Festivals of the Jewish Calendar

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The Jewish part of a two-part contribution. See also the Christian part.

Festivals of the Jewish Calendar

We are the Jews. We love to get together with our friends and family for celebrations, a Bar Mitzvah, the New Year, a discussion on philosophy, or a day of fasting. Our forefathers have supplied us with a range of festivals and fasts to suit all tastes, some marked as parties, others as times for mourning, but mostly dated to mark some historical event. Because their origins are so far back, precise dating of the chosen days is sometimes difficult. One of my sources is a book named The Jewish Festivals, first published in Yiddish in 1933. The other is my own studies of the Torah (the Five Books of Moses) and other texts.

The Sabbath claims priority and then, in order of their coming in the calendar, we may consider seven other memorable dates: Pesach (Passover), Shavuot (Feast of Weeks), Rosh Hashanah (New Year), Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), and Sukkot (Festival of Booths, or of Harvest), plus the lesser festivals of Chanukkah (Festival of Lights), and Purim (Feast of Esther). Some still lesser ones are not included here, such as the New Moon, the Fast of Tisha B"Av, (mouming for the destroyed temples of ancient days), and Lag B"omer, (Scholars" Feast). All services show local variations, built up during perhaps centuries spent in Russia, or North Africa, or southern Germany, etc.

The arrival of almost any festival, just like the arrival of the first fruit for the season, or even a new suit, is greeted with one special blessing which we may translate as, "Thank You, God, for keeping us alive and healthy and allowing us to enjoy this season." No matter how long the service, or how heavy the prayer-book, most Jewish rituals for these occasions are saying, in a rambling fashion, "Thank You, God," or "You are wonderful and kind," or "We remember when You preserved us from some troubles," or maybe, "We shall try to remember what You have taught us."

The Sabbath

Origins

The Sabbath probably had its origin about the time of the Exodus from Egypt, when the rootless unorganised Hebrew people first heard of the Ten Commandments. It was impressed on us as children as the most important of the festivals. As with all Hebrew dates, the Sabbath begins in the evening, as the days are described in the Genesis story of creation, "*And it was evening and it was morning, the first day,"* etc. This celebration is a combination of a mark at the end of every seven-day week plus a periodical day of rest, and is marked by religious activities.

The seven-day unit may have come from an ancient belief in seven as a lucky number, together

with a memory that the people of Mesopotamia (now Iraq) marked in their business life the quarter of a lunar month, a spell of approximately seven days. Possibly our ancestor Moses, desperate to obtain a little relief for the hard-pressed slaves of ancient Egypt, devised the day of rest. He mixed it with the idea of periodic worship of the special Deity, which he regarded as the real ruler of the Hebrew people. The idea of the seven-day spell and the weekly day of rest has spread from the ancient Hebrews to the Christians and the Moslems in the modern world. Of all the great religions of today, I believe that only these three have this special weekly day. In the days when many people really could not count, the counting of the seven days may have been done by daily lighting one more candle on the seven-branched candelabra which was in the first great Temple in Jerusalem.

The religious rituals of the Sabbath are as follows:

Synagogues have a short public service near sunset on Friday, but this is secondary to the family service at home. At the evening meal, with a pair of candles, wine is served, and usually two loaves of bread, all on a clean white cloth. The woman of the house hides her eyes while she lights the candles and utters a blessing. Covering her eyes may be an indication that these lights are for celebration, not to illuminate the room. The two loaves may represent the double quantity of manna which the Hebrews gathered in the wilderness of Sinai on the day before the Sabbath, so that they need not go out and gather on the day of rest. The clean cloth, the candles, the best possible food — all mark the day. In Poland, before World War II, millions of Jews lived in the dreadful poverty of the Shtetl (a small village). They had very little food, few candles, and little that was clean. All the best was often saved for the Sabbath eve meal.

The opening blessing of the Sabbath eve may be translated as, "Thank You, o Lord our God, King of the universe, Who sanctifies us with His commandments and commands us to kindle the Sabbath lights." Two other blessings follow, one for the wine, the other for the bread (or maybe for the food in general).

The heart of Jewish prayers is always a mixture of thanks and praise for the Author of all blessings. After the meal, there are more blessings, songs of praise and chanting of passages from the Psalms. The leader may be any male, but usually is the father of the family. In accordance with a command in the Torah, the Jews are held to be a nation of priests, so that any adult male may give any religious service. In modern progressive congregations, the woman also may conduct any service, but orthodox Jews do not permit this.

