

The Jewish Holy Days

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Our discussion of Jewish holy days concentrates on the central ideas that imbue each of them with its own distinctive quality. We will not attempt to present a detailed description of their ritual practices. Also beyond our scope are the ways in which our holy days have constantly reshaped themselves in their modes of observance through the attachment of new meanings, new texts and new rituals. Our approach will be to examine and to understand our holy days as key moments that enable us to experience a distinctive relationship to our people's past and to its dreams of the future.

Shabbat (The Sabbath Day)

Its full Hebrew name, Yom Shabbat, means the day of rest. It is the first holy day we meet in the Bible where it is presented as the culminating response to the preceding six days of Creation. Unique among all biblical holy days, the Shabbat is the only one that has no connection to a specific event in the history of the Jewish people. What then is it that gives Shabbat an importance so great that justifies its being celebrated every seventh day for all time?

The old cliché that “time is of the essence” turns out to be indispensable for our understanding of the meaning of Shabbat. By a happy coincidence, both our ancient Torah and modern physics are in accord regarding a critical aspect of time; that it moves always in only one direction, forward. The great British physicist Sir Arthur Eddington described it as the “arrow of time.” In the Torah's lyrical language, the birth of time is the opening act, without which the entire saga of Creation could not have occurred. It is the ever forward movement of time,

pictured by the Torah as day one, followed by days two, three, four, five, and six, that allows the world of nature to come into being. In the biblical Creation epic time, like Eddington's "arrow," moves always in a single direction. Time can never be undone or made to reverse itself. Each day of Creation is the outcome of advancing time, and each merits the Torah's congratulatory salutation: "God saw that it was good." The picture of God that emerges is that of a master craftsman who creates the dimension of time in order to fashion the successive, more and more complex, elements of space.

We owe to the Torah the notion of the seven-day week that eventually became a universal measure of time. For the Torah, every seventh day is to be set aside and made completely different from the preceding six days. Humans, fashioned on the sixth day, are the only creatures described as formed in God's image. Only they are charged with the task of maintaining the world. Only they have the capacity to identify with God's joy when He surveyed all that He had brought forth as time advanced. Only humans can grasp and share the knowledge that time is an ever unfolding, always forward advancing dimension. Paradoxically, only humans can appreciate the significance of resting from work and setting aside a day of rest in order to contemplate and celebrate the achievements of work.

The Torah's depiction of Creation completing itself in a day of rest, can serve as the miniscule template for the entire unfolding of history. Creation is thus seen not as an end in itself, but as a series of beginning points meant to reach a time of completion. Each moment of time is meant to bring us nearer to the ultimate goal, to an era of ever widening Shabbat experience that will be celebrated by all human beings. Understood this way, each weekly Shabbat, freed from weekday concerns, when preoccupation with monetary matters and the stress of the workplace are set aside, replaced by devotion to peaceful contemplation, to tranquil moments shared with family and community, is experienced as a foretaste of the final triumph of unfolding time. All of these hopes are captured in the Psalmist's paean of praise which hails the Shabbat as the precursor to a final, worldwide messianic future time. It takes its cue from the opening words of Psalm 91: "A psalm, a song to be sung on the day of Shabbat" – a song, says an interpretive midrash, for a time to come, a time that will be altogether Shabbat, a time of rest eternal (Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashanah, 31a).

Unlike all other Jewish holy days, Shabbat was not conceived as the capturing and reexperiencing of a Jewish historical event. It therefore transcends the experience of a single people. It is entirely devoted to a dream, a hope, a prayer, and a message beamed to all humanity that history is not meant to be an ever-recurrent cycle of endless failure and conflict. It grows from the conviction that Shabbat must not be relegated to abstract verbiage, but must be shared as an event, a weekly celebration, a palpable taste of a reality to be that will bind all of mankind in the gentle bonds of enduring togetherness and peace.

The Pilgrimage Holidays: Pesach, Shavuot, Sukkot

When we turn our attention to the three pilgrimage holidays, we are struck immediately by the shared characteristic that sets them apart sharply from Shabbat. Nowhere does the biblical narrative connect them to the realm of time which, as we have seen, is critical to our understanding of Shabbat. All three are born in the transforming experiences that occur early in the lives of our ancestors, events that shaped them into a people. Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot are presented as entry points, ritualized moments in the yearly calendar that keep alive the memory of those events. On another more profound level they serve as vehicles whereby we can identify with the trials and triumphs of our ancestors as they lived through those moments. What begins as remembrance can become an act of imagining ourselves as participants in them, allowing us to see ourselves as living with the past, and not merely living in it.

