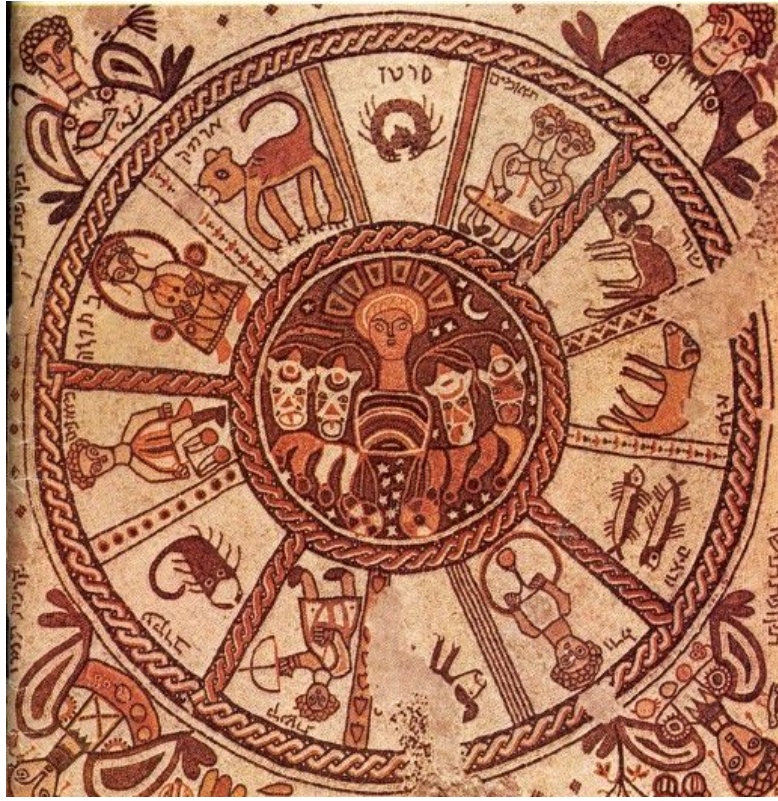


## Jewish Ways with Winter Solstice



A mosaic from a 6th century synagogue at Beth Alpha, Jezreel Valley, Northern Israel, discovered in 1928. Signs of the zodiac surround the central chariot of the Sun (a Greek motif), while the corners depict the 4 "turning points" (*tekufot*) of the year, solstices and equinoxes, each named for the month in which they occur - Tishrei, Tevet, Nisan, and Tamuz.

### Excerpt from Chapter 8, Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer

***Composed in Talmudic Israel/Babylon c.630-1030 CE, Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer (Chapters of Rabbi Eliezer) is a work of stories and explanations based on the Torah. The composition has enjoyed widespread circulation all the way to the present day.***

...The number of years, months, days, nights, terms, seasons, cycles, and intercalation were before the Holy One, blessed be He, and He intercalated the years and afterwards He delivered the (calculations) to the first man in the garden of Eden, as it is said, "*This is the calculation for the generations of Adam*" (Gen, 5:1), [...] Adam handed on the tradition to Enoch [...] And Enoch delivered the principle of intercalation to Noah, and he was initiated in the principle of intercalation, and he intercalated the year, as it is said, "*While the earth remaineth, seed-time and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter*" (Gen 8:22). "Seed-time" refers to the Tekufa of Tishri, "harvest" refers to the Tekufa of Nisan, "cold" refers to the Tekufa of Tevet, and "heat" refers to the Tekufa of Tammuz; "summer" is in its season and "winter" is in its season.

