

Déjà- Jew

Does history repeat itself? Is repetition a good thing?

Parashat Bo, 5777

Temple Beth El, Stamford CT

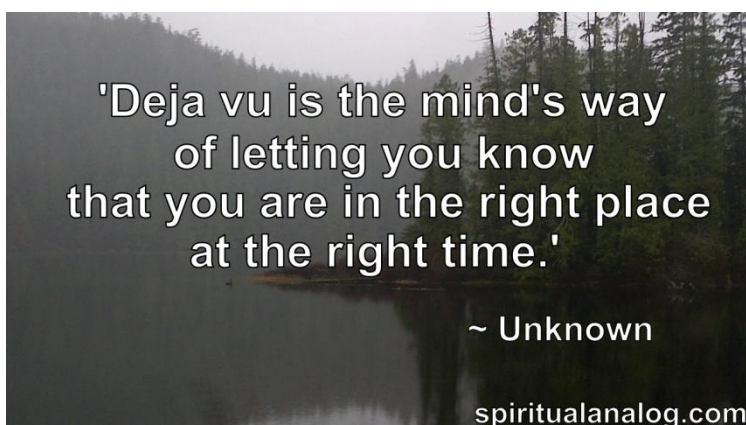
Exodus 12:2 'This month shall be unto you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year to you.
ב הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם, רִאשׁוֹן הַחֹדָשִׁים : רִאשׁוֹן הוּא לָכֶם, לְחֹדֶשִׁי הַשָּׁנָה.

Déjà vu, ([/ˌdeɪʒɑː ˈvuː/](#); French pronunciation: [\[de.ʒa.vy\]](#)) from [French](#), literally "already seen", is the [phenomenon](#) of having the strong sensation that an event or experience currently being experienced has already been experienced in the past. Déjà vu is a feeling of familiarity, and déjà vécu (the feeling of having "already lived through" something)^[5] is a feeling of recollection.

Rita: There is something *so familiar* about this. Do you ever have *déjà vu*?

Phil: Didn't you just ask me that? *From the film "Groundhog Day"*

"History repeats itself because no one was listening the first time." Anonymous



"History does not repeat itself, but it does rhyme." Mark Twain

Judaism's Mulligan Month - Jewish Week 2014, Rabbi Joshua Hammerman

How often have we heard that familiar refrain this past year: "My, the holidays are early." Ever since Passover snuck in like a lamb last March, the crescendo has been building. With Rosh HaShanah linked to Labor Day and Chanukah to Thanksgiving the cry continued for months on end. But now, it's about to change. The month of Adar, which begins on the last day of January, will replicate itself on March 1 and we'll get back to normal. Except then, everything will be deemed "late."

During Jewish leap years, Adar is our Mulligan Month, an entire month that we get to do over. Yahrzeits can get confusing (ask me if you have a question), and Purim is always in Adar 2, but otherwise, we'll have two of all things Adar. Since Adar is our most joyous month, we get a double dose of happiness, just what the doctor ordered in the midst of a brutal winter. Adar will be doubly good, and Purim will be late.

With our brains and bodies stuck on the monotonous, relentless tick of secular time, it's natural to wonder if the Jewish holidays ever fall on schedule. But when life sways to the rhythms of the Jewish calendar, the question never arises. For most, the idea of Jewish time has more to do with tardy board meetings than an intricate system of ritual, emotion and instruction affixed to the cycles of nature. The hour has come for Jews to begin living on Jewish time. That venerated goal of Jewish continuity can hardly be served when our peak religious experiences are always being measured in secular seconds. Until we begin thinking of Rosh HaShanah as neither early or late, but right on target -- two months after Tisha b'Av and half a year from Passover -- we're grafting Judaism artificially into a corner of our beings. For Judaism to breathe, it must be lived on its own terms, on its own schedule.

That said, so nu, why were the holidays so early this year?

Since you asked, yes, it's true, Rosh HaShanah hadn't fallen this early on the secular calendar in quite some time; 19 years to be exact. It was 1994 when it last began on Sept. 5, and here's why. The rabbis calculated the lunar month to be 29 days, 12 hours, 44 minutes and 3.33 seconds (and they were less than a half a second off).

The year consists of 12 of those months, or approximately 354 days. With the secular, solar calendar lasting 365 days, the lunar calendar falls 11 days behind the solar -- one each year. The rabbis figured that an additional month should be added seven times in each 19-year cycle in order to keep agricultural festivals in their seasons. Passover must come in the spring and Sukkot in the fall (unless you live in the Southern Hemisphere, but let's not complicate things). The sages actually were a little off in these calculations, or Passover would be celebrated in June. Fortunately, that's one of those problems we can afford to leave to subsequent generations, like the national debt and the location of Jimmy Hoffa.