Pesach (Passover)

Biblical historians have generally settled on the date of 1250 BCE as the approximate time of our ancestors' escape from Egypt and their debased centuries-long existence as slaves. The epic of their stunning release serves as the birth moment of a new history, the history of the Jewish people. No longer is it the saga of a tiny, conflict-ridden nomadic family or of occasional larger-than-life individuals, sometimes inspired, often bewildering. The Torah's description of Israel's flight to freedom is mirrored in the Pesach festival, a seven-day event (eight days in lands other than Israel) during which texts and foods are combined to create rituals of remembrance and identification. The number seven, it should be kept in mind, is often encountered as a biblical device tracing to the biblical tale of the seven days of Creation, and adapted to other contexts to convey the sense of completion or the successful conclusion of transforming events. In the case of the Pesach festival, it conveys the sense that the liberation of our ancestors, though sudden and rapid, was too momentous to be encompassed by the ceremonies of a single day's commemoration.

Shavuot (Feast of Weeks)

The story of the Exodus from Egypt swiftly moves the newly freed people to the Sinai desert en route to their return to the Promised Land, the home of their forebears. Even more important, the rapid trek will bring them to the mountain of Sinai where they will hear the words of the Ten Commandments – better

understood as the ten utterances since not all of them are commandments. The Torah's description is a phantasmagoria of dazzling lights, thunderous sounds, and the gripping fear of a people unable to comprehend the meaning of its freedom, all of which signify to the reader that the Hebrew people will henceforth be the bearers of radically new religious doctrines. As the collective emissaries of a new way of apprehending the divine they are to be separated from all other peoples, and as bearers of a new code of moral behavior, all of its members, regardless of social position, wealth, royal status, or other rank, will be judged equally by their faithfulness to its demands.

This vivid dramatization of the encounter at Mount Sinai is encapsulated in the festival of Shavuot (a single day in Israel; two days in Diaspora lands), a name meaning "weeks," recalling the passage of seven weeks from the onset of the exodus to their arrival at Mount Sinai; hence the name Pentecost, from the Greek, meaning "the holiday of the fiftieth day." While Shavuot has long been regarded as an independent holiday, it is best understood as the culminating moment of the Exodus, marking the metamorphosis from physical escape to national purpose.

Sukkot (Tabernacles)

The Fall season is home to the third festival, Sukkot (Tabernacles) whose name literally means "booths," calling to mind the sometimes brutal and often distressful conditions endured by the former slaves in what unfolded as a series of tortuous detours over a period of forty years as they made their fitful way across the desert to Canaan. Sukkot is rich in agricultural symbolism: the *lulav* (palm branch), *hadas* and *arava* (myrtle and willow twigs), *etrog* (citron). Ritual practice combines them to evoke the image of a fruit-bearing tree, a bearer of a measure of shade and sustenance during the harsh times of the relentless years of wandering. The booths, which give the holiday its name, conjure up the image of the twig huts that served as makeshift housing during those fateful years.

The Torah, candidly and clearly, indicates that the seasons of the three festivals coincide precisely with the significant harvest times in the agricultural cycles of the land of Israel: Pesach, the starting time of the barley harvest; Shavuot, ending the harvest of other grains; Sukkot, when the harvest of vegetable and fruits was completed. This means, of course, that the celebrating of nature's gifts as sacred moments long predated the historical events the Torah later attached to them. This should be understood as more than a satisfying coincidence in which the theme of planting and growth, from seed to harvest, happily mirrors the birth and nurturing moments of the Jewish people. We must not forget that for our ancestors who underwent the many generations of slavery, their "seed" memories included their earliest beginnings as a tiny family group in Canaan where their transition from nomadic existence to a more settled one depended heavily on the predictability of agricultural seasons.

For their descendants, redeemed from slavery, their overwhelming goal was to return to Canaan and to resume the way of life that was so intimately bound to the phases of nature. Significantly, for the generation of former slaves, their remembered tales of Canaan and their personal experiences combined similar motifs of anxiety. The farmer's investment of grueling labor carries no assurance that nature's forces will reward his efforts with a bountiful harvest. Similarly, the freed slaves experienced cruel moments when hoped-for successes were overturned by hunger, thirst, desert marauders, and, at times, their own rebellions.

An unusual element of the observance of the three holidays is the Torah's requirement that they be collectively celebrated by all Jews of Israel at the place where the Temple of God was to be erected. The Torah does not specify where the temple's location is to be. In time, it became Jerusalem, which served also as the seat of government and the home of Israel's kings. No reason is given for this law, but plausible reasons can be found. It is self-evident that the experiences that led to the creation of the three holidays involved the presence of the entire people. Second, all three are connected to the journey from Egypt to Canaan. The three festivals were likely intended to be observed as reenactments when masses of Jews would perform their own journey to a sacred destination. The Torah designates each of these holidays as a "chag," a term related to the Arabic "haj" designating the seasonal journeying of Moslems to their holy center of Mecca.

The holy days of Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot can be seen too as moments that connect us to the rigors and the uncertainties that accompany our own life journeys, serving as reminders that our achievements, whether physical or material, are never guaranteed, and require of us that we too live a lifestyle of shared community. Viewed in this light, these holidays are constantly renewed as journeys of memory, identification, hope, and commitment.

