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Women's Whispers: Diaspora holiday bonus

By VIVA HAMMER
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Survival of the second day of *yom tov* is a vexing enigma of Diaspora Judaism. Every schoolchild knows of its primordial origins, when the calendar was fixed according to sightings of the moon. But the extra day should have become a mere historical curiosity after the adoption of the mathematical calendar.

Logic does not prevail in the ways of love or religion, and so this time of year those of us who toil amongst the gentiles live in great tension. “*Another holiday?*” they ask us every week.

The procedure for establishing the calendar in ancient times was a divinely orchestrated drama. Witnesses traveled to the Sanhedrin from all over Israel to testify regarding their lunar visions. The witnesses’ mission was so important that they were permitted to break Shabbat on their journey.

Was there glory in offering testimony? Clearly there was power in it; the witnesses obtained audience with the nation’s elite and their words controlled its life cycle. Indeed, heretics so abused the open populism of the system that eventually only known witnesses were permitted to testify.

Once sufficient evidence of the new moon had accumulated, someone lit a torch on the Mount of Olives, waving it back and forth, up and down, until he saw a similar fire being lit on the next hill, and so on until all of Israel was aflame with news of the month. But the Cutheans wrought mischief with the fiery telegraph and it was replaced with human messengers spreading the word to Jewish settlements.

Dramatic suspense drove the calendar-making; participants were drawn from all strata of society: witnesses, judges, messengers, firemakers, troublemakers. It was a dialectic system, requiring travel by ordinary folk for the purpose of communication with central leadership. Great feasts were prepared for the witnesses, giving an opportunity to exchange intelligence beyond the shape of the moon. As witnesses were released and messengers sent out to announce the new month, outlying communities received news

of the happenings at the capital. This process formed a loop of give and take, of information from the people to the leaders and back to the people.

Messengers were also sent to the Diaspora regarding Rosh Hodesh, but often they did not arrive in time for the Jews there to learn the precise festival dates, and so they kept two days each holiday – *sfeika d'yoma*.

By the time of Hillel II, the witness and messenger system had broken down. A calendar based on astronomical calculations developed, and it has served better than the Gregorian calendar in choreographing the relationship between the life of man and the rhythm of the universe she lives in.

There is no drama, no dialogue; there is the fixed and unmovable *luach*. And in the Diaspora, the *luach* tells us we keep two days, even though there is no whiff of uncertainty as to holiday dates, no *sfeika d'yoma* whatsoever.

“Every autumn a Jew takes up to seven days off from harvesting, money-lending, tax-collecting; how could this be sustained in the centuries we lived hand to mouth?” I marvel to myself on the third and final round of a “three day” holiday. We have been shuling and cooking and eating for a whole season and everyone is weary. The piles of papers and e-mails wait restlessly for us at our offices, and the dishes sit unwashed in the sink.

The rabbis were fanatical about preserving the sanctity of the second day. They knew it would be disparaged, so they built sturdy walls about it. Jews in Israel keep one day, but if they travel, they must not desecrate the second day in public, and only in limited ways in private. Diaspora Jews visiting Israel must keep two days unless they are certain of their immigration. My uncle kept two days for seven years after making aliya, ever unsure of his intentions.

I am blessed with an abundant shower of relatives on many continents, but in America where I live, I have only one cousin. Succot was difficult for him when he lived in an apartment, so we invited him to stay with us for the holiday when we bought a house with a garden. The time spent together was at least two days, and with Shabbat, stretched to three or four.

It has been many years now, and my cousin has a house too, but he still comes for Succot. Every other year he adds to his clan and we add to the *succa*. None of his children can remember a Tishrei we didn't spend together. This is not a mere daylong confab, it is a whole-season jamboree in which we cook, dine and *succa-hop* together, talking of *shidduchim* and exchanging business intelligence and child-rearing advice.

Observant Jews, fewer than one million in number, rattle around on this planet of seven billion or so; no longer do witnesses or messengers link the centers and the peripheries. Instead, caravans of fringed Jews travel the world's highways this time of year, to park in each other's *succot*. And during long, languid hours under impermanent roofs, we

might find a business partner or win a neighbor's hand in marriage.

None of this would be necessary or possible for a one-day holiday. In a society that expects 60- to 80-hour workweeks, in which we sleep with our BlackBerrys, a three-day festival may be the only extended time we spend with our landsmen. The luach tells us we must.

My logic is not your logic, neither are my ways yours.

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