

What Year is it Now?

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We are about to hail the New Year, Rosh Hashana, computed as being the year 5768. We are entitled to ask these questions; 1: is this a Jewish system of dating the years? 2: have we always used this system? 3: is it accurate? and 4: what are we supposed to be 5768 years away from?

In attempting to deal with these questions, let me make two fundamental points. There are many Jewish people who believe in the absolute and perfect computation of the year, and they will probably consider what follows here as being wrong and even misguided. I respect their right to both opinions. My second point is that belief or non-belief in the accuracy of the computation of the year, whether it is a Jewish system or not, is not a fundamental principle of Jewish faith and does not affect the performance of Torah mitzvot or observance of Jewish custom and practice. It is perhaps a very interesting academic aside, but in raising it, I hope at least it will stimulate some discussion or thought. It is in that spirit that I raise the subject.

The calendary computation of years that gives us now the dawn of 5768 implies that the system reaches back into the dim and distant past of Jewish history. With Abraham our Father living some 4,000 years ago, the Exodus from Egypt some 3,500 years ago and the building of the Solomonic Temple some 3,000 years ago, would confidently expect to find this system of dating repeatedly mentioned in the pages of Holy Scripture; we do not.

Not once in the entirety of our Bible do we find any reference to a system of continuous dating that gives us in 2007 of the civil calendar a year of 5768. The Torah and Bible very frequently record the passing of the years and the passage of time indeed, the entire study of Biblical chronology which is a fascinating subject, seeks repeatedly to give the reader a concept of time. But nowhere, not once, is there any reference to a continuous Jewish system of dating that links up or co-relates to our present 'Jewish Calendar'.

Jewish Literature

Let us turn to the pages of the Talmud, the great tomes of Jewish literature, spanning some seven centuries from Mishnah to Gemarah, with the quotations and explanations of thousands of divinely-inspired sages of Israel. Do we not find the continuous system of calendary computation which in time would give us our present year 5768 there?

No we don't find it there either.

Yes, there are attempts to actually work out the passage of time (Avodah Zarah 9a) and later rabbinic works such as the Seder Olam. There were also individual rabbis, who worked out the passage of time from the Bible and gave numbers to the years according to their own systems, but in the first place none of these became a generally accepted system of dating, and in the second they were computations not real systems used throughout history.

It behoves me to draw attention to systems of counting years that are referred to in the Bible. The Exodus from Egypt was the great birth of the Jewish nation, our first independence day, and in the Bible there are references to the year computed from the Exodus from Egypt (Numb. I, v.1., Numb, X v.11; Numb. IX, v.1., Deut. I, v.3, 1 Kings, VI vi.). It is obvious from the reference in the Book of Kings that for some five centuries the computation of the Jewish year was from the Exodus. No correlation to our system by any means!

The second system we find in the Bible is much later. Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, came to Jerusalem twice. In the year we call 597 BCE, before the present civil era, he came to Jerusalem, appointed a new king over Judea, and took away with him the nobles, the rabbis and sages, and some of the Temple vessels, and warned the new king Zedekiah not to meddle in politics and to stay a loyal vassal of Babylon. Eleven years later, after another rebellion against Babylon in defiance of the G-d-given advice of Jeremiah, Nebuchadnezzar returned and destroyed the Temple, Jerusalem and the Jewish Kingdom.

That was in 586 before the present civil era. The first exile that is, the one of 597 BCE became known as the first year of the exile. This system is reflected in the Prophet Ezekiel (Ezek. I v.2) the fifth year of the exile of King Yehoiyachin of Judea (deposed in 597 and taken to Babylon with the exiles). Having established that dating, Ezekiel continues to use it; Ezek. VIII v.1., XX v.1-, etc. Would the Prophet have used such a system of dating if there had been a continuous Jewish era?

