

The Jewish Calendar is rigged. It's a lunar calendar and so it should be fairly simple following the cycles of the moon, but actually its quite complex. For starters, the Jewish lunar calendar is synchronized with the solar calendar in order to insure that Passover is always celebrated in the spring. That was why we had a leap month this past March, prompting our very late High Holidays this year.

But that's just one example of the special arrangements in the calendar. Every once in a while someone asks me very worried about our use of a church for the High Holidays. What will we do, they ask, when the holidays fall on a Sunday?

Fortunately that's not something that can every happen either on Rosh Hashanah, which we celebrate for one day, or on Yom Kippur. This is because the calendar is rigged so that Yom Kippur can never fall on a Friday or a Sunday, as it would be impossible to move into Yom Kippur directly from Shabbat or from Shabbat into Yom Kippur.

Ben has already shared with us another special aspect of the calendar, that is the special Haftarah portions which are always read between Tisha B'av and Rosh Hashanah, with their message of consolation and encouragement.

But there is another way that the calendar is rigged, and that is that we always begin the book of Deuteronomy on the Shabbat before Tisha B'av, insuring that

for the seven weeks leading up to the High Holidays, the Torah readings are from this book. And Deuteronomy in its basic mood is the opposite of the later chapters of Isaiah, which are the Haftarah portions. Moses' retelling of the experiences of the Israelites in the wilderness is not an impartial, news-casters account. Rather, it is a story told with a very specific purpose. Moses' concern for the Israelites after his death, prompts him to a rather harsh review, focusing on all of the people's failings and sins, and full of warnings about the consequences of falling off the derech, falling off the path which he has laid out for them.

Even this week's Torah portion with its stirring call to pursue justice, also includes elements of tochecha, of rebuke. Moses is concerned about the Israelites potentially being led astray by a fellow Israelite who turns to the worship of idols. Moses warns the people that kings can be abusive and take the wealth of the nation for themselves. The punishment this parshah decrees for soothsayers and witches is extreme, and though we focus on the humane aspects of the rules of warfare laid out in this week's reading, there is also the proscription of the seven Canaanite nations lest they lure the Israelites into the worship of foreign gods. These are harsh words.

So why would we go out of our way to make sure we are reading these very critical readings from Deuteronomy while at the same time having set up a cycle of prophetic readings of the most optimistic sort?

To me the answer to this question comes in an understanding of the tasks of the month of Elul, the month that precedes the High Holidays and which we have entered last weekend. Elul asks that we take a very honest look at ourselves, acknowledging our failings and shortcomings. In that sense the tasks of this month seem more in tune with Moses' harsh words of rebuke.

Yet, we are taught that the Hebrew letters of the name of the month Elul stand for the words, *ani le dodi ve dodi li*, I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine. It is a month when we are to especially be aware of God's love and forgiving nature. And that seems much more in tune with the Haftarah readings.

Really looking honestly at our shortcomings is anxiety producing. Try it out—if you really focus on all your faults, your heart may start racing, or your palms sweating.

That's not fun. It is very tempting to choose instead to live in a state of denial.

Certainly when we are feeling attacked we are much less likely to be able to recognize and admit our own culpability for any mistake or mishap. If your boss or your teacher is criticizing you, all you want to do is find someone else to blame.

And yet if all the feedback we get is about how great we are, we are less likely to take that long hard look.

This month is about needing that necessary balance, needing both the Torah and Haftarah portions. A little push towards recognizing where we have fallen short, yet with the reassurance of support and understanding that reduces our anxiety enough so that we can look in the mirror without going into fight or flight.

May we each find the strength necessary for our work of repentance, secure in our tradition's insistence that if we take even a baby step in the right direction, the world itself will conspire to move the rest of the way.