

JEWISH HOLY DAYS & FESTIVALS

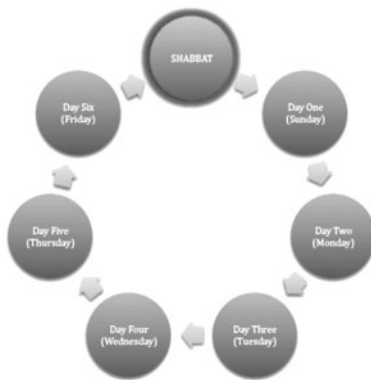
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Eat and drink and celebrate before Me.
Babylonian Talmud, Haggigah 10b

INTRODUCTION

Shared moments of celebration and mourning, accomplishment and defeat blend solitary individuals into vibrant community. Since the earliest days of our history, we Jews have continuously constituted and renewed ourselves as a people through the commemoration of our shared joys and sorrows. The Jewish calendar cycle, through its distillation of Jewish theology and history, offers us a series of annual opportunities to perpetuate and encounter anew the values, beliefs and history which have sustained us as a people, an *‘Am*. While there are certainly other prisms through which to appreciate the beauty and insights of Jewish life, our Sabbaths, holy days, festivals, memorials and fast days offer a uniquely embodied experience of our faith, one cloaked in mitzvot, traditions, readings and rituals and embedded in the distinctiveness of the unfolding seasons. A mindful engagement with our calendar offers lessons on how to live our lives with awareness, gratitude, and devotion.

Every point on a circle is identical to every other. In theory, this claim is equally true for every day of the calendar – none possesses intrinsic meaning or distinction. The progression of days appears to be smooth and constant, with no inherent distinction between one day and the next. Yet nothing could be farther from our subjective experience of time. We all know instinctively that in lived reality no two days are identical. Each has a texture and color provided by our moods, activities, challenges and achievements. One of the functions of a calendar is to inscribe this lived experience on the passage of time, to give days distinctive identities. Calendars are, furthermore, a collective accounting of time, a communal endeavor to create and reaffirm meaning.



Every people must grapple with how to mark the passage of time: through the observance of anniversaries, the celebration of agricultural cycles, the consecration of memorials, or the commemoration of mythic or historical events – the list goes on. The choices made are both reflective and definitional of who and what a particular community values. Americans, for example, celebrate the success of the American Revolution on Independence Day, self-sacrifice and service to the country on Memorial Day, and Americans’ sense of indebtedness to their Creator and for the land’s bounty on Thanksgiving Day. More recently, as the desire grew to enshrine tolerance and racial equality within the pantheon of public virtues, Martin Luther King’s birthday was designated a national holiday.

The events that make up the Jewish calendar commemorate three distinct types of collective experience: natural events, historical events, and theological or spiritual themes. Let us examine each of these in turn to see the role it plays in structuring Jewish notions of time.

NATURAL EVENTS

The most obvious units to mark the passage of time are the days, months, seasons and solar years created by the cycles of the natural world. Even in our current era of electric lights and 24-hour convenience stores, our pattern of activities is governed to a large extent by patterns of daylight and variations in day length, weather and climate. How much more so was this the case for Ancient Israel, an agricultural society whose work routines, living conditions, and food availability were governed by astronomical and meteorological forces beyond their awareness or control. It is unsurprising, then, that the most fundamental components of the Jewish calendar reflect the movement of celestial bodies.

While the Temple stood, the *Cohanim* (priests) were given the simultaneously practical and sacred task of keeping communal time. Although they lacked the complex optics needed to fully comprehend the motion of the Earth, moon and other planetary bodies, they were able to construct a remarkably sophisticated luni-solar calendar. Lunar months, which were marked by the waxing and waning of the moon and lasted either 29 or 30 days, depending on when the new moon was first sighted at the Temple in Jerusalem, were embedded in solar year, which was timed relative to the recurrence of



JEWISH HOLY DAYS & FESTIVALS

the agricultural seasons. Their calculations took into account the discrepancy of about 11 days between the length of the twelve lunar months and one solar year by intercalating seven lunar months over the course of a nineteen-year cycle, thus keeping the holidays and festivals in their proper seasons.