Or put more simply, the four Tekufot (*Hebrew: תְּקוּפֹת*, singular: *tekufah*, literally, "turn" or "cycle") mark the four seasons of the year as recognised by the Talmud. They are:

1. **Tekufat Nisan**, the vernal equinox, when the sun enters Aries; this is the beginning of spring, or "eit hazera" (seed-time), when day and night are equal.
2. **Tekufat Tammuz**, the summer solstice, when the sun enters Cancer; this is the summer season, or "et ha-katsir" (harvest-time), when the day is the longest in the year.
3. **Tekufat Tishrei**, the autumnal equinox, when the sun enters Libra, and autumn, or "et ha-batsir" (vintage-time), begins, and when the day again equals the night.
4. **Tekufat Tevet**, the winter solstice, when the sun enters Capricorn; this is the beginning of winter, or "et ha-ḥoref" (winter-time), when the night is the longest during the year.

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In your groups, take turns to listen to each other sharing about your *existing* relationship is with the turning points of the seasons, if any.

This *might* be ritualistic / spiritual, but it might simply be about your physical energy at different times of year due to the weather, or light, or certain activities you enjoy or avoid at different times of the year.

What might have been the significance of the Tekufot in the daily lives of ancient Israelites and medieval Jewish people?

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## Jewish Tekufot Tales and Customs

An ancient custom is connected with the tekufot: All water that may be in the house or stored away in vessels in the first hour of the tekufah is thrown away in the belief that the water is then poisoned, and if drunk would cause swelling of the body, sickness, and sometimes death.

The origin of the customs cannot be traced, but here are some writings from across the Jewish world, which suggests how seriously these practices were taken by many parts of the community.

- **Hai Gaon (939-1038, Pumbedita - modern day Fallujah, Iraq)**, in reply to a question as to the prevalence of this custom in the "West" (i.e., West of Babylon), said it was followed only in order that the new season might be begun with a supply of fresh, sweet water.
- **Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089–c.1167, Navarre, Spain)** ridicules the fear that the tekufah water will cause swelling, and ascribes the belief to the "gossip of old women" (ib.).
- **Hezekiah da Silva (1659–1698, Tuscany, Italy)** asserts that he knows of many people who fell ill and died from who drinking water when the tekufah occurred. Da Silva says the principal danger lies in the first tekufah (Nisan), and a special announcement of its occurrence was made by the beadle of the congregation (Peri Ḥadash, on Oraḥ Ḥayyim, 428, end).
- The danger may be avoided by putting in it a piece of iron or an iron vessel (Bet Yosef, **Joseph ben Ephraim Karo, 1488-1575, Spain-Safed**), Moses Isserles' (1532-1575, Krakow, Poland) note to Shulḥan Aruk, Oraḥ Ḥayyim, 455, 1; Be'er Hetev, to Yore De'a, 116, 5).
- **Yaakov ben Moshe Levi Moelin (1365-1427, Mainz, Germany)** required that a new iron nail should be lowered by means of a string into the water used for baking matzot during Tekufat Nisan (Sefer Maharil, p. 6b, ed. Warsaw).
- **David Abudirham, Sha'ar ha-Tekufot (14th century, Seville, Spain)** the action is to remove drops of blood in the water, based on what happened at these times of year:  
 At Tekufat Nisan, the waters in Egypt turned to blood at that particular moment.  
 At Tekufat Tammuz, Moses smote the rock and caused drops of blood to flow from it.  
 At Tekufat Tishrei the knife which Abraham held to slay Isaac dropped blood.  
 At Tekufat Tevet, Jephthah sacrificed his daughter

## The Thin Line Between Solstice & Chanukah Traditions

### **Yiftach's Daughter, the Forgotten Human Sacrifice (Judges, Chapter 11)**

*And it came to pass at the end of two months, that she returned unto her father, who did with her according to the vow which he had vowed; and she had not known man. And it was a custom in Israel, that the daughters of Israel went yearly to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in a year.*

Jephthah (or Yiftach) is an Israelite war chieftain who foolishly makes a vow that, if he wins a battle, he will sacrifice the first thing that comes from his door to greet him. It is his only daughter who comes to greet him, and, accusing her of being his *troubler*, he insists that he must sacrifice her. She asks for two months to be alone with her friends, and then returns to her father to be killed. No ram in a thicket or an angel saved her.

This truly is one of the darkest stories of the year, and it was traditional for many Medieval Jewish communities in Europe to connect this tale to the Winter Solstice.

