

An Eighteenth Century Hebrew *Lu'ah* from Pennsylvania

Jonathan D. Sarna

Jewish religious life revolves around Jewish time — time measured according to the complex lunar-solar calendar of the Jewish people. One needs a Jewish calendar, or *lu'ah*, to know when Jewish holidays are to be celebrated, what time the Sabbath begins and ends, when to memorialize the dead, and even when to say morning and evening prayers. The first printed Jewish calendar in America appeared in 1806: Moses Lopez's *A Lunar Calendar, of the Festivals, and Other Days in the Year, Observed by the Israelites, Commencing Anno Mundi, 5566, and Ending in 5619, being a Period of 54 Years, Which by the Solar Computation of Times, Begins September 24th 1805, and will End the 28th of the Same Month, in the Year 1859* (Newport, 1806). Thereafter, they appear quite regularly.¹

Prior to 1806, Jewish calendars in North America were handwritten. Several are extant, including one written for Joseph Simon, the famous Lancaster, Pennsylvania, merchant.² Now another *lu'ah* has come to light, found in the private collection of Arnold and Dee Kaplan of Allentown, Pennsylvania. It is at once typical of traditional Jewish calendars written in German lands and also unique.

This handwritten *lu'ah*, several images from which are printed in the color insert found in the back of this volume, courtesy of the Kaplans, covers the year 5539 of the Hebrew calendar, corresponding to the year 1778–79. The author of the *lu'ah* was Abraham Eleazer Cohen, who identifies himself on the cover. The cover likewise mentions Philadelphia in large print, indicating that the *lu'ah* was written there. However, during the course of 1779, several prominent Jews fled Philadelphia for Lancaster, Pennsylvania, to escape the British occupation; the *lu'ah* may have traveled with them. This would explain why the cover also seems to mention Lancaster in small faded Hebrew print vertically on the left side. The fact that this *lu'ah* was produced in the midst of the American Revolution underscores the calendar's importance for the proper observance of Jewish religious life and makes this document particularly significant.

Cohen died in February 1785 in Philadelphia. He was a schoolmaster and the *shamash* (beadle) for Congregation Mikveh Israel of Philadelphia in 1783. During his tenure at Mikveh Israel, he offered to provide private Hebrew lessons, a sign of his superior Jewish education. In his will, he described himself as a “schoolmaster” and left fifty pounds to the synagogue.³

Cohen's *lu'ah* contains four lines of text on its inside cover that are written in another hand than the *lu'ah* itself. This Hebrew text, which is in a cursive script, may be translated as follows:

Rachel, wife of the master (*g'vir*)
Jacob, son of Joshua
Cohen, of Oppenheim⁴ (?)
For good deeds, Amen.

This would seem to be a dedication to the recipient of the *lu'ah*. Perhaps that recipient was Rachel Jacobs (Polack), the second wife of Jacob I. Cohen (known in Hebrew as Jacob son of Joshua.)⁵ If so, the dedication would have been composed no earlier than November 3, 1807, when that couple was married. Professor Elisheva Carlebach, who has examined hundreds of these calendars, reports that this is the first she has seen that is “clearly intended to be used by a woman.”⁶ Women needed calendars, among other reasons, to punctiliously observe the laws of *niddah* (menstrual purity).

Rabbi Mordechai and Caren Torczyner of Congregation Sons of Israel, Allentown, Pennsylvania, have analyzed this *lu'ah*⁷ and suggest that its author is a man of some learning who knows the laws of the Jewish calendar well.⁸ For example, the *lu'ah* takes into account the *tekufah*, the solstice, which marks the division of the seasons for the religious calendar. It also documents the *molad*, the time when the new moon is “born.” In the month of Heshvan (which usually falls in October–November), it gives this *molad* not only in hours and minutes but also with the traditional number of parts (*halakim*) of three and one-third seconds each (there are 1,080 *halakim* in an hour). The number provided, however, is erroneous, suggesting that this tradition had by then been lost (which may also explain why *halakim* are not supplied for other months). In addition, the *lu'ah* lists the weekly Torah portion (sometimes misspelled), the secular date that correlates with the Hebrew date, and of course, all Jewish holidays. While many a manuscript *lu'ah* from Germany also list selected Christian holidays, such as Christmas and some saints days — which affected business and sometimes drove Jews indoors — this one does not, implying that it was used exclusively for religious purposes.

The discovery of this *lu'ah* extends our understanding of the religious lives of early American Jews. It serves as a reminder that those pioneers, remote as they were from the European centers of Jewish life, nevertheless found ways, such as through handwritten Jewish calendars, to preserve Jewish time.

Dr. Jonathan D. Sarna, Joseph H. & Belle R. Braun Professor of American Jewish History in the Department of Near Eastern & Judaic Studies at Brandeis University, is one of America's foremost commentators on American Jewish history, religion, and life. Born in Philadelphia and raised in New York and Boston, he attended Brandeis University, the Boston Hebrew College, Merkaz HaRav Kook in Jerusalem, and Yale University, where he obtained his doctorate in 1979. Dr. Sarna has written, edited, or coedited more than twenty books. His most recent work is the acclaimed *American Judaism: A History*. Winner of the Jewish Book Council's "Jewish Book of the Year Award" in 2004, it has been praised as being "the single best description of American Judaism during its 350 years on American soil."

Notes

¹Robert Singerman, *Judaica Americana: A Bibliography of Publications to 1900*, New York: Greenwood, 1990, index s.v. "Calendar."

²The *lu'ah* prepared for Joseph Simon for 5537 (1776–1777) is found at the Center for Judaic Studies, University of Pennsylvania, ms. 59. My thanks to Professor Elisheva Carlebach for this reference and for other invaluable comments on the significance of the Kaplan's *lu'ah*. On Joseph Simon, see David Brener, *The Jews of Lancaster, Pennsylvania*, Lancaster: 1979, esp. 9–19.

³Edwin Wolf II and Maxwell Whiteman, *The History of the Jews of Philadelphia from Colonial Times to the Age of Jackson*, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1975, pp. 124, 141, 421 n136.

⁴Based on a reading of dalet, alef, peh, heh, which is a standard Hebrew abbreviation for Oppenheim. By the late eighteenth century, the Jewish community of Oppenheim numbered less than ten, but Jews with roots in Oppenheim often added "from Oppenheim" to their names. See S. Ashkenazi and D. Jarden, *Ozar Rashe Tevot*, Jerusalem: 1978, and "Oppenheim," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., 2007, 15:442–43. An alternate reading would be "leḥuppah" (lamed, het, vav, peh, heh), implying that the book is a wedding gift, but this woman is clearly described as "the wife of," which indicates that she is already married.

⁵On Cohen, see Jonathan D. Sarna, "Jacob I. Cohen," *Dictionary of Virginia Biography* 3, Richmond: Library of Virginia, 2006, 345–347.

⁶Elisheva Carlebach to Jonathan D. Sarna, May 14, 2007, copy at American Jewish Archives.

⁷A detailed analysis of the *lu'ah*, by the Torczyners, is available at the Marcus Center.

⁸For a survey of the laws of the calendar, see Ephraim J. Wiesenberg, "Calendar," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., 2007, 4: 354–58.