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

Rachel, wife of the master (gʿvir)  
Jacob son of Joshua  
Cohen, of Oppenheim (?)  
For good deeds, Amen.

This would seem to be a dedication to the recipient of the luʿah. Perhaps that recipient was Rachel Jacobs (Polack), the second wife of Jacob I. Cohen (known in Hebrew as Jacob son of Joshua). 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.” 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 luʿah and suggest that its author is a man of some learning, who knows the laws of the Jewish calendar well. For example, the luʿah 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 Ḥeshvan (which usually falls in October–November), it gives this molad not only in hours and minutes, but also with the traditional number of parts (ḥalakim) of three and one-third seconds each (there are 1,080 ḥalakim in an hour). The number provided, however, is erroneous, suggesting that this tradition had by then been lost (which may also explain why ḥalakim are not supplied for other months). In addition, the luʿah 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 luʿah from Germany also lists 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 luʿah 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.
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Notes
2 The 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 Kaplans’ lu’ah. On Joseph Simon, see David Brener, The Jews of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, Lancaster: 1979, esp. 9–19.
4 Based 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 “lehuppaḥ” (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.
6 Elisheva Carlebach to Jonathan D. Sarna (May 14, 2007), copy at American Jewish Archives.
7 A detailed analysis of the lu’ah, by the Torczyners, is available at the Marcus Center.