### **Adam & the Winter Solstice**

**Avodah Zarah 8a, (excerpt) Composed Talmudic Babylon c.450 - 50 CE, Avodah Zarah (Foreign Worship) presents the laws of interactions between Jews and non-Jewish practices.**

These are the festivals of gentiles: [...] *Kalenda* is celebrated during the eight days after the winter solstice, and *Saturnalia* is celebrated during the eight days before the winter solstice. [...] With regard to the dates of these festivals, the Sages taught: When Adam the first man saw that the day was progressively diminishing, as the days become shorter from the autumnal equinox until the winter solstice, he did not yet know that this is a normal phenomenon, and therefore he said: Woe is me; perhaps because I sinned the world is becoming dark around me and will ultimately return to the primordial state of chaos and disorder. [...] He arose and spent eight days in fasting and in prayer. Once he saw that the season of Tevet, i.e., the winter solstice, had arrived, and saw that the day was progressively lengthening after the solstice, he said: Clearly, the days become shorter and then longer, and [...] He went and observed a festival for eight days. Upon the next year, he observed both these eight days on which he had fasted on the previous year, and these eight days of his celebration, as days of festivities. He, Adam, established these festivals for the sake of Heaven, but they, the gentiles of later generations, established them for the sake of idol worship.

### **Otzar haMidrashim, Hashem Bechachmah Yasad Aretz 6, Composed in (c.400 - c.1200 CE).**

**Encyclopedic work listing the various Midrashim, with a description of each.**

*God created in the sea big fish and little fish. The size of the biggest fish was one hundred parsangs, two hundred, three hundred, even four hundred. If it was not for God's merciful repair [tikkun], the big ones would have eaten the smaller ones. What repair did God make? God created the Leviathan.*

*On every winter tekufah, Leviathan would rear his head and make himself great and snort in the water and stir it up, and the fear of him would fall on all the fishes in the sea. If this were not so, the small could not stand before the great.*

In this tale, it is the winter solstice when the world returns to order. Leviathan, the great dragon who represents chaos, the unconscious and the primordial waters, rises and stirs up the water and makes everyone afraid. So too, in the depths of winter when trees are bare, nights are long, and the earth is cold, we feel as if the forces of evil will swallow us. It is Leviathan, the playmate of God, the embodiment of the ancient power of unbridled life, who comes to our rescue, roaring at those who are greedy and selfish that those who love and cherish life will triumph. (In Near Eastern mythology this character is called Tiamat, the goddess of the deep--in Hebrew the word becomes Tehomot, or ocean-depths).

**II Maccabees, 1:**

Since we are about to celebrate the purification of the Temple on the twenty-fifth day of the month of Kislev, we think it necessary to inform you [the Jews of the diaspora] so you too may observe this delayed Sukkot festival—also the festival of the kindling of the fire. For when our fathers were led into Persia [this is referring to the 1st Exile in 586 BCE, after the Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians], the priests that were then devout took the fire of the altar privily, and hid it in an hollow place of a pit without water, where they kept it sure, so that the place was unknown to all men. Now after many years, when it pleased God, Neemias [*Nehemiah, governor of Judea who was responsible for rebuilding Jerusalem in the 2nd Temple Period, 5th Century BCE*], being sent from the king of Persia, did send of the posterity of those priests that had hid it to the fire: but when they told us they found no fire, but thick [muddy] water; Then commanded he them to draw it up, and to bring it; and when the sacrifices were laid on, Neemias commanded the priests to sprinkle the wood and the things laid thereupon with the water. When this was done, and the time came that the sun shone, which afore was hid in the cloud, there was a great fire kindled, so that every man marvelled.

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**In your groups, discuss which stories of these stories you resonate with, which stories surprise you most, and which ones would you like to explore in more depth?**

**How do they connect with the Winter Solstice for you?**

**Are there other stories, or kinds of stories you might like to hear on Winter Solstice (religious or secular). Why those ones?**