

World of the Sages: Day or night - when do we start?

In Jewish tradition, each 24-hour period begins at sunset, hence the morning is really the middle of the day.

By LEVI COOPER

OCTOBER 2, 2007 07:01



The tractate Berachot opens with a discussion of the earliest and latest time for the recital of the evening Shema (M. Berachot 1:1). The Talmud immediately questions the context of this statement, wondering why the sages did not begin with the times for the morning Shema, which must be read earlier in the day (B. Berachot 2a). The Talmud explains the structure by citing two biblical verses. The first passage of Shema speaks of an obligation to teach children and speak of Torah when you lie down and when you get up (Deuteronomy 6:7). Thus the evening Shema recited before retiring precedes the morning Shema which is read upon waking in the morning. The Talmud continues with a more general verse that does not limit this order to Shema. At the end of each day in the biblical creation description, the phrase "and it was evening and it was morning" is used to signal the end of the day's work. Here too evening precedes morning and this validates the discussion first of the evening Shema and subsequently of the morning Shema (see M. Berachot 1:2). The night-before-day rule applies in a different context as well. The Torah tells us that it is forbidden to slaughter an animal and its offspring on the same day (Leviticus 22: 28). The term yom ehad (one day) is used in this context and in the creation story. Thus our sages conclude that the day follows the night for calculating the 24-hour period during which an animal and its offspring cannot be slaughtered together (M. Hullin 5:5). In Jewish tradition, each 24-hour period begins at sunset, hence the morning is really the middle of the day. Thus Shabbat begins in the evening, as do all the festivals. This order curiously sets us apart from non-Jewish dating systems and could be considered a defining feature of the Jewish calendar. However, it may not be so clear-cut that the night precedes the day in Jewish tradition. The very biblical verse quoted by the Talmud - "and it was evening and it was morning" - was read very differently by one of the medieval biblical commentators. The Frenchman Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir (c.1085-1158), known as Rashbam, followed in the footsteps of his illustrious grandfather, Rashi, authoring biblical and talmudic commentaries. His commentary on the Pentateuch stands out for its succinct style and its bold devotion

to the literal meaning of the text. As such, Rashbam made no attempt to align his comments with normative law. On a few occasions, his words blatantly contradict Halacha, though he viewed Jewish law as true and authoritative. Noticing that the biblical verse avoids using the term *layla* (night), Rashbam suggests that passage should be read "and the day set and it was dawn." Thus dawn concluded the day and the new day began at sunrise. Rashbam never suggested that this interpretation should affect Jewish law. Nevertheless, in an unrelated halachic realm - Temple service - the day precedes the night. Sacrificial leftovers from the day's service were burned on the altar in the evening and no new offerings were made. When sacrifices were to be eaten on the day they were offered, they could be consumed the entire night, the deadline being the next morning (see Leviticus 7:15). Thus when the sages were faced with someone who forgot the afternoon *Mincha* prayer, they questioned whether the supplicant could make up this lost prayer by reciting the evening prayer twice (B. Berachot 26a-b). At the root of the question is the source of the three daily prayer services. If the prayers replace the Temple service, then once evening has arrived and the day has passed, the prayer can no longer be offered. Alternatively, the afternoon prayer may be recited in the evening, just as the remainders of offerings were burned on the altar that evening. Even if the prayers are not modeled after the Temple rituals, the other possibility may also indicate that the day precedes the night. The Talmud records the opinion that the three daily services date back to our forefathers: Abraham established *Shaharit*, Isaac introduced *Mincha* and *Arvit* was the innovation of Jacob. Indicatively, our first forefather - Abraham - established the first prayer, that is, the morning *Shaharit* and not the evening prayer. Indeed, other biblical verses indicate that the day precedes the night. When Moses sat in judgment, he received people from the morning until the evening (Exodus 18:13-14). In the curses delineated at the end of the Torah, we are told that the situation will be so dire that in the morning you will say "when will evening come?" and in the evening you will say "when will morning come?" (Deuteronomy 28:67). In both these passages the day precedes the night. Thus we see that Jewish tradition offers two paradigms for the order of the day. The accepted Jewish view is that the night precedes the day, and this approach permeates Jewish life. Another view, however, exists whereby each calendar day begins in the morning. This view was reserved for the Temple. Why did our tradition not adopt the Temple model as the pervasive practice? This system would certainly fit our lifestyle - each morning we wake up to a new day. Why was the night-precedes-day paradigm preferred? We can suggest that our forebears sought to establish where we begin our day. Does the day begin gulping down a quick breakfast and racing off to earn a livelihood? When there is a holiday, do we start the day by oversleeping? Or perhaps the day should begin by coming home to the family and by sitting around the Shabbat table? By adopting the

night-before-day system, our sages convey a message about priorities: True we must work to support ourselves and our families, but employment is merely a means, not the goal. Our day really begins when we arrive home from work, when we sit and enjoy a festive atmosphere with loved ones. Thus the day starts in the evening, in the home, together with the family. *The writer is on the faculty of Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies and is a rabbi in Tzur Hadassah.*