

Legal-ease

A column devoted to researching commonly-held beliefs

What's the Truth about... "Mar Cheshvan"?

By Rabbi Ari Z. Zivotofsky, Ph.D.

Misconception: The complete and correct name for the month following Tishrei is Cheshvan, and it is a quaint tradition to call it Mar Cheshvan because it is bitter (Hebrew: *mar*) due to its lack of holidays.

Fact: The correct name for this fall month is the one word Marcheshvan/ M'rachshvan¹ (*Aruch Hashulchan, Even Ha'ezer* 126:17).

Background: The Bible usually refers to the months by their ordinal numbers, although occasional ancient Israelite names are also used.² The currently used Jewish names for the months were imported from *Bavel* (Babylonia),³ and many of them appear in post-exilic books of the Bible.⁴ Some of these are derived from the names of ancient gods, such as Tammuz which is thought to come from the Assyrian Du-mu-zu, an Egyptian god, and is mentioned as the name of an idol in Ezekiel (8:14).⁵

Marcheshvan is probably derived from its location in the calendar. In Akkadian (Babylonian/Assyrian), "w" (*vav*) and "m" (*mem*) sounds can interchange. As a result, Marcheshvan which is from the two words "m'rach" and "shvan," would have been "warh" and "shman," in Akkadian, corresponding to the Hebrew "*yerech shmini*," thus "eighth month."⁶ In the Yemenite tradition, the name of the month is pronounced Marachsha'wan, not Mar-cheshvan as in the Ashkenazic tradition, and this would

seem to preserve a greater fidelity to the original.⁷

Older sources attest to the name as being the longer name Marcheshvan/ M'rachshwan (as opposed to just Cheshvan). When the eighth month is mentioned in the Mishnah and Talmud, it is referred to as Marcheshvan. A few examples include: *Taanit* 1:3,4; *Pesachim* 94b; and *Rosh Hashanah* 7a; 11b. Throughout all of Rashi's Biblical and Talmudic commentary, he also refers to the month as Marcheshvan. A few examples are: *Rosh Hashanah* 11b, s.v. *v'azda l'tamahu*; 16a s.v. *D'miz'daran*; *Beitzah* 40a, s.v. *bir'vi'ah*. The Rambam⁸ and Ibn Ezra (commentary to *Leviticus* 25:9) also use the complete name.

This misconception has halachic implications. Since the mistaken practice of simply calling the month Cheshvan is so widespread, either Cheshvan or the two-word Mar Cheshvan is now acceptable, post-facto, if erroneously used in a legal document such as a *get* (*Aruch Hashulchan, Even Ha'ezer* 127:17). The Ramah (*Even Ha'ezer* 127:7) lists only Marcheshvan as the month's name and does not give the *halachah* if one wrote either just Cheshvan or the two-word Mar Cheshvan. Others even accept post-facto the Biblical name of the month, "Bul," if it was used in a document. The *Aruch Hashulchan* states that the *halachah* is the same for the imprecise "*Menachem Av*" (*Even Ha'ezer* 127:16).⁹

Surprisingly, there are even customs that developed around the error. The assumption is that it is called Mar

Cheshvan (the bitter Cheshvan) either due to its lack of holidays or because it is when Sarah the Matriarch died.¹⁰ Because of those negative associations, there are those who refrain from getting married in Marcheshvan (*Shut Lev Chaim* 2:26). The *Sdei Chemed* (*Ma'arechet Chaton v'Kallah* 23) claims that this was the *minhag* in Jerusalem. *Shulchan Ha'ezer* (4:5:8) writes that in his locale people are not concerned with this and get married in Cheshvan [sic].¹¹

The *Pri Chadash* (*Even Ha'ezer* 126:7) offers the only explanation that I have found for calling this month by the two-word name Mar Cheshvan. He suggests that the name Mar Cheshvan is based on the fact that it is the beginning of the rainy season. The Targum translated *mar* as *tipah*, a drop, in the verse "*Hen goyim knar midli*— Behold, the nations are as a drop of [water from] a bucket" (*Isaiah* 40:15). As such, the name means the "rainy Cheshvan," and far from *mar* meaning bitter, it connotes a month of blessed rain.¹²

The Bnei Yissaschar (2:56-57) relates a beautiful *midrash* about the future of Marcheshvan indicating that the dedication of the Third Temple will occur in Marcheshvan, removing any doubt about it being a bitter month. **JA**

Notes:

1. Despite the fact that the second pronunciation is probably more authentic, the first will be used most of the time in this article since it is the more common and familiar version.

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2. For example: *Aviv* (first month - Nissan) appears six times in the Pentateuch (*Ex.* 13:4, 34:18 [x2], *Deut.* 16:1 [x2]); *Ziv* (the second month - Iyar) is found in I Kings 6:1 and 6:37; *Yerech Etanim* (seventh month - Tishrei) is used in I Kings 8:2; and *Bul* (eighth month - Marcheshvan) is used in I Kings 6:38. There are homiletical Talmudic (e.g. *Rosh Hashanah* 11a) and Midrashic (*Yalkut Shimon* I Kings, Chapter 6, *remez* 184) explanations of these names (See also Radak and Rashi to I Kings 6:38 on *Bul*.) It may be that *aviv* is not a proper name, but simply a reference to the “spring month,” hence it is always *chodesh he-aviv* not *chodesh Aviv*.

3. According to the Jerusalem Talmud (*Rosh Hashanah* 1:2), three things were imported with the Jews who returned from Babylonia: the names of the months, the names of the angels, and the currently used script (*Ktav Ashuri* as opposed to the ancient *Ktav Ivr*).

4. Nissan (*Esther* 3:7; *Nehemiah* 2:1),

Sivan (*Esther* 8:9), Elul (*Nehemiah* 6:5), Kislev (*Zechariah* 7:1, *Nehemiah* 1:1), Tevet (*Esther* 2:16), Shevat (*Zechariah* 1:7), Adar (*Esther* 3:7). Each of these occurrences gives not only the name of the month, but its number, and every one corresponds to our current use of the name. Iyar, Tammuz, Av, Tishrei, and Marcheshvan are not found in the Bible. Some of these names are also found in the apocrypha and *Megillat Ta’anit*.

5. This is the only place in the Bible where the pagan deity Tammuz is mentioned. See Rashi and Radak on Ezekiel 8:14 for a discussion of the name and its meaning.

6. Similarly, in the Julian calendar, October means eighth month, which it was in the original calendar in which the first month of spring, March, was the first month.

7. Many in the Yemenite community lost the original meaning and have ascribed new meaning to it. They note that *marachsha’wan* means spreading or smoothing the grain. This is the final

agricultural process before the grain is stored. It is done in the eighth month before the rains start.

8. Zev Vilnay, *Matzeivot Kodesh B’Eretz Yisrael*, 3rd edition, 1985, cites from the letters of the Rambam about his trip to Israel in which he refers to Marcheshvan several times.

9. There are those who write just “Menachem” as the name of the month, even on legal documents. I have not seen a discussion of the validity of that custom.

10. *Esther Rabbah* 7:13 states that Sarah died in Marcheshvan, but no specific date within the month is given. Commenting on this *midrash*, the *Anaf Yosef* notes that there are many conflicting sources that give alternate dates for Sarah’s death, one of which is in Nissan, immediately following the *akeidah* (binding of Isaac).

11. See also *Shut B’tzel Hachochmah* 2:60 and *Binyamin Adler, Ha’nisuin K’hilchatum*, 5:56.

12. Rashi says it means a “bitter drop” in this verse.