Centuries

The books of the Bible, however, that concern themselves most with the passing of time are the Book of Judges, the two Books of Kings and parallel to the Books of Kings the two Books of Chronicles. The Book of Judges relates the deeds, battles and valiant acts of the great heroes and heroines of the 'Republic of Israel', those centuries between Joshua and King Saul.

The Books of Kings deal with the reigns of the kings of Israel and Judea in the centuries from the end of the reign of David until the destruction of the Temple by the Babylonians. The two Jewish Kingdoms, Israel and Judea, that existed side by side for more than two centuries, record the reigns of their kings and the years of their reigns. Scripture always correlates the king of one State to the king of the adjoining State; And A began to reign in the X year of King B. The Book of Chronicles with notable variations repeats this pattern.

But surely, such repeated correlation is in a clear attempt to indicate passage of time, and to state which kings and events were contemporary. If there had been a continuous system of dating, a calendary system of years by which to count, such complex correlation would not have been necessary. It is like saying for example 'The Russian Revolution occurred in the seventh year of George V of Great Britain'; or, 'Margaret Thatcher was elected to be Prime Minister in the 28th year of the reign of Elizabeth II'. Both points can be made by simply stating the year of the continuous era used; 1917, 1979.

In the Biblical books in which there is critical need to give dating and to indicate the passage of time not once is there a reference to a system that relates in any way with our 'Jewish Calendar'. Further, apart from individual attempts to compute a system, or to discuss historical events to determine the passage of time since Creation, no such clear system exists in the Talmud either.

Greek Era

There are other points yet to be made. Two other calendars were used to compute years in the 2nd Temple period. The first was the Greek era. In the year 311 before the civil era commenced (BCE) the Greek general Seleucus proclaimed himself king of a large slice of the Greek Empire of Alexander which was fragmenting after his death. Seleucus snatched Syria and Asia Minor, Babylon and later Judea, where the Jews were living in the 2nd Temple period.

He proclaimed that year (311 BCE) to be year 1 of the Seleucid calendar. Henceforth it was used throughout that vast area of the ancient world, and by the Jews. Jewish documents, for example, were dated according to the Jewish months, but the year was the Greek or Seleucid year. If there had been a Jewish continuous system surely it would have been used or at least used alongside the Seleucid calendar!

This Greek system was used by the Jews continuously until the 11th century! For almost 1,400 years the Jews used the Seleucid calendar! Would they have done so had there been a Jewish system? From about 15th century the Jewish community of the Yemen became isolated from mainstream Jewish communities.

In 1947, archaeologists and explorers who penetrated the remote and forbidding Yemen not least because the Imam (king) forbade foreigners inside his frontiers returned bringing news of Jewish communities. In 1948, as Israel was being restored to statehood, the Jews of Yemen were brought home to Israel and it was found that they were still using the Seleucid calendar to compute their years! They knew of no Jewish system that was numbered as 5708! Of course, they used the Jewish months for dates and festivals, as do we all, and have always done.

Jubilees

Another system that must be briefly mentioned is reflected in the Book of Jubilees in the Pseudepigrapher (a collection of books grouped with the Apocrypha, outside the Bible). This book computes time from Creation until the Giving of the Torah in time-spans called Jubilees.

Every Jubilee is fifty years. This is attested to in the first verse of chapter 1 of Ezekiel, where his reference to the 30th year is to the 30th year of the final Jubilee period that operated when the first Temple stood. This does not appear to have been used as a system again.

Having sought to demonstrate that our present system did not operate in any way in the Bible and Talmud, not even till the 11th century of the current civil era, we must tackle the questions of where the system came from, and is it accurate?

About the 11th century, the period of Maimonides, the Greek system had long outlived the Greek kingdom. The Jews rebelled at the idea of adopting the Christian calendar computed from the date

when the Carpenter from Nazareth was supposedly born in Bethlehem. The Christian calendar is itself inaccurate (it is something between 2001 and 2007 in fact) but hostility and persecution dissuaded Jews from using it. They turned not unnaturally to the Bible, and utilised passages such as Avodah Zarah 9a to work out from Scripture the passage of time. The system is computed thus; Adam was 130 years at the birth of Seth - 130 years Seth was 105 years old when Enosh was born + 105 years. Enosh was 90 years old when Kenan was born +90 years and so on, for the 20 generations spanning Adam to Abraham.

