

Episode 37

Pinchas

A couple of years ago, I spent New Year's in Moscow. It was the evening of December 31st. I was walking in the direction of the Kremlin, beginning at Tverskaya Square. As Moscow tends to be this time of year, it was extremely cold. It was also lightly snowing. Yet, despite the weather, Russia had decided to put on a performance down this main road. There was a choreographed performance of dancing women all the way down the boulevard. I felt extremely bad for these women, actually. Their sparkly, glittery angel costumes were way too flimsy for the frigid weather. The women were probably freezing, but they still had to relentlessly smile or else Putin would have fired them. It felt a bit like forced slave labor, although I'm sure they got paid. The weather was so cold, that you couldn't stay outside for very long. It wasn't too long before I was back at the AirBNB, my snow-covered boots by the door, drinking a hot cup of tea.

It was still a good time. Christmas spirit, beautiful lights, the coziness of warm refuge after wandering around in a frosty snowstorm. But something about the night felt a bit off. For the first time in my life, I began to ask myself the question: why do we celebrate the New Year on January first? Why do we celebrate rebirth, renewal, a fresh start in the depths of winter, when everything is dead, grey, and oppressive? I'm not saying there is no need for a wintry holiday at this time, but I think it should be a different holiday than New Year's.

A similar argument could be made for "midnight." Why should the day officially end at 11:59 p.m. and begin at 12:00 a.m., of all numbers? When the clock strikes twelve, nobody actually *feels* as if the day is over; rather, we feel simply as though it is late at night, the middle of the night, midnight. Yet, officially speaking, a new day has begun. But from the perspective of nature, nothing significant has occurred. 12:00 a.m. is just an arbitrary minute in the course of the twenty-four hour day.

Months are also a bit strange. It makes sense to divide the year into 365 days. That is the amount of time it takes for the Earth to orbit once around the sun, roughly speaking. But why do we divide these 365 days up into twelve months? Moreover, why do the months begin *when* they do, and why do some months have more days than others? What exactly changes from March 31 to April 1 such that it becomes a "new month"? Why are there twelve months and not ten months or thirty months?

All of these questions can be answered, but none can be answered satisfactorily. That is, none can be answered such that we feel satisfied with the answer. We live today with the Gregorian calendar, named after Pope Gregory in 1582. Pretty much everything about this calendar is artificially constructed. It is a *manmade* calendar. The one exception is that it does track the year rather accurately; the Earth has made one full revolution around the sun each year. But other than that, the Gregorian calendar is largely disconnected from nature. The reason why, when March 31 comes to an end, the month of April begins, is just because we, essentially, say so. Many of the reasons why the calendar ended up the way it did are actually kind of complicated, obscure, and not really worth going into at this time. The point is that the Gregorian calendar was largely created by a bunch of priests and princes sitting together in a castle and "decreeing" how the year should fall into place, including many holidays.

The hours of the day are equally artificial. In the nineteenth century, the modern "hour" needed to be created, concocted, so that time could follow a uniform system across the four corners of the globe. The world had become interconnected in a way never witnessed before. The nineteenth century saw the invention of trains, the telegraph, telephones, industrial factories, and

international banking. Accordingly, all clocks had to be in sync. It was quite literally a committee, just an appointed committee, which would decide how the clocks would run, when the day would “officially” end and begin, how the day would be divided up. This is how midnight came to be the beginning of the next day. Because a committee decreed it. The 1884 International Prime Meridian Conference adopted international standard time. This system of time is the same one which we use today.

In ancient cultures, the “year” began on a far more reasonable and sensible date than January 1, when the Earth is a cold, dead place. It began in what we would today call “March.” March is when we witness the first conspicuous signs of spring—budding trees, sprouting plants, sunnier skies, warmer weather. Snow melts, grass grows, the green world starts to return. And this process just continues with ever-increasing speed in the coming weeks, until nature is teeming with color, life, and profundity. No wonder ancient cultures saw March as the beginning of the year. How could they not have?

