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The Jewish Calendar and the Cycle of the Jewish Year

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The Jewish year and its calendar, marked by the regular succession of Sabbaths is the ‘backbone of the year’ and based on the phases of the moon. So important is the moon in determining festivals and important periods in Jewish religious observance that the New Moon is celebrated as a Sabbath though work and the lighting of fires is not proscribed. Today it is more the custom to honour the day as ‘Rosh Hodesh’ or the beginning of the month. In order to maintain the stability of certain festivals and to insure that those that are held in the Spring and others in the Fall do not rotate, the lunar year is incalculated into the solar year in such a manner that an additional month is created seven times in every nineteen years. This additional month is placed prior to the month in which Passover falls (Nissan).

The Day

For religiously observant Jews the day is marked by set times of prayer that are centered on the recitation of the Shma (‘Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One’ in its scriptural context) which is said formally during the morning

(Shahrith) and evening (Arvith) prayers. The Amidah or 18 Blessings is recited as a separate mitzvah (fulfillment of a commandment) and completes the required prayer. It is an integral part of the afternoon prayers (Minha). Strictly speaking both men as well as women are obliged to recite these prayers during the day.

Sabbath

The Jewish week is made up of six working days followed by its most important day, Shabbath, the day of rest and stillness. Essentially the entire week is a preparation for this Seventh Day and the names of the days of the week are simply ‘first day (Sunday), second day (Monday) etc.

Friday has a special place as it is the day of preparation for the Shabbath that begins at its termination. The house must be cleaned, shopping completed and food prepared that will provide at least three meals as cooking is forbidden on Shabbath. The table is laid with special tablecloths, cutlery, dishes, flowers and candles that are lit at least 18 minutes or even earlier but not more than approximately an hour before Shabbath begins with the setting of the sun. The table symbolizes the ancient altar of the Temple in Jerusalem and the members of the family approach it almost in a state of ritual purity having taken baths in hot water and in some cases, immersing themselves in the ritual bath, (mikveh) and dressed in clean clothes.

The spirit of the Sabbath is difficult to define and while it is true that it is characterized as being a ‘day of rest’ during which no work may be done, money handled, writing carried out, or fires lit (this

includes turning on electricity) it is also an 'oneg' or day of observance. In the words of the Prophet Isaiah (58:13-14)

"If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your own

will on my day, and call the Sabbath a joy and the Lord's holy day

honored, and if you honor it by not doing your own ways, finding

your own will, speaking your own word, then you will rejoice in

the Lord, and I shall let you mount upon the high places of the

world, and feed you with the inheritance of your father Jacob".

The Sabbath is a temporal context of sacred time in which the Jew enters and lives for a day of recollection. Much like the mikveh or ritual bath which cannot 'hold' water in the sense that it may be inert, the Sabbath is for the observant Jew a day through which the Ultimate flows. It is called 'sacred' (kodesh) in the Hebrew sense of this word which means to be separate and during it the 'rhythm and texture' of life are changed.

The Pilgrim Festivals

Prior to 70 CE, when the Second Temple was destroyed public Jewish religious life was celebrated at the Temple in Jerusalem - and only there. There did exist, as today. Synagogues or Batei Am where people gathered for prayer and study, however, only in the Temple could the sacrifices be carried out. The daily sacrifices, morning and evening, were performed by the priesthood of Aaron assisted by the Levites. At least three times a year all Jewish males were required to assemble in Jerusalem for these festivals hence they became known as the 'Pilgrim Festivals'.

Jewish religious holidays have a triple significance. Many, such as Passover, Shavuoth, (Pentecost) and

Sukkoth (Tabernacles) - The Pilgrim Festivals - commemorate moments in the story of a Covenant between God and the Israelite nation at Sinai. Passover tells of the flight from Egypt, Shavuoth of the Giving of the Law on Sinai, and Sukkoth of the forty years lived in the desert before entering Canaan. These are also agrarian festivals as they commemorate the Spring and the first planting, the first harvest and the final harvest of the year. These are also festivals that call one to examine closely one's personal life. The flight from Egypt calls one to flee from one's ego attachment and to idolatry in every form. Shavuoth calls one back again to examining how one has maintained the covenant in one's daily life and actions. Sukkoth, when many observant Jews still eat and if possible sleep in very temporary shelters (huts), binds us to our sense of oneness with nature and the universe and our dependence on God.

Passover is celebrated for a period of in the Diaspora for eight days though in Israel for only seven. The first two evenings (the second of which is omitted in Eretz Israel) are celebrated mainly in the home where the Haggadah, or account of the Flight from Egypt, is recited with blessings and the drinking of four cups of wine. This seder, or ritual meal is celebrated with eating un-leavened bread (matzah - the Bread of Affliction) with special symbols - the burnt shankbone of a lamb, a roasted egg, bitter herbs and haroset - a mixture of nuts and dried fruit. Afterwards a proper meal is served and the second part of the seder with thanksgiving prayers is recited. For the entire period of the Festival only un-leavened bread is eaten.

Shavuoth has special prayers that are said in common in the synagogue. A high point of the Shavuoth liturgy is the formal reading of the Ten Commandments from an opened scroll of the Law (Sepher Torah). Milk foods are especially eaten on this Festival perhaps symbolizing the 'mothering' of the Torah or (Law of Moses) that feeds us with the Divine Will.

