



# The Border That Stole 500 Birthdays



**One day in winter 2012, Samoa skipped Friday and jumped straight from Thursday into Saturday. This revived a burning question: Which day are Jews in the region supposed to keep as Shabbos?**

When a tiny nation in the Pacific Ocean decided to skip one calendar day for economic reasons, it ruined 500 people's birthday parties. For Jews, it reawakened an old debate about the International Date Line, an arbitrary line whose two sides observe different days for Shabbos, Yom Kippur, etc. What is the International Date Line? How did it come about? Why would the Samoans care enough about it to skip a day in their calendar? These are some of the intriguing questions surrounding the fascinating story of this almost invisible dot on the world map.

A bizarre occurrence took place on Thursday, December 29, 2011, in the South Pacific nation of Samoa. The residents went to sleep that night on Thursday and woke up the next morning to Saturday, December 31. The day between, Friday, December 30, 2011 never arrived to Samoa.

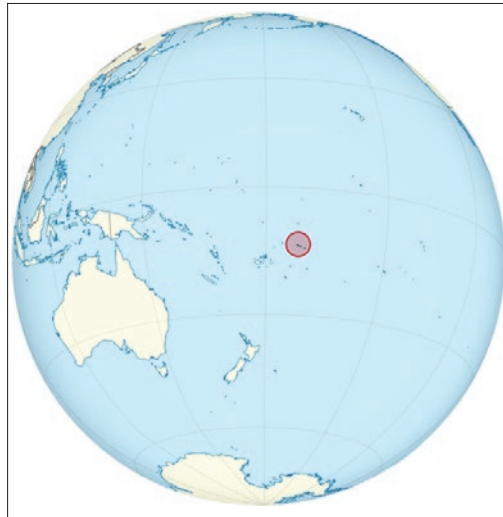
It's not that Samoans got drunk celebrating New Year's a night too early and overslept the next day. They actually skipped a calendar day. This was done by redrawing the International Date Line to the other side of the island. Instead of being the last country in the world to greet the new year, they became the first.

All it took was a bit of ink from the prime minister's pen on the document that the Samoan parliament sent to his desk a few months earlier, and the birthday parties of an estimated 500 Samoans were wiped out. (Samoa is home to approximately 180,000 residents. When dividing the population among the 365 days of the year, that results in a statistical average of 500 people having been born on any given calendar day.)

How does a country just go ahead and erase a day from its calendar? And where does that place Samoa in relation to the rest of the world—ahead or behind? The answer is that Samoa is located along the International Date Line, where when on one side it's Sunday, on the other side it's Monday. Of course, no actual line exists—except on maps. Countries in and around that line are free to decide which side of the line they want to be on. Any country in the region can technically redraw the line whenever it wishes.

For 119 years, Samoa had been on the eastern side of the line. For economic reasons, though, the island nation found it expedient to align itself with the countries on the west side of the International Date Line. In doing so, Samoa cut to the head of the line, so to speak. It is now the first country to greet each new day, whereas previously it was the last.

The jump from Thursday to Saturday was welcomed enthusiastically by island residents. On Thursday evening,



The small island nation that decided to switch.

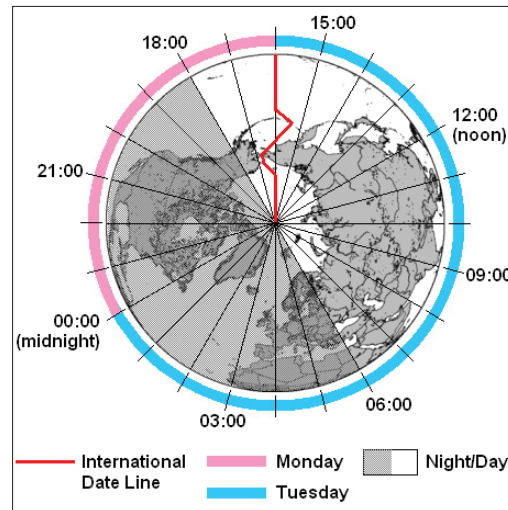


Diagram of the International Date Line showing where the new day begins.

thousands of Samoans gathered around the central clock tower in the capital city, Apia, to celebrate the historic day. (Or maybe the lack of one?) They cheered and applauded when the clock struck 12. Dozens of sirens went off and firecrackers lit up the skies. Drivers drove around the tower and honked.

If there were any Jews in Samoa that weekend, they would have faced an unusual dilemma. Imagine: a *Shabbos* arriving without an *erev Shabbos* to prepare.

Samoa lies in a part of the world where there is tremendous dispute among the

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