The ancient Babylonian calendar began the year in what today is mid-March with a spring festival. The early Roman calendar designated the first of March as the first day of the year. The Romans actually used the month March, but for the Babylonians it was called Nisan—more on this later. For the Romans, the calendar had just ten months, beginning with March. March was the first month—not January. You’ll notice that the last four months, September, October, November, and December, have Latin-based numerical roots. Sept means seven, oct means eight—octopus, nov means nine, and dec comes out to ten. The summer months of July and August were not always called as such. July used to be called Quintilis—*quin* meaning fifth, and August was called Sextilis for *six*. In the names July and August, we can hear in the names the sounds of distant Roman Emperors. July for *Julius* Caesar, and August for *Augustus*, who was Caesar’s successor. These emperors had the names of these two months changed to glorify themselves. Roman emperors *wanted* their names on the calendar, much like corporations want stadiums named in their honor.

January and February were added by Numa Pompilius, the second king of Rome. Originally, these two months were tacked onto the end of the calendar. But eventually—we don’t know exactly when—the Romans decided to make January the first month and February the second. The reason for this was that Roman elections occurred in January, so the government decided that the year should begin with January. This move destroyed the original numerical fitness of month names like September, October, November, which ceased being the seventh, eighth, and ninth months to become instead the ninth, tenth, and eleventh.

You can see, then, how our calendar is anything but natural and authentic. It was made by princes and priests, often put together awkwardly for self-serving and political motives.

The year should start with March, with spring. But it doesn’t. Nevertheless, it took a long time to get people to accept January as the beginning of the year. In Great Britain, for example, the year officially began on March 25 until the year 1752.

In the parsha for this week, we learn when the Jewish holidays occur. There are five major Jewish holidays. There is Passover, which celebrates the exile from Egypt. This occurs in early spring. Then there is Shavuot, which celebrates when Moses received the Ten Commandments and the Torah from God on Mount Sinai. This occurs in late spring. Then there are three holidays in the fall. Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot. Rosh Hashanah is the New Year, but actually it isn’t really—more on that in a minute. Yom Kippur is the day of atonement and cleansing for one’s sins. And Sukkot commemorates the forty years the Hebrews spent wandering in the desert.

Right away, you will notice that these holidays are timed with the agricultural year. In the fall, during the harvest, when all of the grapes fall of the vines, and all of the fruit is heavy with sugary ripeness, Judaism has three holidays. *Three*. And then, throughout the long, cold winter, there are none. This is not a coincidence. The fall was the time when people *naturally* celebrated. Look at all this food we suddenly have!

The other two holidays occur in the spring, when the earth becomes green and warm again. In the spring, it is possible to *begin* planting again, to *begin* more easily hunting again, to *begin* building and gathering and traveling again. The earth had been a cold, icy, dark, hellish place for the last five months or so. Spring is the time to celebrate!

The *first* month of the Jewish calendar is Nisan. This was, you'll recall, also the first month of the Babylonian calendar. Today, Jews celebrate the "New Year" in the fall on the holiday of Rosh Hashanah, for which the literal translation is "head of the year." But this is largely a historical accident. Nowhere in the Torah is this holiday named Rosh Hashanah. Rather, in the Torah it is called Yom Teruah, which means "day of blasting" or "feast of trumpets." Sometime in the late Roman Empire, the Jewish authorities decided to make this day the Jewish New Year. But no one knows exactly when or why this change occurred. The real Jewish New Year occurred in the spring, during the *first* month of Nisan, roughly corresponding to today's month of March.

We should also take a step back and realize that ancient cultures did not obsess about years the way we do today. Most people didn't know their birthdays; they were lucky if they knew which season they were born in. There was no desire to track the exact passing of each year; most of the "year" was irrelevant, particularly the winter, when nothing was growing. The "year" was thought of more as the agricultural season from early spring to early fall. People didn't celebrate birthdays or even count how old they were getting. This may also explain why, in the Bible, the figures reach such strange ages when they die; Moses died at 120, Noah died at 950.