The relationship of the ancient Israelites to the heavenly orbs was not wholly unencumbered, however. Living in a cultural milieu in which the “great light which rules of the day and the minor light which governs the night” were regarded by many of their neighbors as significant deities in their own right, the early proponents of monotheism felt a need to domesticate the celebration of astronomical events and to ensure that the rituals which marked them were unambiguously oriented towards the worship of the one God. Thus, while the Jewish calendar marks the new moon as a significant occasion, it prescribes that it be marked through the recitation of Hallel, a liturgy praising God as (among other things) the One who fashioned the sun, the moon, the stars and other astral bodies. The reappearance of the moon is thus framed as a sign of God’s steadfast love and creative bounty, rather than a marvel in its own right. Indeed, the ritual calendar further inscribes the arrival of the new month as an occasion for strengthening our relationship to the Divine by anticipating the new moon’s arrival on the preceding Shabbat with a special prayer asking that the month ahead should be marked by love of Torah and the fear of sin. It further reinforces this message a few days after the new moon’s arrival through the ritual of Kiddush Levanah, the recitation of a psalm establishing God as the author of the natural order, noting that the sun, moon and stars reliably respond to God’s lure reliably (and implying that we should too).

Nested within the cycle of the lunar months and creating a yet more proximate occasion for recognizing God’s role in Creation and God’s special relationship with the people Israel is the weekly celebration of Shabbat – the only calendrical unit that is not a reflection of the motion of the sun, moon, or earth. Shabbat is not only the capstone of the cycle of the days of the week, it is also arguably the pinnacle of Jewish holy days. In determining which greeting receives priority on those occasions when Shabbat and a holiday coincide (“Shabbat Shalom” or “Chag Sameach”, i.e. happy festival), the rabbis determined that the Shabbat greeting should come first. Indeed, Shabbat takes precedence in every way – it is always the first blessing offered, it is honored with the most numerous *aliyot* to the Torah, and its laws take precedence over those specific to other holy days (for example, we kindle the Chanukah lights before the candles for Shabbat on Friday night and after the recitation of Havdalah on Saturday). Far from being rendered prosaic by its frequency, Shabbat is taken as a cornerstone of Jewish identity and observance. It is credited by many of the sages, philosophers, mystics and poets with a redemptive role, instilling in the Jewish people a perpetual awareness of creation and the exodus, while other commentators see this day devoted to non-material pursuits as an occasion for us to enlist as God’s partners in the work of liberation and justice.

Just as the designation of the weeks divided by Shabbatot divides the moon’s cycles into comprehensible periods of work and rest, mirroring the work of Creation itself, so the aggregation of months into seasons marked by agricultural festivals plants in us an awareness of the passage of larger blocks of time, characterized by more profound changes both within us and around us. The three pilgrimage festivals which anchor the Jewish calendar – Passover, which by some reckonings begins the Jewish year and, in any case, coincides with the spring harvest; Shavuot, fifty days later, which marks the barley harvest in Israel; and, Sukkot, the “festival of booths” which celebrates the completion of the fall harvest – impart a greater mindfulness of the bounteous, raw, undomesticated creation of which we are a part, inviting both awe and gratitude at God’s wondrous world.

On the most encompassing level is the cycle of years that we group together to celebrate the periodic Birkat ha-Hammah, the blessing of the sun. This ritual, mythically understood to be observed when the sun returns to the same position it was in at the moment of creation, is marked only once in 28 years (the next occurrence will fall on April 8th, 2037). Like the monthly Birkat Ha-Levanah, the blessing of the new moon, this ritual takes place outdoors, focusing our attention on the astral bodies that make life on earth possible, moving our attention beyond the ebb of Jewish history and human spirit to the stars above and the cosmos itself as a repository of value, spirit, and oneness.

