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# ***The Jewish Holidays***

***their meanings, origins and history***

BY RABBI MARC H. TANENBAUM, DIRECTOR OF THE INTERRELIGIOUS AFFAIRS DEPARTMENT  
OF THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE



Jewish festivals, fasts and holy days are supreme expressions of the essence of Judaism—the halowing of life. Central to the existence of the Jewish people is the affirmation that “God, *Torah* and Israel are one.” Jews have survived their 3,000-year-long history, most of which was lived in the diaspora—the dispersion or exile—solely because, says Jewish tradition, Israel and God are bound to each other by the Covenant (in Hebrew, *B’ris*), a special contract that is binding upon all generations. Under the terms of the Covenant, Israel has agreed, in return for God’s providential care, to serve as “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation”—that is, to serve as God’s witness in the world of men. The holy task to which the Jews committed themselves at the foot of Mount Sinai is to live as a model society, a concrete fulfillment of the teachings of the *Torah*, so succinctly summarized in the words of the prophet Micah: “to do justice, to love mercy, to walk humbly with thy God.”

The *Torah*, which comprises the Five Books of Moses (*Chumosh* or *Pentateuch*), contains the religious commandments (*mitsvos*) and the moral and legal precepts of Judaism. Regarded as the supreme authority for all human conduct, the *Torah* is conceived of by Jews as dynamic since its teachings are developed continuously throughout the ages. These teachings are supplemented by the wisdom and insights of successive generations, the Oral Tradition, or *Torah She’be’al Peh*. The *Talmud* is a vast compendium of the discourses of the rabbis and their decisions covering the creative period of Pharasaic Judaism from roughly 30 B.C.E. to 500 C.E. (B.C.E. stands for Before the Common Era and is equivalent chronologically to B.C. C.E. stands for Common Era and is chronologically equivalent to A.D.) It is recognized as the guide in religious practices and ethical behavior, affecting the ever-changing situations of daily life and moment-to-moment conduct. Crucial to the religious commitment of every Jew is the study and interpretation of the *Torah*, which is no less important than prayer or ritual observance. The esteem associated with study is reflected today in Jewish devotion to the life of the intellect.

All of the Jewish festivals, fasts and holy days are

celebrated as living experiences, acts of present-day commitment, rather than nostalgic reminiscences. Passover, the celebration of the exodus from Egypt, is thus conceived of by Jews as a present-day reenactment of the liberation from slavery. “For *we* were slaves to Pharaoh in the land of Egypt . . .,” declares every Jew during Passover at the annual family *Seder* service. Similarly, *Shavuot* (Pentecost) epitomizes an annual reaffirmation by every Jew of his acceptance of the Covenant revealed at Mount Sinai and a recognition that the Revelation is *continuous*.

The observance of these festivals, fasts and holy days is a collective act of the *community* of Israel, the people of God, and not a performance of private devotion. It is for this reason that Jewish holidays, as well as the personal events of birth or marriage, are never restricted to the home or to the synagogue but are celebrated partly in each. Some are centered more in the home and some more in the community, but any major event is shared with the group.

## THE JEWISH CALENDAR

To understand these festivals and the traditions of Judaism they incorporate, it is helpful that one have an understanding of the Jewish calendar. Unlike the Western calendar, which is based on the sun and contains 365 days in the year, and unlike the Islamic calendar, based on the phases of the moon and having 354 days, the Jewish calendar is based on a synthesis of the two. The months are figured according to the moon (twelve months of twenty-nine-and-a-half days each) and the year according to the sun. A whole month is added to the Jewish calendar in leap years in order to make up the extra eleven days. This thirteenth month is known as *Adar Sheni* (Second *Adar*). For civil purposes the year begins in the spring (March-April); for religious purposes it commences in autumn (September-October). Although New Year’s Day (*Rosh Hashonoh*) comes in the autumn, the Jew feels that the annual cycle begins in the spring with the celebration of Passover (*Pesach*). In East-European Jewish life, workers were hired “from *Pesach* to *Pesach*.”