Rosh Hashanah (The New Year Festival)

Literally the "head of the year," Rosh Hashanah occurs at the beginning of the month of Tishri, marking the start of the year in the Jewish lunar calendar. The Torah records it as a single day (later two days in Diaspora lands), but nowhere refers to it as the start of the year. The Torah, in two places (Leviticus 23:24–25; Numbers 29:1–2), provides the barest of information. The Leviticus source notes it as a Shabbat, a day of complete rest with but a solitary ritual, the sounding of the ram's horn, a kind of trumpet. Numbers, with only slight differences, repeats the same two requirements. Absent too is any sense that Rosh Hashanah is a time of pleading for God's forgiveness so that the new year may begin with a clean slate. Nor is there even the faintest echo of Rosh Hashanah as the opening act in a powerful spiritual drama that unfolds over a period of ten days, culminating in Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

What brought about the transformation of Rosh Hashanah from the meager holy day of the Torah into the festival of later times? One explanation centers on the ceremony of the sounding of the ram's horn, noting its prominence in the rituals of the new year day in Ancient Near Eastern societies. A feature of such celebrations was the symbolic re-coronation of the king who demonstrated his powers of mercy by declaring amnesty for selected people who had been judged guilty by the courts. The sounds of the ram's horn served as a joyful accompaniment to the ceremonies of the day. According to this interpretation, it is assumed that Rosh Hashanah was enlarged and enhanced by transmuting these observances into a reenactment of God's coronation as Israel's king who bestows mercy.

A parallel explanation sees a different set of comparisons. It focuses on the belief in some Ancient Near Eastern cultures that on their new year's day the entire panoply of lesser gods would leave their posts in order to visit and pay homage to the chief deity, leaving the world for that day untended and subject to the whims of evil forces. The first day of the year was thus a day of great fear and danger during which all normal activities were suppressed. Only on the day following, upon the return of the gods, did the people venture from their homes, visit one another, and share festive meals to celebrate the beginning of a new year. Biblical Judaism, in many ways a rejection of pagan practices, nevertheless held a similar belief in the special powers of the new year day, but concentrated on the frailties of human actions and the need for change.

While admittedly conjectural, such interpretations do help us to better relate to the evolution of Rosh Hashanah into a time for introspective attention to wrongful deeds in the year just ended, while at the same time recommitting us to the renewal of a relationship to God. By emphasizing the start of the new year as a time of remembrance, a theme captured in another of the holiday's names, *Yom Hazikaron* (the Day of Remembrance), the holiday was transformed into a time of mutual remembrance; by ourselves, so that we might begin the process of repentance and change, and by God whom we celebrate as King, so that He might forgive.

Yom Kippur (The Day of Atonement)

As we have seen, the beginning of the year was sketched in the Torah in the most minimal way, providing a date but no name. Its only rituals, a special holy day animal sacrifice and the sounding of the ram's horn, were performed by priests. We are told nothing of how the day was to be commemorated by the people as a whole, whether as a community or in the privacy of their homes. By contrast, Yom Kippur receives substantial attention on both levels. In the same chapter (Leviticus 23:26–31) its date, the tenth of the seventh month, is immediately followed by the holy day's name, *Yom Kippurim*. Next we are told that two principal daily activities, the eating of food and workday routines, are to be avoided for the entire day. A stern

admonition warns that violators of these two commandments will be grievously punished.

Still more dramatic, and at far greater length, an earlier chapter (Leviticus 16:2–34) spells out manifold rules for the observance of Yom Kippur in the Shrine (the *Aron ha-Kodesh*; eventually erected in Jerusalem and known thereafter as the Temple). There, on Yom Kippur, the high priest, garbed in special garments worn only on that day, would perform a series of purification rituals for himself, his family, fellow priests, the Temple, and the entire people of Israel. He performed these rites as the intermediary between God and the people, thereby assuring forgiveness for their sins of the prior year.

The most dramatic ritual, performed on no other day of the year, was the selection of a goat upon whose head the High Priest was to symbolically place the sins of the entire people, after which it was to be dispatched to a remote wilderness area and released, signaling to the Temple worshippers that they too were now released from their sins and thereby absolved. Following the destruction of the Temple by the Roman occupiers in 70 CE, and over the course of many centuries, synagogue prayers filled with interpretive allusions to the Temple's rituals created a striking atmosphere for Jewish worshippers in which they could imagine themselves witnessing the ceremonies in the Temple. It is generally agreed that the destruction of the Temple became the main impetus to create the institution of the synagogue and its formalized prayers as the Temple's substitute. In the case of Yom Kippur, whose ceremonies in the Temple were witnessed by no more than a tiny fraction of the Jewish people, the glory of the Temple was kept alive through prayer services in which words replaced rituals.