HISTORICAL EVENTS

Connection with the rest of the natural world – or, more correctly, with God through creation – is but one of the bases on which the Jewish calendar is constructed. Another important function of the calendar is to both bind and define us as a



JEWISH HOLY DAYS & FESTIVALS

people by linking us to our shared history and keeping it alive in our hearts. Many of the important events in our calendar serve primarily as markers of important events in Jewish history, including Chanukah, Tisha b'Av, Purim, Lag b'Omer and, more recently, Yom ha'Shoah and the Israeli national holidays which commemorate signal moments in the creation of the modern Jewish state. Each of these occasions reminds of not only of a specific experience in the long history of the Jewish people, but also speaks to recurrent themes that continue to resonate in our inner and outer lives.

Indeed, so central is the creation of a collective pool of memories to the calendar's function that even occasions focused primarily on seasonal or ethical/spiritual concerns are also linked to a shared past, whether historical or mythical in origin. Thus Pesach, in addition to marking the arrival of spring, is identified with the exodus from Egypt and in particular, the crossing of the Red Sea, Shavuot is identified with receiving the Torah at Sinai. Even the Days of Awe, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the timing of which is only vaguely specified by the Tanakh, come to be fixed in our calendar through the celebration of the anniversary of Creation.

The Jewish calendar, particularly the historic festivals, has evolved to reflect not only the progression of our history but also the progression of the ways we *think* about our history. This self-reflexivity is already evident in the early rabbinic debates about which historic occasions should be celebrated as events of national significance and on what terms. The Talmudic debate about the celebration of Chanukah,¹ for example (discussed in greater detail in Chapter 8), reflects the profound discomfort of the rabbinic sages with the elevation of a military victory to the status of a religious rite through the recitation of Hallel (a practice which was already widespread by the 2nd century of the Common Era). Their discomfort was alleviated only when the martial victory was recast as an act of divine intervention (as evinced through the miracle of the oil). By contrast, outside of ultra-Orthodox communities there has been almost no debate about the recognition of the establishment of the State of Israel (Yom HaAtzmaut) or the reunification of Jerusalem (Yom Yerushalayim) as historic events which nevertheless warranted the recitation of Hallel. The consensus on this matter reflects a wide-spread shift in Jewish consciousness, accepting human actors as themselves agents of divine providence.

This attunement to historical currents and willingness to incorporate and build upon the accrued insights of the ages is evident, too, in the manner in which the Jewish people mark even occasions of a predominantly seasonal or religious/spiritual nature. One has only to review the Biblical passages describing the celebration of our most ancient rites to realize that none of our festivals or holy days – not even those mentioned in the Tanakh (Shabbat, Pesach, Shavuot, Sukkot, Yom Kippur and Rosh Chodesh) – have come to us in unchanged form. They were first and formatively fashioned in Scripture, enhanced and expanded by the teachings of rabbinic sages, and internalized and renewed in the writings of philosophers, kabbalists and chasidic masters in early modernity and our own time. Indeed, our celebration of our ritual cycle differs even from the practices of our more recent forefathers and mothers in the shtetls of Europe, the mellahs of North Africa or the Yishuv of pre-State Israel. And this is as it should be. As David HaLevi Segal, a 17th century Polish commentator on the Shulchan Aruch noted, “One is perpetually commanded to derive new teachings from the Torah...for it is incumbent every moment to labor in the study of Torah and to innovate to the full extent of one's abilities.”² The practice of a Jewish life involves balancing a profound respect for tradition with a recognition of the need to respond to ever-changing conditions and perceptions.

Nowhere is this mix of conservation and innovation more evident than in the Pesach *seder* and, in particular, the haggadah around which it is based. The haggadah text and the rituals which it describes can be seen as a palimpsest, the layers of which can be peeled back to reveal a treasure trove of accumulated thought and ritual practice. This document, of which we are but the latest stewards, reflects more than two thousand years of evolving insights into the Exodus story and its motifs. Yet far from becoming ossified through the accretion of so much collective wisdom, the haggadah has remained a supple, living text, which even in our own day is viewed as a “work in progress,” a still-wet canvas to which we are invited to add our own narratives, customs and interpretations. As Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra stated with respect to the Sages of yore, and as we, as Conservative Jews, hold with respect to those involved in the study and practice of Torah in every generation, “By utilizing their great wisdom and casuistic powers, the Sages were able to derive new meanings from biblical texts.”³

¹ Babylonian Talmud, “Mai Chanukah”, Shabbat 21b.