The holidays in the Torah, in short, do not occur arbitrarily. Rather, they fall during the natural cycle of the seasons. The month is also based on natural rhythms. The Gregorian calendar, the calendar we use today, has no connection with the cycles of the moon. The Hebrew calendar, by contrast, is based exclusively off the moon. The Hebrew month is simply the amount of time it takes for the moon to go through all of its phases. The similarity between the word month and moon demonstrates this ancient, pre-Gregorian connection, between months and moons. If you know which day of the Hebrew month it is, you know what the moon will look like. On the first day of the month, there will be *no* moon. On the second day, there will be the tiniest sliver of a waxing crescent. Halfway through the month, there will be a bright full moon in the sky. And on the twenty-eighth day of the month, the moon will have shrunk to a mere sliver again, looking just as it did on the second day, but now facing in the opposite direction.

The Hebrew day is also intimately tied up with nature. The day doesn't end abruptly and randomly at midnight. Rather, the day ends when the sun goes down. The Torah doesn't tell us when the day officially ends; the Torah just says it ends in the "evening." The evening can be anytime from sunset to darkness. The Torah, I think, leaves this ambiguous for two reasons. First, the Torah just doesn't have the same obsession with clock time that we do today. There were no trains, appointments, and deadlines in the ancient world. If people wanted to set up a meeting, they just agreed to meet "in the morning" or "when the sun is going down." If you had to wait an hour for someone, that was okay. Second, the Torah probably recognized that, in the ancient world, universal standards of time were impossible to institute. There were quite literally

no clocks or watches; “time” hadn’t yet been invented. The best you could do was tell someone the day ends in the evening, and let them figure out the rest for themselves.

To sum up, the holidays and the months and days are structured the way they are in the Torah for two reasons. The first reason is that, in the ancient world, people were more connected with the rhythm of nature and the cycles of the season than we are today. The second reason is that power was decentralized. Power and authority existed on the local level. And there was little hope of coordinating between powers from other communities. Therefore, time could not be standardized the way it is today. The only thing *standardized* back then, was nature itself. You will notice a connection between these two reasons. As technology increases, and our “mastery” over the earth increases, we have less a need to let nature be our guide and we have a greater ability to centralize power and control.

Centralization of power and standardization has increased exponentially over the last few centuries. When America was first founded, it was not called *the* United States of America, but rather *these* United States of America. It was a confederation; not a nation-state. Citizens would have been far more connected with their state’s constitution and their state governments than with the federal constitution and the national government. Germany did not exist as a modern country until 1871. Before then, it was made up of tiny kingdoms, each with their own laws and customs. There was not even a universal German language; rather, each kingdom spoke its own dialect of German. The rapid developments in mass communication and technology has enabled this centralization to occur.

Centralization of authority is a problem Goethe dealt with in his first major play, *Götz von Berlichingen*, written in 1773, when Goethe was only twenty-four years old. Before discussing the play, let me provide a bit of historical background. The young Goethe wrote this play during the height of the *Sturm und Drang* artistic movement in Germany. I discussed *Sturm und Drang* in episode 26. This was a stormy, angsty movement of young, German intellectuals who wished to rebel against the dominance of the French language, French art, and even French politics, in the German lands. Historically, during this time, Germany was, as I said, made up of these tiny kingdoms. And as other nations grew in size and power, they sought to push these little city-states around, imposing their laws upon them.

The protagonist of *Götz von Berlichingen* is Götz von Berlichingen himself. The play takes place during the sixteenth century or so. Götz is an old knight who is a kind of local hero in his region of southwestern Germany. He is the kind of guy knows who he is and where he comes from. He’s a local boy. He loves the traditions of his community and knows the laws and unwritten rules inside and out. What he doesn’t like is when the Holy Roman Empire comes onto his turf and imposes itself. The Holy Roman Empire was one of these centralized powers of the era. Much of the play is devoted to showing Götz’s anger at centralized powers coming down to the local level and telling people what they can and cannot do. Götz inevitably begins fighting battles against the Holy Roman Empire. The most famous quote from the play occurs when Götz is being hunted down by the Kaiser and hides in a cave. One of his soldiers tells Götz that perhaps he should turn himself in. Götz responds by saying: “Turn myself in? Are you out of your mind. Do you know who you’re speaking to? I am a rebel. You can tell the captain this: I have nothing but respect for the Kaiser. But be sure to tell him as well that he can go ahead and kiss my ass.” The Holy Roman Empire is too strong for Götz and his little city-state, and so, at the end of the play, he dies in a dungeon from being poisoned. His final words are: “Freiheit, freiheit... freedom, freedom.”