Of great interest is that we do not find in the Torah a single allusion to a relationship between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, but over time the two holidays became linked, assuming roles as the opening and closing acts of an intense introspective drama which came to be known as The Ten Days of Repentance. In a spiritual environment that consciously avoided the revelries of an extended season of new year celebrations known from other national and religious cultures, The Ten Days of Repentance became a distinctive and powerful experience for both individuals and the larger community. Each year, throughout the ten days, the appeal to both mind and emotions through the daily repetition of basic prayer themes reaches its climax in a wordless release in the sound of a single, elongated note from the ram's horn marking the conclusion of Yom Kippur.

Hanukah (Holiday of Rededication)

Hanukah has come down to us as the commemoration of a victory that spared Jews the destruction of their religious heritage along with the ruthless extermination of much life. Like Purim, the Hanukah historical account omits God as an active

presence that determined the outcome of the struggle. Except for these two similarities, there are no other significant features that the two holidays share. The Scroll of Esther, source of the Purim narrative, is set in ancient Babylonia at an undetermined time when a murderous decree issued by the monarch threatened the Jews of the realm with annihilation, a plot for which we lack any supporting historical evidence. The Hanukkah struggle is altogether different. We possess a reliable historical document – Maccabees: Book One – which tells of a different kind of conflict, wars in Palestine in which Jews were pitted at times against fellow Jews and, at other times, against the might of Syrian political powers and their professional armies. It also provides reliable dating, about 165 BCE, denoting the success of the Jewish zealots, the Maccabean religious party, in wresting control of the Temple in Jerusalem from the hands of the Jewish Hellenizing forces, thereby restoring control of the Temple to the historical priesthood and the ancient practices set down in the Torah. (Maccabees: Book One has been preserved along with a second, nonhistorical version – Maccabees: Book Two – written originally in Greek and intended primarily to impress the large Jewish community of Egypt with the importance of the Hanukkah festival.)

Significant too is Book One's account of the intra-Jewish repeated eruptions of warfare that continued over a span of four decades from 175 to 135 BCE, from the reign of the Syrian monarch Antiochus IV to the death of Simon, youngest of the Maccabean brothers, leaders of the zealot forces in their battles throughout Palestine. Detailed too are times and places when Syrian military forces joined the fray, mostly but not always to restore political and religious hegemony to the Hellenized Jewish side.

Jewish religious tradition, for its own reasons, has transmitted to us a truncated, divergent version of the events. It did this in part by excluding Maccabees: Book One from the canon of Jewish Scripture, preferring to portray the warring antagonists as pious Jewish loyalists who prevailed against Syrian pagan troops, thus omitting the battles, truly a civil war of Jew against Jew. It also confined its version of the struggle to its early years leading to the recapture of the Temple. It also created the beguiling tale of a small amount of oil, a single day's worth for illuminating the Temple's restored candelabrum, that miraculously lasted for eight days (Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 21b) thereby creating the basis for the annual ritual of lighting the Hanukkah lamp in Jewish homes for eight days beginning on the evening of the twenty-fifth of Kislev.

Maccabees: Book Two (chs 1 and 10) sees a parallel between the eight-day ceremonies in the rededicated Temple and the original rites at the inauguration of the Temple built by King Solomon, ceremonies that concluded also on the eighth day (1 Kings, 8:66). It describes how, at the onset of the Maccabean uprising, Jewish loyalists, unable to observe the eight-day Fall festival of Sukkot (Feast of Tabernacles) in the desecrated Temple, would leave their homes and hide in deserted mountain areas in order to observe simulated holiday rituals. Thus, the return to a cleansed and restored Temple during the eight-day Hanukkah renewal

celebration, was understood as a belated making-up for the proper Sukkot observance they had been denied.

Neither explanation helps to explain the much later story of the miracle of the oil. One possible interpretation connects it to the Roman occupation of Palestine beginning about 65 BCE, beginning a long period of subjugation. According to this view, an annual celebration of a successful military uprising against a foreign occupier would undoubtedly have been perceived by the occupier as a threat. Therefore, the tale of the miracle of the oil made for a benign, unthreatening explanation of the holiday's origin.

We suggest too that the story of the oil captures in a symbolic way an essential teaching of Hanukah that has nourished the Jewish mind and imagination for millennia; that it represents the capacity and the will of a small people, dedicated to its religious faith, to outlast forces, both external and internal, that have sought to dilute its message or to destroy it entirely. Jews have lived this message and have seen it reiterated and revalidated during many times of oppression throughout their long history and continue to look upon the glow of the Hanukah lights as a graphic reminder of their survival and their capacity for renewal.

Purim: Fact or Fiction?

“Puru” in ancient Akkadian means a lottery, the kind of event whose outcome, when undertaken by government forces, can have fateful, even disastrous consequences. The holiday of Purim whose name, as told in the biblical Scroll of Esther, traces to a lottery created by Haman, the evil senior vizier of Emperor Ahasuerus, to determine the date when all the Jews of Persia were to be put to death and their wealth confiscated. The story of the plot, its many intrigues and the final reversal of its grim intentions into the sudden victory of the Jews, has left us the Esther Scroll as the sole record of the events, as well as the birth of the commemoration annually on the fourteenth of Adar of the Jewish triumph.