² Turei Zahav, Orach Chayyim 545:13.

³ Yesod Mora, 1:iv.



JEWISH HOLY DAYS & FESTIVALS

That said, embedded in Judaism is a deep-seated respect for the contributions of those who have come before us and a firm insistence that our religious life be of a piece with that of preceding generations. As the great scholar of Jewish mysticism, Gershom Scholem, reminds us, “We must arouse in the next generation a sense of understanding and of general identification with the great heritage of the generations.”⁴ Thus, our observance of the festivals is grounded in *halacha* (legal precedent) and *minhag* (customary practice or tradition), which together constitute an instruction manual as to how to mark time and make it holy, whether through recitation of special liturgy, restructuring of daily activities, consuming or abstaining from certain foods, participation in charitable giving, or performing other distinctive rites.

THEOLOGICAL OR SPIRITUAL THEMES

No event in the Jewish calendar, however prosaic its origins, lacks a theological or spiritual underpinning. The insertion of practices of holiness and occasions for drawing closer to God into the fabric of our daily lives is a persistent *raison d'être* of the Jewish calendar and, indeed, of Jewish life. That said, there are certain times in the Jewish year when sacred themes figure more prominently than others.

Shining supreme among the holy days, Shabbat recalls and re-enacts God's primal, sovereign rest. On this day, the labors of pre-modern agriculture specify how we define labor and therefore the tasks we must avoid. On Shabbat, we explicitly rest in identification with the Creator, and in remembrance of the acts of creation and then, with the arrival of Saturday evening, resume the ongoing work of creation as God's partners. The Sabbath invites us to celebrate our liberation from slavery through affirmative acts of Jewish belonging and celebration - festive meals, joyous worship, companionship, relaxation, and rest – all of which were precluded for our enslaved ancestors.

The year can, on a deeper level, provide a circle, which we round with each passing month. The two pivots of the year are the cluster of the Yamim Nora'im, Days of Awe (Elul, Selichot, Rosh Hashanah, Aseret Yamei Teshuvah, Yom Kippur) that are the most introspective and the least connected to an historical event of any time of the year. At the opposite side of the calendar are Purim and Pesach (Passover) which are the most communal/public commemorations of the year. As we move from the introspective and personal time of the Days of Awe, we move through Sukkot and Chanukah, which offer a blend of the personal and the communal, the introspective and the historical on our way to Pesach. And after Pesach concludes, we cycle through the Sefirat Ha-Omer, counting of the barley grain, Shavuot, and Tisha B'Av on our way back from the public toward the introspective. The Jewish year marks a constant swinging from one pole to the other.

As we spiral between the poles of the year – with an introspective focus at the Days of Awe and a communal emphasis for Passover and Shavuot, we affirm that each occasion in the Jewish year expresses profound ethical responsibilities embedded in the Torah and our rabbinic sources for how we treat our fellow human beings, other living things, and the creation as a whole, and each also resonates with opportunities to deepen our inner life and the spiritual discipline that a path of holiness makes possible. Passover, for example, bids us to renew our commitment to our own liberation (political, communal, and spiritual) and to work all the more resolutely for freedom and justice for all. Shavuot asks us to listen for the divine the still, small voice, to discern God's invitation to live a life of relationship, connection, and joy. Sukkot bids us to reflect on the false security of our solid structures and to embrace the resilient fragility of sheltering love (God's and each other's). Chanukah offers the chance to renew our commitment to Jewish independence and pride, to light a candle in the darkness, and Purim helps us to laugh at our enemies and at our own shortcomings.

For a person who links his or her life to the rhythms of Jewish time, the cycles of the Jewish calendar, each day is no mere repetition of a timeless past. Instead, the Jew finds eternity nestled within time, as the richness of the seasons provide a regular reminder of our covenantal past, a present to hallow with acts of empathy, holiness, and justice, and a future resonant with hope and joy.

⁴ *Education for Judaism*, p. 84.