The following are the twelve months of the



# Shabbos

Sabbath



Shabbos, the Sabbath day of rest which commences Friday at sunset (*Erev Shabbos*) and concludes Saturday after sunset, derives its character from the biblical declaration that "in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day He rested [*sha'vas*] and was refreshed" (Exodus 31:17). The Jewish conception of the Sabbath involves both physical rest—that is, abstention from work—and spiritual replenishment through study and worship. In Jewish tradition the Sabbath is personified as a bride whose bridegroom is Israel. *Kabbolas Shabbos*, the greeting of the Sabbath on Friday just before the evening prayers, is celebrated as a symbolic wedding festivity and is regarded as

one of the most beautiful parts of the Sabbath observance. The *Talmud* (*Shabbos* 119a) tells us that on the eve of the Sabbath, certain Palestinian rabbis of the third century would put on their best clothes and say, "Come, let us go out and meet the Sabbath Queen." Under the influence of the Kabbalists, the religious mystics of the sixteenth century, the ceremony of greeting the Sabbath with psalms and symbolic marriage songs was introduced in all Jewish communities. To this day it is the custom for the rabbi, the *chazan* (cantor) and the congregation to turn about at the last stanza of one of these songs, "*L'choh Dodi*" (Come, O cherished friend to meet the bride) and face the door of the syna-

gogue in the poetic act of expecting the Sabbath Queen to come to her beloved groom, Israel.

The men and boys of the family come home from the synagogue after Friday-evening services. Their first words of zesty greeting to everyone are "*Gut Shabbos*." The mother has already performed the ritual of lighting the candles and blessing them in Hebrew. The table is prepared, with its white cloth and two Sabbath loaves, the twists called *challo*s, symbolic of the double portion of manna received by the Israelites in the wilderness on the eve of Sabbath (Exodus 16: 22, 29). The loaves are covered with a finely embroidered cloth, symbolizing the "fine layer of dew" which covered the manna. The house is imbued with a spirit of sacred rest and family peace, and the father of the house leads the family in singing "*Sholom Aleichem*."

The *Kiddush* is recited over the wine, establishing the presence of the Sabbath Queen in the family and the participation of all its members in the Sabbath holiness. The Sabbath meal, with traditional dishes including gefilte fish, noodle soup, carrot pudding (*tsimmes*) and poultry, is served. *Z'miros*, table songs whose theme is the delight of the Sabbath day, are sung between courses and after the meal. The pleasant afterglow of the Sabbath meal, the putting aside of all concerns about business, money and family problems, and the slow, measured pace of the Sabbath day itself, with its emphasis on the life of the spirit, all strengthen the popular Jewish conviction that "the Sabbath is a foretaste of the world to come."

## SHABBOS HAMALKOH

"Sabbath Queen"

This popular Sabbath song is sung to welcome the Sabbath Queen. It reflects the idea that Sabbath is a queen and a bride, and on the Sabbath, "every Jew is a king."

## SHOLOM ALEICHEM

"Peace unto you, O angels of peace. May your coming be in peace, and your going forth."

This melody, which is widely known, is one of the most characteristic Sabbath songs. It is a greeting to the two angels who, according to mystical legend, accompany every Jew from the synagogue to his home on Friday night.



## Rosh Hashonoh

Jewish New Year

Rosh Hashonoh ushers in the most solemn period of the Jewish religious calendar. Known in the Bible as the Day of Memorial (*Yom ha-Zikaron*), which falls on the new moon of the seventh month, *Tishri*, it inaugurates the Ten Days of Penitence (*Aseres Yemei Teshuvah*). During this period, as tradition asserts, the world, which was created on Rosh Hashonoh, stands under judgment, and the destinies of men are determined for the ensuing year. This period of self-examination, confession and repentance is climaxed by the observance of *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement.