The rise in technology and centralization has also allowed us—or cursed us—to be disconnected from nature, to live our lives as though nature is something to be conquered rather than something to remain humble before. A couple of decades later after *Sturm und Drang*, the Romantic movement took hold in Germany. German Romanticism was, once again, also a response to the dominance of French courtly culture. If you think about the gardens of Versailles, for example, you will notice that they aim to subdue and organize nature. To make nature pretty and tame. The German Romantics wanted to return nature to its awesomeness. They wished to show that nature should not be neutered but rather let to run wild. A person should stand in fear and wonder before nature, not in command over her. The paintings of Caspar David Friedrich masterfully depict these themes. The most famous is perhaps the *Monk by the Sea*. In this painting, one sees the tiny figure of a monk standing next to the endless ocean. Here, nature is wild, unpredictable, and all-powerful. Nature utterly dwarfs the monk. Whatever ideas the monk may have about life are only greeted by the tempestuous ocean with indifference and mystery.

But German Romanticism believed that, by accepting the grandness of nature, by making ourselves humble before nature, we could better connect with nature. We could learn from nature, transcend ourselves through nature. In 1835, the German poet Joseph von Eichendorff published his famous poem “Mondnacht” or “Moon Night.” The poem is only three stanzas long. The first two stanzas describe nature in human terms, as though the sky can kiss the earth, and as though the earth can dream of the sky. The scene of the German forest is described with majesty and beauty and anticipation. The final stanza is about the narrator—the human. In this final stanza, the narrator’s soul merges with nature herself, flying through the forest and into the night toward home. I will read the poem in English due to the Schrift’s international audience, but I must say that it is even more captivating when read in German. Here is “Moon Night” or “Mond Nacht.”

It was as though Heaven
Had softly kissed the Earth,
So that she in a gleam of blossom
Had only to dream of him.

The breeze passed through the fields,
The corn swayed gently to and fro,
The forests murmured softly,
The night was so clear with stars.

And my soul spread
Her wings out wide,
Flew across the silent land,
As though flying home.

We may do well to gain some perspective and distance from the Gregorian Calendar, which has become the status quo in the last centuries. Our calendar does not reflect the world as it really is; if anything, it deceives us as to the rhythm and march of time. Historically, this makes sense. This calendar did not arise organically out of the cycle of life but was mandated upon us by a sixteenth-century pope. The Gregorian calendar was, moreover, an outgrowth of the

equally artificial Julian calendar, a ramshackle document thrown together by overly eager Roman politicians.

It may not at first seem like a big deal if we celebrate New Years Eve in on December 31 or sometime in March. Either way, it will be a fun time with champagne, friends, and parties. If some underpaid Russian dancers need to freeze their ass off in the cold, so be it. But, I think, we miss out on a lot by celebrating New Years in the dead of winter than when it should be celebrated: at the dawn of spring. Spring is, unlike the middle of winter, an immensely inspirational time of year. It is a time in which you can witness the year beginning a new, see for yourself nature being given a fresh start, and become excited about the warm, bountiful months ahead. This is the time to make resolutions, to appreciate what you have, to reflect on the past year. This is the time when we will not see champagne as just another fizzy drink to chug down. Rather, surrounded by chirping birds, a golden twilight, and blossoming yellow tulips, a New Years Eve in march will be an evening in which you can taste and savor the fermented, ripened grapes from the vineyard, from the harvest.