

**December 29, 2017**

*This week's teaching is provided by Rabbi Chaya Bender.*

**Shabbat Shalom,**

**Rabbi Mitch**

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## **The Fifth New Year's**

By [Rabbi Chaya Bender](#)

*The Mishna recounts four Jewish New Year's: Rosh Hashanah, Tu B'shevat, the first of Nissan (the month of Passover) and the first of Elul (the month before Rosh Hashanah). So what do we do about the "fifth" New Year's, December 31st?*

When I was a junior in college, I spent my winter break on a service trip to Naharia, Israel. We spent the week painting the insides of bomb shelters, planting in community gardens and volunteering in after school supplementary programs for elementary school children. A few days after arriving was New Year's, and I was excited to spend the holiday in Israel.

Growing up, in my family, New Year's was always a special time. We ate miniature hot dogs, chips and dip, and drank Martinelli's sparkling apple cider as we watched the New Year come in around the world, and tried to stay up to watch the ball drop in Time's Square.

Since I was in Israel, I would be on the side of the world that brought in the New Year seven hours before my family back home.

My excitement was short-lived, however. Our trip guides informed us that New Year's wasn't really celebrated in Israel. Those who did celebrate, didn't celebrate to the extent Americans do. Israelis have even adapted the European name for the day—Sylvester—a reference to Saint Sylvester.

Saint Sylvester served as pope from 314 to 335 CE. During this time, he passed laws limiting the freedom of the Jews, including prohibiting them from living in Jerusalem and socializing with Christians. Later Pope Sylvester became canonized as a saint on the day of his death—December 31st. Centuries later, many European countries in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions honor the saint with a feast day and refer to it just by the Saint's name, Sylvester.

When Jews emigrated to Israel from Europe, the name Sylvester stuck. After all, in Israel, the predominant New Year is Rosh Hashanah. Still, the tension between secular and Jewish culture remains.

In Israel, New Year's isn't a national holiday. While some venues go out of their way to have a celebration, other venues continue with "business as usual." Of course, some businesses close down completely so as not to be associated with the holiday one way or another.

That night, I ended up ringing in the New Year with about four other volunteers while casually sipping coffee in one of the local coffee shops that happened to be open late on a weeknight. We were one of the only full tables and the cafe closed down shortly after we left.

A few years later, during my semester in Israel for Rabbinical School, my flight back to the States was on New Year's Day. I spent the night in Jerusalem where I had been living. My plan was to ring in the New Year with one toast and some snacks shared with my classmates before I went back to do a final packing. I needed to walk to the center of town to find a Makolet, corner store, that was open. I walked back to my apartment just after midnight. There

were no firecrackers, fireworks, fog horns or celebratory exchanges between strangers. In the airport taxi, I could just barely hear the radio personalities narrating in Hebrew as the ball dropped in New York City.

Spending New Year's in Israel reaffirmed the complicated relationship between American culture and Jewish tradition. Sylvester highlights this tension: If one celebrates New Year's, are they less likely to celebrate Rosh Hashanah? Are they agreeing with the policies of a long-deceased pope? If one doesn't celebrate Sylvester, are they doing so out of protest or just out of cultural indifference?

There can be a middle ground.

Both times I celebrated New Year's in Israel, I did so with a love of both American and Jewish tradition. Celebrating New Year's in Israel has given me an awareness of the roots of the holiday I might not have otherwise known and has led me to invent new traditions for a holiday I already enjoyed. In this way, my American and Jewish traditions work hand in hand to strengthen my connection to both.

While adding another ritual laden New Year's to the four original New Years' from the Mishnah, Rosh Hashanah, Tu B'shevat, the first of Nissan (the month of Passover), and the first of Elul (the month before Rosh Hashanah), would be over-kill, it is a great time for a check-in regarding any resolutions you might have made over the High Holidays.

I like to use New Year's as a check in rather than a time to make more vows I may or may not be able to keep:

- Did I make steps towards reconnecting with that friend?
- Did I carve out more time during the week for my family?

In that way, I use New Year's as an anchor-allowing reflective time to see if I am living up to the promises I made myself during the High Holidays as well as braving the store to buy the last bottles of Martinelli's sparkling apple cider.

For more ideas for how to mark New Year's through the lens of Jewish tradition, check out this resource from [My Jewish Learning](#).

Wishing the Temple Sholom Family a happy and healthy 2018 and 5778.