The traditional Rosh Hashonoh greeting, recited in Hebrew usually after synagogue services, is "*L'shonoh to'voh ti-ko-seyvu*" (May you be inscribed for a good year) or, more simply in Yiddish, "*A gut yor.*" The Hebrew greeting refers to the traditional imagery of the Book of Life, in which the worshipper seeks to have his name inscribed for the coming year. Rosh Hashonoh, which is observed by Orthodox and Conservative Jews for two days and by Reform for one day, is not a home festival. Meals are eaten in the home—with the ceremony of spreading honey on the first slice of bread or on a piece of apple eaten as an omen for a sweet year—but the major observance takes place in the synagogue or temple. The atmosphere in the synagogue is at first festive, but the prayers are chanted by the *chazan* and congregation with a specific intonation and pious fervor associated with the Days of Awe, evoking a profoundly religious attitude. Perhaps the highest peak of religious feeling is reached when the *shofar* (ram's horn) is blown during the morning service and four times more during subsequent services, symbolizing, among other things, the sovereignty of God over men and nations.

### UN'SANEH TOKEF

"Let us tell how utterly holy this day is."

The chanting of this liturgical poem, which is repeated on *Yom Kippur*, is regarded as one of the most exalted moments of the service. Among East-European Jews especially, when the Ark of the *Torah* is opened and the chant of this prayer begins, one can hear sobs from men and women. A section of the *piy-yut* (poem) tells of the grandeur and majesty of the Great Day of Judgment:

On Rosh Hashonoh their destiny is



inscribed and on *Yom Kippur* it is sealed; how many shall pass away and how many shall be brought into existence; who shall live and who shall die. . . . But repentance, prayer and charity cancel the stern decree.

Legend holds that this poem was written in the tenth century by the scholar Rabbi Amnon of Mayence at the time of his martyrdom when he faced the choice of forced baptism or death.

### OVINU MALKEYNU

"Our Father, our King, we have sinned before Thee." This is possibly the oldest and certainly among the most stirring of all the litanies of the Jewish year. The *Talmud* (*Ta'anis* 25b) attributes some of its lines to Rabbi Akiba, the great second-century sage, who spoke them on a fast day in a

time of drought. In the course of the centuries, new invocations were added, some expressing normal tribulations and needs of human existence, while others, like the grim refrains toward the end, are the responses of Jews to the terrible massacres that accompanied the Black Death in the fourteenth century, when in the whole of Germany only three Jewish communities escaped total annihilation. The present Ashkenazic, or East-European, rite consists of forty-four invocations that are recited throughout the Days of Awe, except on the Sabbath when one ought not to be sad but cheerful. The *Midrash*, or rabbinic commentary, says regarding this prayer: "As soon as a man has the moral strength to see himself as he is and make the confession 'I have sinned,' the powers of evil lose their hold over him."



# Yom Kippur

Day of Atonement

Yom Kippur is the most sacred of the Jewish holy days. It comes ten days after Rosh Hashonoh, on the tenth of Tishri, and is a solemn fast day from sundown to sundown. Known in Jewish tradition as "the Sabbath of Sabbaths," it is characterized by individual and communal spiritual regeneration to be sought through fasting, self-examination, confessions of wrongdoing and atonement. The biblical foundation of Yom Kippur is in the Book of Leviticus 16:30-31:

For on this day shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you; from all your sins shall ye be clean before the Lord. It is a Sabbath of rest unto you, and ye shall afflict your souls; it is a statute forever.

As commentators have observed, Yom Kippur is not a magical "Day of Pardon"; rather, it is an annual experience designed to restore a dedicated people to the state of holiness necessary to its mission in the world. During the long day of prayer in the synagogue, each worshipper confesses his own sins and the sins of all, for each is implicated in and responsible for the acts of all.

