Temple service was the Levites' song and music, which would accompany some of the services. In fact, the Book of Psalms is replete with songs that were traditionally sung in the Holy Temple by the Levites.

### **Who Sang?**

King David divided the Levites into 24 groups, each of which served a different week in the Holy Temple, similar to how the Kohanim were divided into 24 groups. They had two primary duties: guarding the Temple and singing during the services. Each one of these was further split into two. "Guarding" consisted of standing guard and opening and closing the gates. "Singing" consisted of vocalists and musicians. A Levite who was assigned to one task was not allowed to change to another.

Following a debate, the Talmud concludes that the singing was the primary service; the music simply accompanied the vocalists. In fact, although only the Levites could sing, an Israelite was permitted to be a musician.

### **When Did They Sing?**

The Levites would sing when wine libations were poured on the altar to accompany the communal burnt offerings (i.e., the daily offerings and the special offerings brought on Shabbat, [Rosh Chodesh](#) and holidays), and the peace offerings brought on Shavuot.

They would also sing [Hallel](#) during the offering of the Paschal lamb, during [Simchat Beit Hashoeva](#) (the drawing of the water ceremony) on Sukkot, and when the [bikkurim](#) (first fruits) were brought. Most are of the opinion that the Levites would only sing during communal offerings.

### **What Instruments Did They Play?**

The following is a breakdown of the number of instruments the Levites used:

At least two lyres, but no more than six

At least two flutes, but no more than twelve

At least two trumpets, but no more than 120

At least nine harps, with no upper limit

There was only one cymbal used.

The Levites used to keep the instruments in the chambers underneath the Ezrat Yisrael ("Court of Israel"), which opened into the Ezrat Nashim ("Court of Women").

### **Platform or Steps: Where Did They Sing?**

In some sources, the Levites are described as singing upon a *duchan* ("platform") in the Temple courtyard near the altar. Elsewhere we read that the Levites sang on the 15 steps—corresponding to the 15 Songs of Ascent in Psalms—that led from the Ezrat Nashim ("Court of Women") to the Ezrat Yisrael ("Court of Israelites").

### **When Did They Start Singing?**

During the era of the Mishkan, the Levites would start training for service in the Tabernacle at the age of 25 and would only begin service at age 30 (retiring at 50). This age restriction was lifted during the Temple period, but the Levites still needed to train for five years prior to their service.

### **What Did They Sing?**

Almost all the Levites' songs are recorded in the Book of Psalms. As mentioned above, during the Passover offering, they sang Hallel (Psalms 113-118). Throughout the year, a different Psalm was sung each day of the week during the morning and afternoon daily offerings:

**Sunday:** "The earth is the Lord's and all it contains . . ." (Psalms 24)

**Monday:** "Great is the Lord and highly to be praised in the city of God. . ." (Psalms 48)

**Tuesday:** "God stands in the divine assembly . . ." (Psalms 82)  
**Wednesday:** "O Lord G-d, to Whom vengeance belongs . . ." (Psalms 94)  
**Thursday:** "Sing for joy to G-d, our strength . . ." (Psalms 81)  
**Friday:** "The Lord reigns: He is robed in majesty . . ." (Psalms 93).  
**Shabbat** (only during the morning offering): "A psalm, a song for Shabbat day . . ." (Psalms 92)

During the *musaf* offering of Shabbat, the Levites would sing one of six parts of the song of Haazinu (Deuteronomy 32), completing the song every six weeks.

During the afternoon *tamid* offering on Shabbat, they would sing the "Song of the Sea" from Exodus.

When they would bring the *bikkurim* (first fruits), they would sing, "I will extol You, O Lord, for You have raised me up . . ." (Psalm 30).

According to some, on holidays when the complete [Hallel](#) is recited during prayer services, the Levites would sing the Hallel during the *musaf* offering of that day, in addition to the special holiday songs enumerated in Masechet Sofrim.

### **Singing in the World to Come**

The daily psalms selected for each day of the week praise G-d for creating the world in six days. The exception is the song sung on Shabbat, Psalms 92, which begins, "A psalm, a song for Shabbat day." The [Mishnah](#) says it is "a song for the future, for the day that will be entirely Shabbat and rest for everlasting life" —for Shabbat is a glimmer of the World to Come.

May we merit this time with the coming of Moshiach and the rebuilding of the Temple speedily in our days!

### **Rabbi Zeira**



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Born in Babylonia, Rabbi Zeira, known in the Jerusalem Talmud as Rabbi Ze'eira, became one of the great third-generation *amora'im* of Eretz Yisrael. His father, a tax collector for the Persian government, was praised as one of the few who performed that function honestly. When Rabbi Zeira ascended to Eretz Yisrael, he decided to identify himself entirely with the Torah of Eretz Yisrael. The Gemara relates that he undertook one hundred fasts to forget the Torah he studied in Babylonia.

## **The Text: Babylonian Talmud Rosh Hashanah 30b**

### **Mishna**

Initially, they would accept testimony to determine the start of the month throughout the entire thirtieth day from the beginning of the month of Elul, before Rosh HaShana, and if witnesses arrived from afar and testified that they had sighted the New Moon the previous night, they would declare that day the Festival.

### **Gemara**

Once, the witnesses tarried coming, and the Levites erred regarding the song, i.e., the psalm that they were supposed to recite, as they did not know at the time whether

it was a Festival or an ordinary weekday. From that point on, the Sages instituted that they would accept testimony to determine the start of the month only until *minhâ* time. If witnesses had not arrived by that hour, they would declare Elul a thirty-day month.

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What error did the Levites make regarding the song they were supposed to recite?

Here, in Babylonia, they interpreted that they did not recite any song at all, as they did not know which psalm should be sung, the one for an ordinary weekday or the special one for the Festival.

Rabbi Zeira said: Their mistake was that they recited the song of an ordinary weekday with the daily afternoon offering. After the witnesses testified, it became clear that they should have recited the psalm of the Festival.

Rabbi Zeira said to his son Ahava: Go out and teach the following *baraita* to the Sages of Babylonia: They instituted that on Rosh HaShana the court would accept testimony to determine the start of the month only if there was enough time left in the day to sacrifice the daily offerings and the additional offerings of the Festival and their libations, and to recite the appropriate song without a mistake. Granted, if you say that they recited the song of an ordinary weekday, this is a case in which there is a mistake. However, if you say that they did not recite any psalm at all, what mistake is there?

The Gemara replies: Since they did not recite any psalm at all, you do not have a mistake greater than this.



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

## Comprehension and Analysis Questions

**?** Why did the Sages initially accept the testimony to determine the start of the month throughout the entire thirtieth day of Elul?

**?** Why did the Sages change the practice and started accepting the testimony only until *minhâ* time?

**?** What was the Levites' mistake according to the sages in Babylonia?

**?** What was the Levites' mistake according to Rabbi Zeira?

**"The Twist" – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from This Text.**

**!** Doing nothing: you do not have a mistake greater than this!



Our story reminds us that while inaction can save us from making mistakes, at the end of the day, there is no greater mistake than doing nothing. Yes, those "who do," will sooner or later make mistakes, but those "who don't," live a mistaken, and at the end of the day, meaningless, life.