The major rituals of the week take place on the Saturday morning. Amongst the prescribed prayers, a portion of the Torah is read aloud to the congregation, followed by a portion of the later books of the Bible. At this service, the men all cover their heads and wear a fringed shawl, called a tallit. In the more orthodox congregations, all the work and the chanting are done by men, but women take their place with the more progressive modern assemblies. The head-coverings and the Biblical readings can be largely traced, apparently, to the days when Ezra led the exiles back from Babylon to Jerusalem about 600 years before the Common Era.

"Work" is forbidden on this day, but there is no clear definition of what is work. Some forbid the carrying of money, or the spending of it, or the riding in a vehicle. Others try to exclude the daily grind of existence and earning one’s living. Talking with the family, visiting relatives, study of the Bible — all these are suitable for the sacred day. Some Jews will happily play games or write letters, while others may see such activities as contrary to the spirit of the day. It is certainly intended to be a break in the daily toil.

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The Passover

Just the Hebrew name, Pesach, conjures up a mass of childhood memories. Mother is telling my father that, if she doesn"t get the *Matzos* in soon, the local store will run out of them and she will have to go to town to buy them. Matzo is the Hebrew name for the unleavened bread which is used instead of normal bread for the whole seven days (eight days for some, as you shall see). The Matzo is a large plain water biscuit and contains nothing but flour and water. It has no flavour, but we find many tasty things to spread on it, so Pesach is a time for special worries about putting on weight. I can smell the cinnamon in the (non-alcoholic) wine mother made and the rich aromas of the almond and coconut used instead of wheaten flour in some Pesach biscuits. The most important annual festival of the Jewish year begins with this evening meal. We children were allowed to sit up late to hear father and uncle Joe racing each other through the ancient melodies of the Seder evening that ushers in the seven days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

What an astonishing complex unravels at this time of each year! It is so important that, starting with Exodus Chapter 12, the Passover is mentioned twenty-two times in the five books of the Torah. Its earliest origin was the pagan festival to Eastre, the Spring goddess, long before there were either Christians or Jews on the earth. That may have fixed the date for a party. Then there was the historical beginning, the great Exodus, when the Hebrew slaves were led out of Egypt about 3,000 years ago. The third origin is one that I believe crept into the festival because it was done at this time of the year as a sort of Spring cleaning (in the northern hemisphere). This is the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when we eat no leaven (yeast) for seven days, and it may record setting up clean yeast cultures for making bread over the ensuing year. Grafted onto this custom is a story that, when the slaves escaped, they were in so great a hurry that there was no time for them to leaven their bread. They put the flour and water mixture into sacks on their backs and the sun baked it into unleavened cakes as they walked. Fortunately, we moderns don"t mind a few fairy-tales mixed into our religious celebrations so we refrain from mentioning that the escape is said to have been in the middle of the night.

Then there is the fourth origin of the Passover, which is stressed more in modern times. Ever since humankind began to try to eradicate slavery, Jews have proclaimed at the Seder that it is time that all peoples were free and slavery wiped out. In the service of the great Seder feast, there appears a plea from long before the State of Israel was founded that we might celebrate "Next Year in Jerusalem." Nowadays, some of us prefer: "Next Year May All Humankind Be Free…"

For this reason, we are told that all of us must lean at the table during this feast, to show we are free and not constrained nor under orders. During the service, the tale is told of the sacrifice of the Paschal Lamb, illustrated, on the table by the scorched shank bone of a lamb. Historians ascribe this to the pre-Exodus days of the shepherd people, marking the season of the birth of new lambs with a feast at which a whole lamb had to be consumed, roasted whole and with all its bones unbroken. None of the meat was to last past that first night. Some of us consider that Moses initiated this tradition as an important part of the preparation for the Exodus, but that is a story for another place.

The tale of the Exodus is told and there are discussions of what some learned scholars had to say about the plagues and how Moses argued with the Pharaoh.

For some, the feast may continue until midnight, with much merriment and the telling of childhood memories of the same time in years long past and the singing of the many verses of the ancient chants, some of which are nursery rhymes. Some Jews keep the first two nights of the Passover as Seder feasts. The reason for this duplication lies in the scattering of the Israelite people over the world. We want to be sure that our celebration will coincide with that in Jerusalem. To ensure the overlap of the times, some keep two first days, as many Jews do with New Year also. For many,

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this extra day makes the festival of the Passover last for eight days instead of the prescribed seven.

The rest of the week of the festival is an anti-climax, eased somewhat for those who keep both of the first two nights as Seder feasts. We took matzo sandwiches to school for lunch and many of us recall how we always had to take extra, because so many of the non-Jewish children wanted to share in our special lunches. Like so many others, I mark the years of my life by where I was for Seder.

