

# Sylvester Night is not a holiday

Rochel Sylvetsky

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Israelis, who blithely call the eve of January 1st “Sylvester<sup>1</sup>”, and Jews who celebrate “New Year’s Eve” as the civil year is ushered in, may not be aware of its tragic significance in Jewish history.

*Rochel Sylvetsky is Senior Consultant and op-ed and Judaism editor of Arutz Sheva’s English site. She is a former Chairperson of Emunah Israel, 1991–96, was CEO/Director of Kfar Hanoar Hadati Youth Village, member of the Emek Zevulun Regional Council and the Religious Education Council of Israel’s Education Ministry as well as managing editor of Arutz Sheva (2008–2013). Her degrees are in Mathematics and Jewish Education.*

Israelis call the night that ushers in the civil new year “Sylvester”. This is the name commonly used in German speaking countries as well as in Poland instead of “New Year’s Eve”, so that it is probably safe to assume that the Catholic name took hold due to early waves of European immigration to Israel.

Growing up in my parents’ home in the immigrant neighborhood of the lower East Side of New York, “Sylvester Nacht” was something akin to the night Niagara Falls froze over and the resultant eerie silence awakened people for miles around. Our house was silent on that night and not because of the carol by that name.

My father’s alarm clock woke us at 4 a.m. every day. He rose at that unearthly hour to sit in the kitchen with a faint light glowing and a cup of hot, strong black coffee in front of him studying Talmud to the traditional singsong chant before he went to synagogue prayers (*shacharit*) and then work (we snuggled happily under the covers, knowing that he would bring fresh, crusty rolls home first). My father, who came home from work every evening, went to synagogue for *maariv* prayers, had his dinner, and then sat bent over his Talmud until almost midnight—did not study Torah on “Sylvester” night.

He did not allow us to study Torah either. He explained that this was a silent night, made so by the Eastern European Jews who lived in fear of the yearly pogroms that accompanied the ushering in of the what is the civil new year today. This evening was, once the calendar settled on December 25th as Christmas, calculated to be the night preceding the circumcision of the child born in the “little town of Bethlehem”, therefore a call for the local peasants to engage in drinking, making merry and killing Jews.

Darkness along with the silence before a storm reigned in Jewish shtetls (small villages) that night in an attempt to make it harder to find defenseless victims, barricaded behind the flimsy doors of their huts. Torah study, which was done by the light of candles, was thus impossible.

As opposed to random pogroms and other manifestations of Jew hatred, this was a predictable yearly date.

Torah study that night eventually became forbidden, in memory of the horrors perpetrated on that evening, the same way Torah study is prohibited in a house of mourning and on the Ninth of Av when the Holy Temple was destroyed. Certain Hassidic sects, among them Satmar, refrain from Torah study on the eve of January 6 for the same reason to this day, a vestige of the fluctuations in the Gregorian Calendar.

A “Yerushalmi”, i.e. someone who lived in the Old City of Jerusalem before the State of Israel was declared, once told me that in this part of the world they would barricade their doors on Easter Sunday, knowing that the traditional Christian procession would often end in rioting against the local Jews. Communal Jewish history is made up of commandments, holidays and customs, but also of this type of memory.

It is jarring to hear the term “Sylvester” used casually by the media in Israel and to see the advertisements in Hebrew newspapers and on internet sites for parties and gala celebrations that usher in the civil new year on “Sylvester Nacht”.

Sylvester was Pope from January 31, 314 C.E. to December 31, 335 C.E. His Saint’s Day is the day he was buried, and it falls on December 31 of every year, that is since the civil solar calendar was straightened out (the Jewish calendar is a lunar one).

Not much is really known about him, but he presided over the Catholic Church during an important period in its history. He is thought to have been instrumental in the process that led to the Emperor Constantine’s conversion to Christianity, certainly nothing to celebrate for Jews.

Subsequent Jewish history did not turn this day into one that should be celebrated by Jews. An historical overview of New Year’s Day from a back issue of *News and World Report* makes me almost wonder if the writer spoke to my late father before writing his article. It reads:

On New Years Day 1577 Pope Gregory XIII decreed that all Roman Jews, under pain of death, must listen attentively to the compulsory Catholic conversion sermon given in Roman synagogues after Friday night services. On New Years Day 1578 Gregory signed into law a tax forcing Jews to pay for the support of a ‘House of Conversion’ to convert Jews to

<sup>1</sup> The correct spelling is of course “Silvester”. *Silva* and *Silvester* (woodsman) are Latin words and there is no “y” in the Roman alphabet. [FAB]

Christianity. On New Years 1581 Gregory ordered his troops to confiscate all sacred literature from the Roman Jewish community. Thousands of Jews were murdered in the campaign.

Throughout the medieval and post-medieval periods, January 1 – supposedly the day on which Jesus' circumcision initiated the reign of Christianity and the death of Judaism – was reserved for anti-Jewish activities: synagogue and book burnings, public tortures, and simple murder.

The Israeli term for New Year's night celebrations, Sylvester, was the name of the 'Saint' and Roman Pope who reigned during the Council of Nicaea (325 C.E.). The year before the Council of Nicaea convened, Sylvester is said to have convinced Constantine to prohibit Jews from living in Jerusalem.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/Articles/Article.aspx/21485>

At the Council of Nicaea, Sylvester arranged for the passage of a host of viciously anti-Semitic legislation. All Catholic Saints' are awarded a day on which Christians celebrate and pay tribute to that Saint's memory. December 31 is Saint Sylvester Day – hence celebrations on the night of December 31 are dedicated to Sylvester's memory.

Unwittingly, Israelis who party and Jews who stand in Times Square and celebrate in other places in the world watching the civil year come in, are doing the same. I preferred the silence in my childhood home.

*(Note: The eve of December 25th, Nittel Nacht, is also a night traditionally without Torah study, but since Jews have no temptation to celebrate that night and this article is intended to explain why the eve of December 31 is no time to attend parties, it is not discussed here.)*

Source: Arutz Sheva, 2017-12-31<sup>2</sup>