Purim has few rituals. Unlike earlier biblical holidays, Purim is not a day of “rest.” There are no restrictions on work or other typical daily routines. A public chanting of the Esther scroll – usually referred to as the Megillah – takes place on the evening of the fourteenth of Adar and, in many congregations, is repeated the following morning. Distributing “portions,” i.e. food items, to friends, along with charity money to at least two poor people is a second requirement. A festive, celebrational dinner is eaten towards the waning hours of the day, closing out the Purim ceremonies.

From a historical perspective, Purim is riddled with questions. The events described in the Megillah cannot be verified or dated. The king, bearing a name common to Persian dynasts, cannot be accurately verified. No known reference exists to the king's harem favorite, the Jewish maiden Esther. The Jewish heroes of

the tale, Mordecai and Esther, carry names that are Hebraized versions of two major Babylonian gods, Marduk and Ishtar; remarkably so, given Judaism's absolute monotheistic character. A striking additional mystery is the complete absence of the name of God anywhere in the Esther Scroll, making the victory of the Jews over their oppressors the result of human intervention alone.

All of these unanswerable questions have generated others. Is the Purim story meant to be a fictionalized telling of an actual event? Is it intended to be a championing of human responses to evil rather than passive dependence upon divine mercy? Is a major theme the integration of Jews into roles of power within Persian society? Does it perhaps carry the opposite message that whenever Jews live as outsiders in exile communities, their lives will be troubled by lurking dangers that may erupt at any time? Or is the Scroll of Esther nothing more than a Jewish reworking of a popular folk theme, widespread among other transplanted Diaspora groups in Persia, in which plotters of evil are made to suffer the fate they intended for others?

Purim, whatever its origins, has evolved into a day of celebration and revelry, in which costumes, games, noise, parodies, comic storytelling, and light-hearted songs engage the imaginations of young and old.

Tish'ah B'av (Remembrance of Destruction)

The destruction of the Temple, ancient Judaism's holiest site, occurred on the ninth of Av, Tish'ah B'av. The catastrophe it has represented for the Jewish people ever after has made Tish'ah B'av Judaism's saddest day of remembrance. On that date in the year 586 BCE, Babylonian forces completed the annihilation of Jerusalem and its defenders, reducing the city and the Temple to rubble. The calamity was twofold, marking the end of Jewish sovereignty and the disappearance of its central religious institution, its priesthood, and the daily sacrifices upon its altars. Soon after, the catastrophe was followed by the forced exile of countless thousands of Jews to Babylonia, among them its greatest religious teachers along with the ablest leaders of government and commerce. Left behind were, from the perspective of the conquerors, those least likely to foment rebellion in the future. From every direction all signs pointed to the likely extinction of the Jews as a people and of their unprecedented religion of monotheism.

Contrary to the anticipated disappearance of the Jewish people, the exiles in Babylonia not only survived, but thrived; the first example of a self-sufficient Diaspora Jewish community. Descendants of the original exiles returned to Jerusalem as early as fifty years later; reestablished it as the capital of an independent nation and rebuilt the Temple on the site of the destroyed one. The Second Temple, as it came to be known, underwent subsequent expansion and beautification, attracting Jewish worshippers in great numbers from all parts of the Middle East.

Five centuries later, in a tragic repeat of history, the ninth of Av once again became embedded in Jewish memory, and continues to be brought to mind as the day when Roman forces completed the second destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple. Once again, Jewish sovereignty over the land of Israel vanished and a new, mass dispersion of Jews to other lands began.

Jewish imagination has attached to the ninth of Av recollections of other expulsions that befell Jews in ensuing centuries; the expulsion in 1290 of Jewish subjects from England, not rescinded until 1655; the massive expulsion of Jews from Spain (along with Muslims) in 1492; the outbreak of World War I in the summer of 1914, culminating in little more than two decades in the savage holocaust that claimed six million Jewish victims during World War II.

In 1948, almost nineteen hundred years later, by act of the United Nations Organization, for the first time since the destruction and expulsion at the hands of the Romans, Jewish sovereignty was restored by the creation of the independent State of Israel. Many rabbinic leaders proclaimed that moment as nothing less than the fulfillment of promises made by prophets of the Bible, and of such scope that it should no longer be required to observe Tish'ah B'av as a day of collective Jewish mourning. Others declared that the new State of Israel's Yom Hazikaron, the memorial day for the thousands of Israeli Jews who perished in the War of Independence, should henceforth become the inclusive date for remembering all historic Jewish tragedies, including the two destructions of the Temple. Still others proposed that the newly established Yom Hashoah – Holocaust Remembrance Day – take on that role. None of the proposals led to action and Tish'ah B'av has remained as it has been throughout the centuries.