The most memorable ones are the wonderful feasts and exciting times of childhood. Like Christmas for the Christians and Anzac Day for the Australians, so is Passover for the Jews. It is celebrated by many, who have long ago lost their other ties to things religious.

Shavuot

Seven weeks after the first day of Passover comes Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks. It is said to mark the occasion when the ex-slaves from Egypt, under the leadership of Moses, received the Ten Commandments. When these were received, it is hard to know how the Jews could have recognised their importance, and so kept them recorded. They have formed the basis of legal, moral and ethical behaviour for so many different peoples. Maybe this relatively minor festival should be spread to many nations, as a major occasion for joy and hope.

Many ceremonies have sprung up around the original simple occasion. Marking the harvesting aspect of Shavuot, we read the Book of Ruth, a romantic novel of doubtful historic veracity, with a strong moral lesson of sharing any harvest we collect with those who are poor and deprived around us. It has also been made, in some places, as a time for a competition as to which housewife can make the best cheesecake and she entertains her friends with cheese blintzes (a sort of baked crust around cheese filling).

The special honour of the Bar Mitzvah (social and religious maturation) was solely for the males until modern times, when Shavuot was taken over as an occasion for a group of girls to be given a somewhat superficial equivalent, at about 12 years of age. This still holds, though the progressive congregations have replaced it with a full Bat Mitzvah, a genuine copy of the boys" celebration. Where tradition excludes the girls, the Shavuot substitute is called a "confirmation."

Rosh Hashanah

The next occasion in the year is what is now called Rosh Hashanah, or New Year, though these terms do not appear in the Torah, where this festival on the first day of the month Tishri is mentioned. This one and the next two, Yom Kippur and Succot, may be segments of a very ancient autumn festival, now cut into a New Year of solemnity and importance, followed by Ten Days of Awe, an awe-filled Day of Repentance, and then an undiluted rejoicing over the fruit harvest. It is typical of Jewish rituals that the elements of joy are mixed with awe, while dancing and wine mingle with tragic memories and mourning. There is a special service of Selichot (supplications) preceding the New Year. Many congregations mark this by holding the special service at midnight at the end of the Sabbath preceding Rosh Hashanah.

The eve of Rosh Hashanah was, in my youth, a happy party, when every member of the family and every guest at the table gave some small gift to each other person present. As on the normal Friday evening, the synagogue service is short and I remember holding my father"s hand as I hurried home to see the table lit with candles and bright with the wrappings of the gifts. There was spice in the wine and pieces of apple to be dipped in honey, to remind us to be sure to have a happy and a sweet time in the year ahead. The next morning, usually in new clothes, we headed

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for synagogue where we greeted friends with one of the blessings of "Happy New Year", or "Good Yom Tov" (Good Festival) or, at a somewhat more sophisticated stage, "G"Ma Tov" (something like Happy Festival). Again, many Jews keep two days of the New Year, for reasons given above.

Yom Kippur

During the Ten Days of Awe, which include and follow Rosh Hashanah, one is not supposed to have parties. One prepares for the peak of solemnity, the time marked by more Jews than observe any other day of the ritual year. The day is called Yom Kippur, or Day of Atonement, the great fast day. It is said that maybe ten per cent of Jews attend service oni”abbath, twenty-five per cent attend on the Sabbath which marks the anniversary of the death of a parent, thirty per cent go on New Year’s Day, forty per cent on the Day of Atonement, and sixty percent on the eve of Yom Kippur, the Kol Nidre Service. Amongst Conservative families, the women generally attend only day- time Services, except for Kol Nidre — the only evening service at which the women generally are present. In Progressive congregations, women share in all services.

So heavily is the Kol Nidre attended that every available seat in the synagogue is taken and the Health Department, or maybe the Fire Department, will forbid standing in the aisles. Again, I hark back to childhood for the feeling of the great days. Kol Nidre is full of anticipation and there is a feeling of awe, as the building darkens during the evening. In an Orthodox congregation, the lights have to be switched on before the service begins and I recall vividly how the windows darkened, accompanied by the impressive music and chanting, long before I could work out what the word Atonement might mean.

