

***D'rash for first day of Sukkot 10/3/20***  
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At first blush, there doesn't seem to be anything remarkable about this parsha. Chapter 23 of Leviticus lays out the calendar – Shabbat, the High Holidays and the festivals – in a fairly straightforward manner. What could be more routine?

But if one steps back, this parsha is both extraordinary and central. Any effort to order and prescribe time is an out-sized exercise in power and influence. To take just one clear example, the French Revolutionaries rewrote the calendar to make it more “rational” – changing and renaming the months, and starting over in the Year One. To take another, time zones were created because railroads needed a new and consistent sense of precision in local time. Nothing could be more central and commanding than reorganizing how we mark time.

Calendars sculpt time and create culture. Without them, time just flows arbitrarily, meaninglessly. Perhaps more than anything else in the Torah, the calendar created Judaism – created its rhythms, underscored its priorities, embedded its history – made us feel and appreciate time itself, an essential Jewish value.

The issues calendars raise may be subtle and intangible, but they are central to a society. That's why even today in the U.S., we have fights over holidays – what they should be, when they should be celebrated, what to name them.

One thing that makes calendars so powerful is that they go about setting specific times for collective activities. This is certainly an explicit concern of the parsha. Here are the first four verses of Chapter 23 in Alter's translation (italics mine): “...These are the *fixed times* of the Lord which you shall call sacred convocations. These are my *fixed times*...These are the *fixed times* of the Lord, sacred convocations which you shall call in their *fixed time*.”

This fundamental concept of fixed times may be getting harder for us than we realize. Everything about contemporary culture and contemporary technology is about an individual doing whatever one prefers whenever one finds it convenient or desirable. That's a very different conception of time. Apple and Google are changing our sense of time just as much as the railroads did, and just as much as the French Revolutionaries, albeit with less bloodshed.

So maybe this Torah portion – in some ways so quotidian – can get us to think more about its premises and its meaning. The parsha, after all, is clear that the intention is to set a calendar that will be “everlasting” – another breathtaking ambition.

So, what does having prescribed times and a collective calendar mean for you? How does the Jewish calendar shape your sense of time? Why is that meaningful (or not) to you? How, if at all, does it shape your attitudes toward time in the secular world?