

FEASTS & FASTS

Jonathan Fishburn on the tangled history of Jewish calendars

Don't throw away those free pocket Jewish calendars sent to you by various charitable organizations – your grandchildren might be able to cash in on them. Just recently, a Jamaican almanac from 1781 containing a *Kalendar of Months Sabbaths and Holy Days, the Hebrews or Jews observe & keep. For the Years 5541 and 5542 of the Creation* was sold for \$46,000 at auction in New York.

Interestingly, the first book published for the Jews of North America containing Hebrew type was not issued until almost four decades later and the first Hebrew calendar in America was not printed until 1851. In England from 1692 to 1699, Isaac Abendana, a scholar of Marrano origin, published a series of annual Jewish almanacs for Christian use

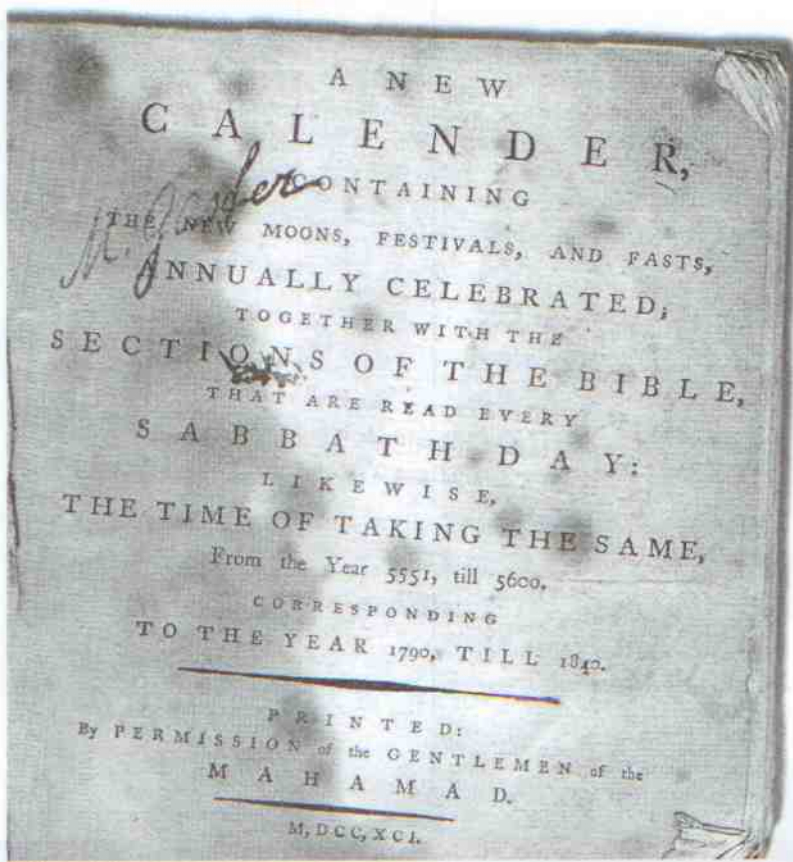
containing an account of their Feasts and Fasts, whether observed at present, or out of use, with their Sabbaths and Proper Season, To which is added an Account of our Publick [sic] Liturgy as at this day established amongst us.

The literary critic Ruth Wisse suggests that an almanac,

an occasional compendium of useful facts and statistics, demographic and calendrical data, and brief essays usually of an informational rather than an analytic or polemical kind – is both a proffered guide to, and an interesting reflection of, its time (*Commentary*, Vol. 71, No. 1: January 1981).

In the early 1900s, Avraham Leib Shalkovitz, better known by the pen name 'Ben Avigdor,' was part of a revolution in the writing and printing of modern Hebrew books in Russia. He helped to establish the Ahiasaf publishing house in Warsaw to consolidate this literary revival and they published the *Luah [Calendar] Ahiasaf*, which declared its intention of providing Jews with the kind of popular compendium that had long since been available to other Europeans, a 'carefully edited and tastefully designed anthology of fiction and fact that would please discriminating readers and benefit the Jews at large'.

I've accumulated about 200 calendars, and their diverse size, content, pictures, length, binding, advertisements, religious affiliation and editorial introduction interestingly reflect the historical context in which each was produced. For example, Shapiro Vallentine, one of the main publishers of calendars in England, changed their format over the years. During the 1870s and 1880s, they were small decorated hardback books, including dates as well as listings of charities, educational institutions and advertisements. By the 1930s and 1940s, the firm produced two types of calendars – a much smaller paperback pocket almanac, which only listed the



dates and a few ads for books, and a larger paperback that included synagogue listings and a wide range of advertisements.

The Sephardi community had its own almanac. I have a rare copy from 1790 with the ink stamp of Moses Gaster, the *Haham* (leader) of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue. In the early 1900s, Mr D. Cohen, a Hebrew and English bookseller of Whitechapel Road, East London, produced his own *Jewish Almanac and Communal Calendar* with an Introduction in Yiddish, while in Glasgow, L. Whiteberg produced a calendar edited by the Reverend Dr Tobias.

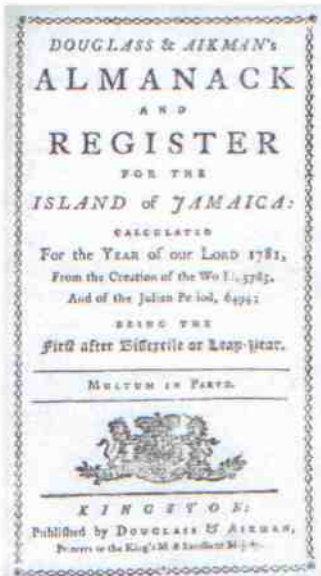
A hundred years later, the nature of Jewish calendars and yearbooks has been transformed. Valentine Mitchell produces the well-known *Jewish Year Book* in 400 hardback pages that include a calendar, essays, a Who's Who of world Jewry and the inevitable lists of Anglo-Jewish communal organizations and advertisements. In America, there are now so many choices, the ritual purchase of one's annual Jewish calendar makes a certain statement. Here's a taster: the current calendar produced

by the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute is entitled *Jewish + Female = Athlete: Portraits of Strength from around the World*. Images of female Jewish athletes adorn each month.

Shulamit Reinharz, the founding director of the Institute, explained that the calendar was an attempt to change the stereotypes surrounding the images of Jews – in both the Jewish and non-Jewish world. 'What's the typical image of a Jew?' she asked rhetorically. 'All too often, it's of a bearded older man praying or blowing the *shofar*.'

There are other men in Jewish calendars. Before she met me, my wife kept her favourite calendar hanging on the wall, even though the year had passed. Entitled *My Son the Doctor Calendar*, it featured a list of eligible Jewish men to accompany each month. When we married, she agreed to take it off the wall, but recently I found it while clearing out the house. 'How much could you get for this?' she asked wistfully. ❧

Jonathan Fishburn is an antiquarian bookseller specializing in Judaica (www.fishburnbooks.com). His latest catalogue has 1,000 items relating to Zionism.



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