The extra month is added during the winter of the third, sixth, eighth, 11th, 14th, 17th and 19th years of the cycle. Notice that leap years are usually three years apart, but occasionally two. Since

we're now in the 17th year of the cycle, we've gone nine years since the last two-year interval (years 6 and 8). That means we've had fewer leap years recently, therefore we've been losing more days to the secular calendar. The 17th year always has the earliest Rosh HaShanah, and the ninth year (because it's preceded by the greatest frequency of leap years) the latest. Get it? Sorry you asked?

Now isn't it so much easier just to live on Jewish time rather than trying to understand it? How often do we ask ourselves about the logic of the secular calendar, which has a new year that occurs when nothing at all is changing and new days begin at an arbitrary hour when few are awake to appreciate it? Give me a calendar that asks us to turn inward just as the weather outside is nudging us precisely in that direction, one that expels us from winter's hibernation to the pulsating poetry of "Song of Songs" and the drama of national release, and one that always promises the moon's return to ripeness, no matter how dark things seem.

For inhabitants of secular time, the only dilemmas occur when July 4 doesn't create a three-day weekend or Christmas falls on a Sunday. When do they collect garbage? When can they play football? When can we shop?

Speaking of football, the only thing that compares to the rhythm of the Jewish year, with all its rituals and pageantry, is the American sports calendar. As a young boy growing up in the Boston area, fall meant three things: playing football, stuffing those delicious marble cake slices from the synagogue sukkah into my jacket pocket and watching someone other than the Red Sox win the World Series (things have changed!). Spring meant sneaking out of school to attend opening day at Fenway, usually with a matzah sandwich crumbling in my book bag.

Seasonal rituals don't normally die easily -- they still have May Day parades in Moscow -- because we need them as a constant by which to measure our years. We need the Seder table as a gauge of how the family has evolved, to see who is sitting where this year. Our lives spin around these sacred moments.

It's really not so difficult to convert over to Jewish time. It's not like Celsius or kilometers or changing dollars to shekels. There's a very easy way to integrate the Jewish calendar into the rhythm of your life: Go out and buy one. Or go to Hebcal.com and download it.

When you do, something remarkable will begin to happen. Your moods will shift and undulate, responding to events that occurred centuries ago. Holidays will arrive neither early nor late, and each week will flow into Shabbat none too soon.

And what is Jewish continuity but the transmission of the cadences of Jewish life from one generation to the next? I am often asked, will the American Jewish community be around in the next century? To which I respond: Sure. The next century is only 26 years away - 5800. And there is one other thing that is certain. As long as there are any Jews left on this planet, meetings will still begin 15 minutes late.

Repetition in Prayer

AUGUST 31, 2012

by Rabbi Roger Herst

As a rabbi, the most common complaint I hear about Jewish ritual in the synagogue is that the repetition of prayers is boring. The complaint is not only common but justified.

First, let's look at Jewish prayers dispassionately. Petitions and adorations of God in ancient times reflected an intimate relationship between a Jew and his deity. Over the years, these prayers were canonized into a liturgy that has come to be recited three times a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. Such prayers were not "free form" but followed a prescribed pattern. Orthodox (fully observant) Jews still recites these prayers *daily*. Now a Reform or Liberal Jew would like to recite some of these prayers when moved to do so, but not necessarily on such a rigorous schedule. And more importantly, he would like to believe that in speaking with God the meaning of his prayers are 1) well considered and 2) sincere.

Now here's the kicker. Can God, however omniscient, really listen to every Jew recite his daily prayers three times per day, along with the billions of pious petitioners in Islam (who recite their prayers five times per day) and Christianity? Would Deity want to?

As far as I can determine in Jewish history, the mitzvah (commandment) to say prayers (as a substitute for animal and gain sacrifices) is in the recitation, NOT the communication or intention. What I mean by that is the commandment is to fabricate the words on the lips. Yes, just say them. It's not essential to think of the meaning with each and every recitation. Sixteenth century scholar Moses Isserles battled with this problem and recognized that a pious Jew is not compelled to recite even the most sacred parts of the liturgy with *kavanah*, intention. It's just a psychological impossibility.

And that makes sense. You'd go crazy trying to think of everything you pray when you do it over and over and over and over. Yes, in can become an Orthodoxy in its own right, but is is more a discipline than a one-to-one communication with God.

I like praying in the synagogue not because I believe God is listening to me. Surely, He/She isn't. I do it to link myself with other Jews throughout the ages who are reciting the same prayers. It unifies us as a people in time and geography.

Is it boring? It certainly can be. But how bad is that when compared with the reward of of bonding with fellow Jews?

Roger Herst is an ordained reform rabbi and the author of nine books, most recently his [*Rabbi Gabrielle series of thrillers*](#), published by Diversion Books. He lives in the Washington, DC area with his physician wife.

Questions:

Have you ever experienced a feeling of déjà-vu?

What are the "rituals" of our daily lives? How do these rituals help us – or not?

Does repeating something make it boring or more meaningful?

What about holiday rituals like the Seder or Shabbat dinner?

Should prayer be more repeated or spontaneous?