Then Abraham was 100 years old when Isaac was born + 100 years. 400 years from the birth of Isaac to the Exodus + 400 years. 480 years from the Exodus to the Building of the Temple + 480. From Solomon to the destruction of the Temple, you add up the total years of the reigns of the kings of Judea - very difficult because there were instances of co-regencies, other overlaps, official regnal years which could be computed twice - but you arrive at a figure. 70 years for the Babylonian exile, 34 years for the Persian empire (stated this in Avodah Zarah 9a, because only 34 years of Persian kings are mentioned in the Bible the rest not mentioned ate ignored!) the Greek period, the rule of the Maccabbees, and the rule of the Herod family under Rome. The years since these events are added in, and you have a system referred to as 'AM' - Anno Mundi, the year of the world based on Scripture itself.

Adopted System

Such a system appealed very strongly to the Jews of the 11th century, and it was adopted not before the Yemenite Jews were isolated in their tiny corner of the world. Gradually the system spread and became the norm. I have already indicated certain inbuilt difficulties that would give inaccuracy. The second was the opinion that the Greek calendar was not founded by Seleucus in 311 BCE, but counted from when Alexander the Great came to Jerusalem, some twenty years earlier. Which is correct is not at issue. But the difference between them is another possible inaccuracy.

I have myself before a class computed this system, adjusting each to the possible inaccuracies. I have arrived at figures in the region of 5669, even 5719, but there is probably room for an inaccuracy of more than 100 years either way.

However, everyone calls this year 2007 even though it could be 2011, or even 2017. It is inaccurate, but

who cares? The Jewish year is 'accepted' as being 5768, even if it is a few decades out one way or the other. It makes no difference. So let us all agree either fundamentally believing, or accepting as a convenient Jewish system that is approximate that it is 5768. 5768 according to various suggestions since Adam was created. (This excludes therefore the days or periods of time of the actual creation).

Artificially Created

It is one thing to have a system and use it. It is quite another to create a calendar and work it backwards to fit in with Biblical history or text from which the system was artificially created in the first place! While I acknowledge publicly that the artscroll books are superb texts that make available to English-speaking Jews huge slices of rabbinic literature and interpretation, their insistence on dating Biblical and historical events according to the Jewish calendar is precisely that - working backwards a created calendary system.

In the Chanukah book on page 90, there is a supposed historical table, with dual dating, the date in the 'Jewish year' and in the BCE civil year. It gives 3338/423 BCE as the date for the destruction of the Temple by the Babylonians. The year 3338 is working the system backwards. The date 423 is wrong, because it was, as can be proved, 586 BCE. The next date given is 3389/372 BCE for the fall of Babylon to Persia. Again 3389 is working the system backwards - no Jew at the time would have said it was 3389! - and Babylon fell to Persia in 539 BCE.

As they believe they must squash the two centuries of Persia into 34 years, they have to bring the number down somehow. I did write to the Artscroll publishers on this, but received no reply. I think this must serve to demonstrate that while we accept the system, it is artificial. Even where Rashi comments on the Avodah Zarah page also giving a detailed account of the eras from Creation to the end of the 2nd Temple, it is computing the passage of time, not giving us a real system that was actually used by hundreds of people in hundreds of generations as a day to day living calendar.

It is also, as I calculate it, three years out, but that is negligible in terms of centuries. Obviously it was a matter of deep concern to the scholars of the 11th century (Rashi and others) to compute a non-Christian Jewish calendar. Considering the imponderables, and lack of reliable ancient histories and texts available then, they did remarkably well