

## Questions for further discussion: Mishnah 1

Masekhet Rosh Hashanah, which focuses specifically on the holiday that is called “the beginning of the year” (a literal translation of Rosh Hashanah) begins by stating that there are four “beginnings of the year” (*rashei shanah*).

- a) Where does our Rosh Hashanah feature on this list? What do you make of that? Does it suggest that one of the beginnings of the year is more primary than the other? [See the “texts for further discussion” below for the famous debate about whether the world was created in Nisan or Tishrei. Think about the implications of this debate for how the rabbis imagined the world’s origins and its connections with the history of the Jewish people.]
- b) More broadly, what is the point of setting various different beginnings of the year? Is this purely functional (e.g. the academic year is set so that the summer months can be vacation months, various organizations set up their fiscal years according to what is most convenient for bookkeeping purposes, etc.)? Purely for legal/ *halakhic* purposes? Are there deeper philosophical or theological insights that can be derived from the various beginnings of the year?
- c) What does the concept of a new year mean to you? Does mishnah 1 accord with/ add to that meaning, come into tension with that meaning, or neutrally co-exist with that meaning?
- d) What do you make of the debate about whether the new year for counting animals for the animal tithes is on the first of Elul or the first of Tishrei? If the Tishrei position is correct, then there are only three new years as opposed to four. Does that matter? Does it matter more once you read the next mishnah?

## Questions for further discussion: Mishnah 2

In mishnah 2, we are told that the world is judged during four chapters of the year.

- a) Note the order in which the four chapters of judgment are listed. Does this privilege one beginning of the year over others? (This is a follow-up to (a) from the previous set of questions).
- b) Do these 4 chapters of judgment correspond with the four beginnings of the year of the previous mishnah? What do you make of this? What relationship, if any, do you think exists between judgment and new beginnings/ new years?
- c) Does the mishnah suggest any kind of deep connection between the idea of judgment and the time at which judgment takes place, or do these seem to be technical connections (legal, seasonal, etc.)? How might Rosh Hashanah stand out from the others in this respect?
- d) Rosh Hashana is the only period of judgment that is attested to by scriptural verse. What do you make of that? Are the other judgment periods somehow more obvious? If so, how?  
[Also, check out the chapter in Psalms in which the verse appears (in “texts for further discussion”) – what do you make of its use as a proof-text for the judgment period on Rosh Hashanah? Is this a convincing proof? If not, what else might be going on here?]

### Questions for further discussion: Mishnayot 3-5

Mishnah 3: This mishnah states that messengers are sent out to inform communities which day the new month was declared. As noted in footnote 4, this information allowed communities to celebrate important Jewish days on the proper calendar date.

- a) Note the 6 months (or possibly 7, when the Temple existed) – are any months noticeably absent? Can you speculate about why such months may not have been deemed important enough for messengers?
- b) There is an ambiguity in the mishnah about whether 6 or 7 months would have had messengers during the time of the Temple. Can you identify one particular month that would seem not to have belonged on this list when the Temple existed? What do you make of its inclusion? Is there a way to suggest that it was actually not included, according to the mishnah?
- c) Why do you think messengers for Rosh Hashana went out in Elul, rather than Tishrei? It might be helpful to know that Elul was almost always a 29-day month.

Mishnah 4: This mishnah states that Shabbat can be violated for two of the months – Nisan and Tishrei – but leaves ambiguous many of the details of *who* can violate Shabbat and in what ways.

- a) Who are the possible antecedents of “*they* may desecrate the Shabbat”? What are the possible ways in which you can imagine these people violate Shabbat in order to accomplish their task?  
[See mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:9 in “texts for further discussion” for some examples]
- b) Does this mishnah suggest anything about the competing values of properly celebrating Shabbat (without any Shabbat violations) and properly celebrating other special days (e.g. knowing the correct day of a holiday so that it may be celebrated properly)? Can you suggest any explanations for these (either technical or utilitarian considerations or broader more essential considerations)?
- c) The mishnah states that Shabbat could be violated for the sake of the new month even more times when the Temple still existed – every single month, in fact! Is there a reason why this might strike you as odd? What do we know about the relationship, in general, between Temple and Shabbat? What makes this particular desecration of Shabbat different? [See the sources on this topic in “texts for further discussion”]

Mishnah 5: This mishnah qualifies the position of the previous mishnah.

- a) What is the debate recorded in the mishnah? What is the difference between the *tanna kama*’s position and Rabbi Yosi’s position? What might account for each position? Can you apply an answer to question (b) under mishnah 4 to both positions in this mishnah?
- b) How might this mishnah shed light on the meaning of the previous mishnah – does it help narrow down the possibilities of antecedents to that mishnah? If so, how? And if not, why not?