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FESTIVALS OF HOPE --
PASSOVER AND EASTER

By Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum* (4-1-77)

Passover and Easter coincide again this year on the calendar, as they do so often, but historical evidence shows that their similarities of origin and practice are more than mere coincidence. The palm branches, for example, that are used on Palm Sunday have a root in Jewish practice. The celebration of Easter on Sunday likewise stems from ancient Israelite practice. Thus, in 1977, as Jews and Christians prepare to mark two of their most meaningful festivals, we should be aware of the roots of both and their special meaning that these two holidays hold for all humankind today.

This year, the Christian Holy Week begins with Palm Sunday, April 3., and reaches its climax seven days later on Easter Sunday. The celebration of the Jewish Passover holiday starts with the Seder ritual on the evening of April 2.

These major Christian and Jewish holy seasons stem from bonds of "family relationship" that link Christians and Jews to a common Biblical source. This does not mean that Jews and Christians do not ascribe differing meanings to these sacred days but the fact is that the positive interrelationships between the two are deeper and more significant than some people have been willing to acknowledge.

Easter cannot be understood today in all its meaning, including its rituals and its symbols, as Jesus and the early Christians knew and lived them, without studying more carefully the world of first century Pharasaic Judaism (on which all of contemporary Judaism is based). Such an examination reveals, for example, that the palm branches used on Palm Sunday stem from Israelite practice. The Gospel according to John (12:12 f.) states that a great multitude "that had come to the feast (of Passover)...took branches of palm trees and went out (from Jerusalem) to meet" Jesus as he approached the city. Historically we know that among the Israelites, the lulav, a collection of varied branches of which palms were the core, were used significantly in the marking of particular holidays, especially those with an agricultural association. The carrying of these branches was a key feature of ceremonies which involved praying for sufficient rainfall to assure the production of bountiful crops. Since the Passover festival, coinciding with the Spring planting, was an agricultural festival of prime importance, the lulav branches played a significant part, as they did in the celebration of Sukkot, the Fall harvest festival, and other holidays with an agricultural theme. In Jesus' day, many of the people who joined Jesus and his disciples on the road to the Mount of Olives, were performing the well-established lulav ceremony in keeping with Israelite tradition.

A second example of the interrelationships between Easter and early Israelite practice stems from the celebration of the holiday on Sunday. The question is asked as to why Jesus and many other Jews planning to celebrate the Passover festival at the Temple came to Jerusalem on Sunday, four days before the beginning of the holiday.

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*Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum is National Interreligious Affairs Director of the American Jewish Committee

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The answer lies in the fact that the Israelites of that day used a pentecontad calendar, which was essentially agricultural in character. It divided the year into seven periods, each of which, called a pentecontad, consisted of seven weeks plus one day. This fifteenth day stood apart from the normal seven-day week and was known as a most sacred and important day of the year. This day, marked with special holiness as the first day of the new year, became Easter Sunday.

In the early Jewish calendar, Sunday was the beginning of the week and the day was measured from sunrise to sunrise. In 950 B.C., during King Solomon's reign, the measurement of the date was changed to sunset to sunset. The Christians who observed Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday were preserving the practices of the earliest Jewish calendar.

When Jesus and his followers came to Jerusalem on Sunday bearing palms, they were engaging in a religious "purification rite" prior to the Passover holiday. The Christian practice of sunrise services on Easter Sunday replicates the Israelite practice of religious services at sunrise, with the special connotation for the day that was held to be the beginning of the new year.

The pilgrimage to the Mount of Olives also stems from ancient Jewish practice. Professor Julius Morgenstern points out that Jewish folk tradition held that on the Sunday preceding Passover, King David went to the Mount of Olives, also called Har Ha-Mashhit, the Mount of the Destroyer. The Angel of Death was supposed to reside there, and the belief was that the King entered the mountain cave for the seven days of Passover, where he struggled with the Angel of Death. The Israelites believed that King David defeated the Angel of Death, was resurrected and came to Jerusalem riding on an ass. Thus, the King of Israel returned from the realm of death to the realm of life, inaugurating for his people hopefully a new year of abundance and good. Jesus, who is portrayed in the Gospels as a descendant of David, was thus clearly reenacting the drama of redemption in keeping with the folk traditions of the Jewish people.

In these and in many other aspects, Passover and Easter both confront Jews and Christians with the realities of evil, corruption, sin and injustice in our imperfect world. But both Jews and Christians bear witness to the fact that the One God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and of Jesus, is a God experienced in acts of liberation.

The farmers of ancient Israel were helped to endure the bleakness and barrenness of winter by the promise of spring and its renewal of life and hope. Today, at a time of bleakness compounded of violence, crime, greed and injustice, the springtime promise of renewal and of hope for mankind, as symbolized by Passover and Easter, are more needed than ever.