Tish'ah B'av's commemorative rites include a full day of fasting by adults, beginning on the eve of the ninth and lasting for twenty-five hours. Adults and children gather in synagogues to hear the chanting of the Lamentations, the biblical book composed in remembrance of the first destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. Included in the prayer services are mournful poetic texts, composed over many centuries, expanding on themes in Lamentations. Private behavior includes abstinence from all activities of a pleasurable nature.

Jewish religious legislation limited days of fasting to the hours between sunrise and sunset, approximately a half day's duration. Such days are referred to as minor fasts. On Yom Kippur and Tish'ah B'av, the sole exceptions, the fast is observed for an entire day.

The synagogue environment on Tish'ah B'av is somber and emotionally evocative, intended to create an atmosphere of sadness. The Torah Ark, emptied of its scrolls, is left open. Its curtain, typically one of the more attractive visual adornments of the sanctuary, is removed. The chanting of prayers and the book of Lamentations is done slowly and in a plaintive chant that is limited to this one day of the year.

The seventeenth of Tammuz, occurring in the summer month preceding Av, has its own sad linkage to Tish'ah B'av, recalling the date when the Romans succeeded in breaching the massive wall that protected Jerusalem, marking the start of a

three-week period of destruction and carnage that ended with the burning and collapse of the Temple on the ninth of Av. The entire three-week period is traditionally observed as a time when joyful celebrations, such as weddings, are not held.

Historical memory is an intrinsic part of the rituals of Jewish holidays. Tish'ah B'av, as a day of memory, embodies the Jewish religious conviction that no disaster, no matter how devastating, may be made into an occasion to wallow in despair or to breed a sense of permanent hopelessness. Jewish memory, faithful to its prophetic teachings, has constantly created ways to transcend the tragedies of the past by strengthening its belief in the possibility of a redemptive future.

Tu B'shevat (The New Year Day of Trees)

In the descriptions of Purim, Hanukah, and Tish'ah B'av, we have seen that Jewish holy days are not restricted to those commanded in the Torah. Here we discuss a calendar date that has gained sanctity in an unexpected way. Tu B'shevat (the fifteenth of Shevat) is one of the least ritualized holidays of the Jewish year. The Mishnah (Rosh Hashanah 1:1) lists it as one of four dates in the calendar year, each titled a new year day. Tu B'shevat marks the date early in the spring of the year when the annual tax on fruit trees, the tithe, took effect in the land of Israel; hence its official name, The New Year Day of Trees. The date was clearly tied to the end of the annual rainy season when blossoms appearing on fruit trees allowed tax inspectors to determine the expected yield of the fruit harvest and the amount of the mandatory tithe. In a land and at a time when agriculture was the major component of the economy, determining the tithe amount was of major consequence.

We know of no liturgical ceremonies that were part of the annual occurrence of Tu B'shevat. In early synagogue ritual it was deemed a joyous date, a day when penitential prayers were considered inappropriate and therefore omitted. For the same reason, fasting, whether for communal or personal reasons, was not permitted. Over time, Ashkenazic (European) and Sephardic (Mediterranean) Jews developed separate customs of celebrating the date, featuring the eating of fruits for which the land of Israel was famed, along with appropriate prayer texts, celebrating the day as a thanksgiving occasion for God's gift to the Jewish people, a fertile land figuratively "flowing with milk and honey."

A major change in the perception and celebration of Tu B'shevat came about in the early years of the twentieth century with the rapid establishment of many agricultural settlements as part of the Zionist inspired mission of return to Palestine. With it, a new folk hero personality, the farmer-settler, emerged, and with it Tu B'shevat took on new significance as a celebration not limited to fruit trees, but expanded to include all trees. As a transformed holiday it has become the special day of the year when masses of people of all ages trek to barren areas of the land and plant saplings as part of the national effort of reforestation.

Growing in popularity among Jews in Israel and other countries is a home ceremony derived from mystical texts and modeled on the Passover Seder. In place of the ritual of four cups of wine of the Passover ceremony, the Tu B'shevat Seder features four different fruits indigenous to Israel's agriculture.

Less well known is that the date for determining the amount of tithe for fruit trees was the subject of dispute. In the Mishnah (Rosh Hashanah 1:1) we are told that the fifteenth of Shevat – the date favored by the Hillel school of interpretation – was opposed by the Shammai school, whose view implies that by the first of Shevat fruit blossoms are at their maximum on the first of Shevat and, therefore, the tithe amount should be imposed upon farmers as of that date. The Hillel approach appears to be based on the normal variation in blossoming times between different areas of the country, so that in hill and mountain terrain blossoming would not reach its maximum until later. Given that the beneficiaries of the tithe were the poor and classes of people who were excluded from land ownership, the Hillel ruling made for greater generosity.