Sukkoth, is celebrated for nine days. (In Israel for eight days) It is incumbent upon observant Jews to build temporary shelters covered with branches etc. through which the stars can be seen. As it falls during the fall harvest it is especially associated

with thanksgiving for the riches of the earth and on the 8th day of the Festival (Shmini Atseret) special supplications are made for rain. This feast also sees the end of the annual cycle of readings from the Torah and the beginning of the new cycle. It is a time of great festivity in synagogues and all of the Torah scrolls are taken out and in many communities they are held in the arms while dancing and singing special songs. Children play a prominent role and are called to read from the new cycle of scriptural passages.

Rosh HaShannah

The Jewish New Year takes place in the fall and its date determines both Yom Kippour (the Day of Atonement) and Sukkoth. New Year begins a ten day period of introspection in which one is called on to examine all of he one's actions during the past year and how they have reflected justice, mercy and loving-kindness towards fellow men and women. One is bound to make atonement for all wrongs done to others as the effects of one's acts are sealed on this day when a ram's horn (shofar) is blown ritually in the Synagogues. The liturgy in the Synagogue is quite long and involved and apart from introducing the period of penitence also contains special supplications for health, success and continued well being.

Yom Kippour

Yom Kippour is a solemn day of fasting and self examination. If on Shabbath one opens one's self and looks into eternity as stillness and serenity Yom Kippour inverts this. Eternity opens itself to us as it says in the utnetanneh tokef one of the most profound prayers said during the liturgy that was composed under the Byzantine Empire - ' We invoke the solemn holiness of this day, for it is a day of awe and terror.a great shofar is sounded, a still small voice is heard.even the army of Heaven will be judged.' The fast is quite austere and one is not permitted to eat, drink or smoke or indulge in sexual activities from the eve of the Fast until its termination on the following evening. The service in the Synagogue is made up of five parts each of which stresses repentance and culminates

in a general communal confession of sins. One of the unique elements in the Yom Kipour liturgy is the Avodah (Temple Worship) in which there is a re-enactment of the ceremonies carried out when the Temple stood in Jerusalem and the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies and recited solemnly the Sacred Name of God.

The liturgy dwells on the awesome power of God to give life and death and to bring on one the consequences of one's actions - good or bad. It also stresses that God is compassionate and merciful to those who repent and turn to Him and the Book of Jonah is read since it tells of how repentance draws man to God and erases the evil effects of his actions.

The last service - the Neilah - is quite dramatic as special prayers are made supplicating God's mercy and the Shema (Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One) is proclaimed by the community in the synagogue and after that the ram's horn is blown again in a long extended blast that seals the day - and the year.

Minor Holidays

The year is interspersed with several fasts as well as minor festivals that commemorate specific historical events such as Purim and Hannukah. The former takes place in the spring and celebrates the saving of the Jews of Bablyon (Persia) through the efforts of Queen Esther, King Xerxes Jewish wife). Hannukah celebrates the cleansing of the Temple in Jerusalem after its desecration by Syro-Hellenists in the 2nd cent BCE. Both festivals are especially popular with children and synagogues become quite joyously filled with them. At Purim children dress in costumes, play games that especially have to do with casting lots and raucously participate in the narration of the story of Queen and her efforts to save her people by blowing horns and shouting at each mention of the wicked Haman. During Hannukah a special lamp with nine oil lamps (or candles) is set up. For eight nights one by one each wick or candle is lit using the ninth (the Shamash) for the purpose of lighting them. They are lit one by one increasingly each night that celebrates the

miraculous self-rejuvenating oil that was found in the Temple after its cleansing.

The Festival of Tu Beshevat - the Feast of the Trees and Fruits - also takes place in the Spring and in recent years has been revived almost as an ecological celebration. For many centuries it was allowed to fall into insignificance due to the fact that it was essentially a Feast that was carried out in the Temple in Jerusalem. In the 16th cent. especially in Saphed, an Israeli city rich in Jewish mysticism, the feast was revived. and is rich in symbolism and meditation on life, death and re-birth in nature - of which we are a part.

part of his religious formation and bind him to both his community as well as to the wider community as he is bound to be, as is God, righteous and just to his fellow man, the flora and fauna of the world and hence to gently turn the world on its axis through acts of tikkunim - returning all of reality to its Source.

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Rites of Passage

In a small Jewish community the boundaries between the synagogue and the home are somewhat blurred and ill-defined and the joys and griefs of its members are shared intimately. For certain prayers and actions a minyan, (a quorum of ten men) must be in attendance. Hence for many of the most important moments in one's life as a Jew the community is by necessity involved. Circumcision must be performed on a male child on the eighth day of his birth in order to commit him to the Covenant of Abraham. On reaching thirteen years of age he becomes an adult in a ceremony called Bar Mitzvah when he assumes the responsibilities of the Covenant given on Sinai. In recent times it has become customary for a similar rite to be held for girls when they reach the age of twelve (Bat Mitzvah). Marriage is a religious rite insofar as there is both a ritual and special blessings that are said by the officiating rabbi. What is mainly essential, however, is that the mutual agreement of bride and groom to live as one must be witnessed by a minyan, ten men who represent the community. Death is marked by the careful cleansing of the body as having been made in the image of God and it is interred with care and respect. It is forbidden to disturb the resting place of the dead in any manner whatsoever.

The life of the observant Jew is marked by longing and expectation of God. The calendar especially draws him to nature; the changes of the seasons and the mysteries of life and death are cyclically made