From the age of thirteen, we boys fasted on Yom Kippur. For twenty-four hours we had nothing to eat or drink (nor to smoke, in our young manhood days). From about ten years old, we could fast until lunch and we looked forward eagerly to being grown up enough to fast the full day. Amongst other parts of the rituals, we hear quotes from Deuteronomy which plead for kindness to others, honesty in business, and taking responsibility for one"s own actions. We read the book of Jonah, with its strange mixture of allegory and reality, of the need to take responsibility and the need for forgiving the weaknesses of others. The one element, which is invariably stressed, is that one cannot look to God for forgiveness for a wrong one has done to another person. Remorse, restitution, and a plea for forgiveness between persons has to come first. At the end of the day, a prolonged call on the ram"s horn is sounded.

Succot

With relief, immediately after Yom Kippur, the congregation turns to the lightness and happy music of the decorated booth of the Succah. Succot marks the harvesting of the fruit. It is traditional that, if possible, a working party will start building the decorations on the day after the Day of Atonement. This celebration lasts for a week during which many families have meals in the booth, a shelter built with green branches in its own back-yard. The framework may stand always, the shelter of palm fronds and strings of bright fruits being added for the festival.

Simchat Torah

At the end of the seven days of Succot comes the Rejoicing of the Law. This is specially marked by the public reading of the conclusion of Deuteronomy from one scroll and the reading of the first piece of Genesis from another scroll. All the scrolls available are held in the arms of men (men and women in Progressive congregations) as they march around the inside of the Synagogue, with songs and general rejoicing. The last of Deuteronomy has been read on the preceding Sabbath and the first of Genesis will be read again the next Sabbath as the restart of the yearlong readings.

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After the excitement of the month of Tishri, with Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Succot, and Simchat Torah, the rest of the calendar year is fairly dull. There are two other items, however, worthy of some note, Chanukah and Purim.

Chanukah

Chanukah is an almost purely historical occasion. The theme is the war in which the little Hebrew nation, led by one family of heroes, threw off the yoke of the wicked and warlike polytheistic Greeks, a David and Goliath story. The theme song, and the tune to which many traditional songs are adapted on this day, is the (alleged) marching song of the Maccabees, the Maoz Tsur. We might call this the Jewish equivalent of the Marseillaise, a stirring song, with a wonderful marching rhythm for its basic melody.

During the fourth century B.C.E., the country of the Hebrews was conquered by the Greeks, who took over from the Persians, who had allowed the locals to practice their own religion and politics. When a decree was issued demanding that the Jews, like all the conquered nations, were to worship the Greek gods, there slowly arose a rebellion. Eventually, Judah Maccabeus led a successful revolt and the kingdom of the land of Judah became, for a brief century, an independent people. The story arose that, when the Maccabeans re-conquered Jerusalem and cleaned out the Temple, there was only enough clean olive oil to keep the Eternal Lamp going for one day. Eight days were required for obtaining more supplies. However, they lit the lamp and the small amount of oil lasted for a miraculous eight days. So we have a nine-branched candlestick for this festival. We light first the "servant". Candle, on the first evening and use it to light one other candle. For the traditional eight days, we light one extra candle each evening, so Chanukah is referred to as the Festival of Lights.

The residues of this brief moment of glory have been used to build the national feelings of the Jews and an admiration for freedom of worship among various cultures. The historical record of some of these events are in two Books of the Maccabees which are not included in the Bible [but as apocrypha part of the Catholic Bible. ed.] The relevant nine-branched candlestick is often a prominent furnishing of a synagogue.

Purim

The Book of Esther is read at the feast of Purim and this gives the history and raison d"etre of the festival. The day before the actual feast is the Fast of Esther, marking the courage of this heroine. The particular story is without any historical verification, but it represents the kind of rescue of the Hebrews from persecution that has happened sometimes. It could be called a historical novel of the class of the Book of Ruth and the Book of Jonah. One odd note is that the name of God is never mentioned. There are editions of this book where the deity is mentioned, but these seem to be later additions.

The heart of the celebrations is a general dressing up, some people representing King Ahasverus, Queen Vashti, Queen Esther, Mordecai and the other characters of the story. Often, adults and children are dressed up to make the general party atmosphere. There is very little of the solemnity which marks most religious occasions.

Conclusion

So we run the gamut of the year, from the Passover party to the Purim play, with the weekly support and resource of the Sabbath. The solemnity of the Days of Awe is reli`Q5 by the joy of the Succot harvest festival. Life is made up of joy and sadness and we mark them all with the favourite Jewish toast "Le Chayim". To the parties and the sadness of our losses, to the freedom

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we mark with the Passover and the triumph of virtue over wickedness in the stories of Chanukah and Purim, "Lechayim, Lechayim, To Life."

Reference: Schauss, Hayyim. *The Jewish Festivals*. Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1938.

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