

p. xix

INTRODUCTION TO TRACT ROSH HASHANA (NEW YEAR'S DAY).

NOTWITHSTANDING the fact that in the history of every nation, especially such as has ever attained to an established form of government, the calendar is a matter of great importance, the Scriptures do not in any manner treat of the Jewish calendar. There cannot even be found a fixed time whence the commencement of the year should be reckoned, although there is this passage in Exodus (xii. 2): "This month shall be unto you the chief of months: the first shall it be unto you of the months of the year." Doubtless this may be assumed to point to the month of Nissan (about April), as not only the most important month, but also as the beginning of the year.

In another passage (Exod. xxiii. 16), however, we find it written: "And the feast of ingathering (Tabernacles), at the conclusion of the year." This would be a palpable contradiction to the previous passage, were it not for the fact that the words "*Betze'th Hashana*" (rendered as "at the conclusion of the year") in the quoted passage can be, with perfect accuracy, translated "during the year." While such a translation would clear away all doubt as to Nissan being the beginning of the year, it could under no circumstances be applied to the Feast of Tabernacles, which is neither "at the conclusion" of the year nor "during the year" (in the sense "when the year has advanced"), if the beginning of the year be Tishri (about September). Hence the passage should be translated: "And the feast of the ingathering, which had been completed at the conclusion of the year"; *i.e.*, in the months preceding the month of Tishri.

In the face of these contradictory terms, we must revert to historical facts which would support one or the other of the above assertions, and we find, that not only the Egyptian rulers, but also the Jewish kings since the time of Solomon, counted the beginning of the year of their accession from the month of

p. xx

Nissan, while other Eastern potentates, such as the Armenian and Chaldean kings, counted the commencement of their year of accession from Tishri.

It is not certain whether the Israelites, after their conquest of Canaan, computed their calendar in conformity with that of the country whence they came or with that of the country they had conquered; but it is plain that in the Mishnaic period, or after the erection of the second Temple, they counted the beginning of the year from Tishri. It may be, however, that their kings, following the example of their predecessors, commenced counting the year of their accession from Nissan, and in all civil contracts and state documents, according to the existing custom, used dates to agree with Nissan as the first month of the year.

On the other hand, the priestly tithes, during the days of the erection of the second Temple, were

payable in Elul (about August), which was considered the expiring season of the year, in order to prevent the confusion which might arise from mixing one year's tithes with those of the other. The priestly tithing of fruits was, however, delayed until Shebhat (about February), the time when the fruits had already matured on the trees, in order that the various tithes should not be confused and to prevent the priests and Levites from unduly interfering with the affairs of the people.

The prehistoric Mishna, which always formed the law, in conformity with the existing custom, and not *vice versa*, 1 found four different New Year's days in four different months, and, with the object in view of making the custom uniform in all Jewish communities, taught its adherents to observe four distinct New Year's days, at the beginning of the four respective months in which certain duties were accomplished. Thus the text of the opening Mishna of this tract, prior to its revision by Rabbi Jehudah Hanassi, read as follows: "There are four different New Year's days; viz., the first day of Nissan, the first of Elul, the first of Tishri, and the first of Shebbat." The different purposes for which these days were established as New Year's days were well known at that time, and it was therefore deemed unnecessary to specify them. At the time

p. xxi

of the new edition of the Mishna, by Rabbi Jehudah Hanassi (the Prince), when the Temple was out of existence, and consequently tithes were no more biblically obligatory (the authority of the priests having been abrogated and reverted to the house of David, the great-grand father of the editor), the latter referring to the first day of Nissan and the first day of Elul as New Year's days, added, by way of commentary, the words, "for kings and cattle-tithe."

He also cited the opinions of R. Eliezer and R. Simeon, that the New Year's Day for cattle-tithe should not be celebrated separately, but on the general New Year's Day; viz., on the first day of Tishri, as under the then existing circumstances there was no necessity to guard against the confusion of tithes accruing from one year to the other. From this it may be concluded that R. Jehudah Hanassi, in citing the above opinions, alluded to them as being in conformity with his own opinion. To that end he also cites the opinions of the schools of Shamai and Hillel respectively.

From the statement in the Mishna to the effect that "there are four periods in each year on which the world is judged," it appears that in the Mishnaic period the New Year's day was considered a day of repentance; and since the principal features of repentance are devotion to God and prayers for forgiveness of sin, Rabbi states, in the Mishna, that devotion is the only requirement during the days of penitence, *i.e.*, the days between New Year's Day and the Day of Atonement. The legend relating that on the New Year's day books (recording the future of each person) were opened was yet unknown in Rabbi's time.

The story told by R. Kruspedai in the name of R. Johanan, that "on New Year's Day books are opened," etc., is taken from the Boraitha which teaches: "Three books are opened on the day of judgment." This Boraitha, however, does not refer to the New Year's day, but to the day of final resurrection, as explained by Rashi, and that R. Kruspedai quotes his story in the name of R. Johanan proves nothing; for in many instances where teachers were desirous of adding weight to their opinions, they would quote some great teacher as their authority. R. Johanan himself permitted this method.

After Rabbi Jehudah Hanassi had completed the proper Mishnaic arrangement regarding the number of New Year's days,

p. xxii

making the principal one "the Day of Memorial" (the first of Tishri); after treating upon the laws governing the sounding of the cornet in an exceedingly brief manner-he dwells upon the custom in vogue at the Temple of covering the mouth of the cornet or horn with gold, and declares the duty of sounding the cornet properly discharged if a person passing by the house of worship can hear it.

He arranges the prayers accompanying this ceremony in a few words, and then dilates at great length upon the Mishnayoth treating of the lunar movements by which alone the Jews were guided in the arrangement of their calendar, upon the manner of receiving the testimony of witnesses, concerning the lunar movements, and upon the phases of the moon as used by Rabban Gamaliel. He then elaborates upon the tradition handed down to him from his ancestors (meaning thereby the undisputably correct regulations), and also upon the statutes ordained by R. Johanan ben Zakkai, enacting that the sages of each generation are the sole arbiters of all regulations and ordinances, and may themselves promulgate decrees even though the bases for such be not found in the Mosaic code.

He also confirms the right of the chief Beth Din (supreme court of law), but not of a lower Beth Din, of each respective period, alone to arrange the order of the holidays, on account of the already apparent discontent of the masses, who were bent upon taking the management of these subjects into their own hands.

Thus he dilates upon this feature with the minutest exactness and supports his assertions with the decision of his grandfather Rabban Gamaliel, as well as with the decisions of Rabbi Dosa ben Harkhinas and Rabbi Jehoshua, to the effect that each generation has only to look for guidance to the Beth Din existing in its own time, and that the opinion rendered by such a Beth Din is as binding and decisive as that of Moses, even though it appear to be erroneous.

Such are the contents of this tract, certainly most important from an historical and archaeological point of view. Proceed, then, and study!

Footnotes

[xx:1](#) Facts corroborating this statement will be found in our periodical *Bakay*, Vol. II., p. 20 *et seq.*

[Next: Synopsis of Subjects of Tract Rosh Hashana](#)