Still, the question remains: Was there something special about the number fifteen rather than, say, fourteen or sixteen? Was it an arbitrary choice or did it rest on something implicit in the lunar calendar? Lunar reckoning was long established as a feature of Middle Eastern nations and religions, many of whose people believed that the fifteenth day of the lunar month – the day of the full moon – was the turning point of the month. Among the early Babylonians, the fifteenth of Shabatu (Shevat) was the date when the priests would decide whether to add a thirteenth month, a second Addaru (Adar), creating a thirteen-month year. If, on the night of the fifteenth, the planet Ninsianna (Venus) was not visible, by adding the extra month the shorter lunar year was brought into alignment with the solar year. The decision was, in effect, the announcement that the major springtime barley harvest was still two months away. The significance of the fifteenth of Shevat was no doubt well known to the Jews in their two major centers, Israel and Babylonia, impacting the Jewish lunar calendar by adding a thirteenth month in certain years too. Significantly, the Hillel school's insistence on setting the tithing date on the fifteenth of Shevat, although unconnected to the barley harvest, resulted in greater assistance to needy citizens.

The Making of New Days of Remembrance

World War II brought about two enormous convulsions in Jewish life. One was the Holocaust, Nazi Germany's war of extinction against Europe's Jews, resulting in the horrific deaths of six million Jews and the near obliteration of Jewish life in all forms in much of Europe. The second was the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 by action of the United Nations Organization. Both events, the one a trauma, the other a rebirth, have entered into the Jewish calendar as times of remembrance.

Jewish leadership, both secular and religious, and especially Holocaust survivors, were unanimous in recognizing the need for a Holocaust day of remembrance, but could not agree on the most appropriate date. Orthodox rabbinic leaders, both in Israel and other countries were for the most part opposed to creating a new calendar date. They strongly advocated incorporating Holocaust remembrance into the existing day of fasting, Tish'ah B'av (the ninth of Av), the day recalling the destructions of the temple in Jerusalem. Non-Orthodox rabbinic leaders, along with the great majority of Holocaust survivors and secular Jews, were in agreement that the scope of the tragedy merited its own day of remembrance separate and apart from the commemorations of other tragedies in Jewish history. On April 12, 1951, Israel's parliament, the Knesset, adopted a resolution establishing the twenty-seventh of Nisan as Yom Hashoah (Holocaust Memorial Day), "a day of perpetual remembrance for the House of Israel." It has become the official date for Jews wherever they reside.

As of now, a half century later, no agreed upon liturgy for Yom Hashoah has been developed. Both in Israel and in other countries various customs have arisen. In Israel, by action of the Knesset, all places of entertainment must be closed on the evening of Yom Hashoah. It is a growing custom in synagogues to light six memorial candles, symbolic of the six million victims. In the privacy of a home, the prevalent custom is for a single memorial candle to burn for 24 hours. Many communities have established commemorative public gatherings at which Holocaust survivors and, increasingly, the descendants of survivors offer reflections on the Holocaust. Diaspora religious schools, both synagogue and community sponsored, have created Holocaust teaching materials for their students. We find too that a small but growing number of public high schools are incorporating similar materials into their history curricula.

Yom Ha'atzma'ut (Israel Independence Day) and Yom Hazikaron (Memorial Day)

On May 14, 1948, corresponding to the fifth of Iyar, in response to the resolution of the United Nations Organization, Israel's prime minister David Ben-Gurion proclaimed the creation of the State of Israel at a special session of the Knesset. The Hebrew date has become an annual celebration that takes place on two levels. In Israel, Yom Ha'atzma'ut (Independence Day) is a day of parades, public gatherings, picnicking, speeches, music, and dancing. On another level, evolving prayer customs have placed a distinctive stamp upon it. Many congregations feature a reading from the Torah added to the morning service. In most congregations, verses from Deuteronomy 17 promising God's blessings on the land of Israel and its inhabitants are the passages read. The reading is followed by the chanting of passages from the Book of Isaiah (10; 11–12), his messianic vision of the dispersed people of Israel restored to their ancestral homeland where they will be blessed to

live in tranquility. Prayers of praise taken from long-established festivals of joy are also added to the prayer service.

Linked to Yom Ha'atzma'ut in Israel, and observed one day earlier, is Yom Hazikaron, the memorial day set aside to recall the thousands of Israelis, both soldiers and civilians, who perished in the War of Independence which erupted within hours of the declaration of independence. The principal ritual, the sounding of sirens, occurs at eleven o'clock in the morning in every city and town in Israel. At the sound of the sirens, all traffic comes to a halt. Passengers exit their vehicles; pedestrians come to a stop. Masses of people stand in silence for two full minutes while the sirens sound. It is a somber ritual where silence prevails; more eloquent than words.

In Jerusalem, Israel's national capital, a ceremony is held on the same day at Mount Herzl at the grave of Theodor Herzl, the father of political Zionism; presided over by the Speaker of the Knesset. Its principal ritual is the kindling of a torch whose flame is passed to 12 additional torches, symbolizing the biblical tribes of Israel. It has also become widely practiced in Israel on Yom Hazikaron to visit the graves of family members and friends who lost their lives in the War of Independence.

The Inner Workings of the Jewish Calendar

It is often assumed that it is the lunar nature of the Jewish calendar that regulates the timing of Jewish holy days. Excluding the unique and unrelated timing of the Shabbat, which simply occurs every seventh day, it is more correct to describe the Jewish calendar as "lunisolar" rather than lunar, inasmuch as both lunar and solar reckonings are involved in fixing the timing of Jewish holy days. Lunar-wise, Jewish months are measured by the cycles of the moon; approximately twenty-nine and a half days (29 days, 12 hours, 44 minutes, three and a half seconds), adding up to a year of 354 days, approximately 11 days shorter than the solar year. Biblical law, however, requires that the three principal festivals – Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot – must occur at specific harvest seasons; harvests, of course, are determined by solar cycles. The shorter lunar year, without periodic adjustment, would constantly drift backwards in relationship to the solar year. Pesach, to cite one example, is fixed by biblical law to coincide with the springtime barley harvest of ancient Israel. Without such adjustments, the Pesach month of Nisan would meander over time through every season of the year, and only at rare intervals match the time of the barley harvest.

To prevent this "wandering" of the lunar year, carefully calibrated adjustments were devised by adding a thirteenth month, Adar Bet, to specific lunar years; a total of seven such intercalations in a cycle of 19 years (years 3, 6, 8, 11, 14, 17, 19); an adjustment that brings the lunar year into close relationship to the agricultural

cycles controlled by the solar year. It is believed that this reform of the Jewish calendar year was institutionalized about the year 360 CE. We now know that an even earlier Babylonian calendar dealt with identical issues in much the same way. But unlike its predecessor, the Jewish year posed specific Jewish issues. Yom Kippur, for example, as mandated by the Bible must be observed as a complete day of rest; i.e. desisting from all manner of work. Were the Shabbat, equally a day of complete rest, to precede Yom Kippur by one day or follow it by one day, the obligatory duration of Yom Kippur would interfere with the required length of the Shabbat. A permanent adjustment built into the Jewish calendar prevents Yom Kippur from occurring on a Friday or a Sunday.

Another unusual characteristic of Jewish calendar calculations is the length of an hour. Both the lunar and the solar calendars have the same 12 hour division of daylight and nighttime hours. Unlike the solar calendar that assigns 60 minutes to every hour, there is no fixed length to the Jewish lunar hour; it changes according to the amount of daylight and dark in a given day. Thus, the 12 hours of daylight in a summer month will have far more than 60 minutes each; the reverse will be true of winter days.

The relationship between the Jewish calendar and the older Babylonian one from which it was derived can be seen also in the similarity of the names each uses for the months of the year. In the Jewish calendar, these names replaced the original Hebrew ones found in Jewish Scriptures.

Hebrew	Babylonian
Nisan	Nisannu
Iyar	Ayaru
Sivan	Simanu
Tammuz	Dumuzu
Av	Abu
Elul	Ululu
Tishre	Tasritu
Marheshvan	Arahsamnu
Kislev	Kislimu
Tevet	Tebetu
Shevat	Sabatu
Adar	Addaru

Afterthoughts

Throughout our discussion of the holy days of the Jewish year, one connecting thread binds all of them together; that they are the moments in which we recreate and relive times past. Whether as joyous festivals or as commemoration of

tragedies, whether ancient or recent, they beckon us to withdraw from our present preoccupations and to step back into time. At such moments we may succeed in seeing ourselves, not as remote onlookers, but as participants in the shaping events in the long unfolding of Jewish history. The goal, however, is not to live in the past, but to live with the past. The distinction is critical to how we relate to our holy days. Each of them becomes an opportunity to extract eternal messages that can shape our lives now and in the future.

One example may suffice: Hanukah is a thanksgiving celebration of a military victory that happened more than two millennia ago. Our modest wintertime ritual of lighting small flames for eight days in the dark hours of night has become an affirmation of an inner light that must always be kept lit, giving courage to the few to prevail against the many. The tangible light of Hanukah becomes a pointer both to the past and to the future, and to freedoms yet to be won.

We have concentrated on the core ideas embedded in these holy days, as found in our foundational Jewish texts and, where possible, utilizing significant information and insights from other sources. We have not attempted to present the emotional content of these days or the impact of diverse customs that have become integral to them in far-flung Jewish communities over the many centuries, or the never-ceasing creation of prayer texts, music, home ceremonies, and even special foods; all of them collectively adding to and deepening the meaning of these sacred times. In these ways each of the holy days of the Jewish year becomes an opportunity for constantly growing participation and appreciation, both privately and within a community. Indeed, they can become life-changing moments.