As it is a religious commandment to fast on Yom Kippur, so is it a religious requirement to eat festively the evening before. The emphasis on feasting before and after the fast underscores the fact that the purpose of abstinence from all food and drink on Yom Kippur is not to mortify the flesh but to sensitize the soul. The soul is not helped by physical suffering, Judaism holds, but only by the symbolism and by the turning of the person away from self-indulgence in material things. After the last meal of Yom Kippur eve is over, the father blesses all his children, laying his hands on their heads, and kisses each one as if

they all were going on a long journey. The whole family hastens off to the synagogue, and from then until sundown the next day, they will not leave the sanctuary except to sleep and will not eat or drink.

The synagogue is crowded, and the atmosphere has a special quality and intensity. The sanctuary gleams in white, with a special white cover for the Ark and the pulpit; the white robes of the rabbi, cantor and other pious Jews; the white *tale'sim* (prayer shawls) and *yarmulkes* (skull caps)—all symbols of purity and spiritual cleanliness, recalling the white linen garments the High Priest of Israel (once called the Pontiff) donned as he ministered on this day in the Holy of Holies in the ancient Temple. An air of solemn and exalted absorption falls over the congregation as the service commences with the cantor's chanting of the moving "*Kol Nidrei*."

Perhaps the most vivid moment occurs on Yom Kippur day, when the rabbi and cantor lead the congregation in the dramatic reenactment, through poetic recitations and ancient melodies, of the ceremony of atonement as practiced in the Temple almost 3,000 years ago. After reciting in Hebrew the ancient confessionals of the High Priest, in which he asked God's forgiveness for his own sins, the sins of the other priests and the sins of the entire people of Israel, the cantor and the rabbi prostrate themselves on the ground and bury their faces, exactly as did their ancestors in Jerusalem.

The concluding prayers of Yom Kippur are called *N'iloh*, which means closing. Originally, the word probably referred to the closing of the gates of the Temple, but Jewish tradition has

spiritualized its meaning by interpreting it to refer to the closing of the gates of heaven. During the closing hours of the day, when the sun is setting and the shadows fall, one has the final opportunity to do penance wholeheartedly and to plead to be "inscribed and sealed in the Book of Life." One long, resounding blast, symbolizing sacred jubilation, is then blown on the ram's horn.

## KOL NIDREI "All Vows"

The "*Kol Nidrei*" is the powerful and solemn overture to the entire Yom Kippur service. Recited on Yom Kippur evening by the cantor and congregation, this plaintive melody sets the mood of humble contrition and hope for forgiveness that dominates the spirit of the Great Day until the next sundown. This Aramaic prayer is a formula for the dispensation of vows, and scholars differ over its origins. The most generally held view dates the "*Kol Nidrei*" from the Spanish Inquisition of the fifteenth century, when some 150,000 Jews were compelled to adopt Christianity or be expelled from the country. Many of these forcibly converted Jews attended the synagogue covertly at the risk of their lives and used the "*Kol Nidrei*" text as a form of renouncing the vows imposed upon them by the Inquisition. The melody of this prayer originated in the sixteenth century in southern Germany and is used universally by Ashkenazic Jews; Sephardic (Spanish-Portuguese) Jews recite the text to the chant of *S'lichos*, simple prayers of supplication. This stirring prayer has made such an imprint on the observance of Yom Kippur eve that this night is often referred to as the eve of "*Kol Nidrei*."



# Sukkos

Festival of Booths

Sukkos is both a seasonal and a historical holiday. It is a festival of thanksgiving, celebrating the reaping of the summer fruits at the beginning of autumn, and relates to the time when our farmer ancestors dwelled in booths during the "ingathering of the harvest," another name for Sukkos. Historically, it commemorates the perilous journey of the Israelites through the wilderness to the Promised Land. The reference to booths derives from the biblical commandment: "Ye shall dwell in booths seven days... that your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the Land of Egypt" (Leviticus 23: 42-43). Sukkos is one of the three pilgrim festivals—Pesach and Shovuos are the

other two—marked in ancient times by statutory pilgrimages to the sanctuary or Temple in Jerusalem. Many of the Sukkos ceremonials observed today derive from the Temple practices. The symbols of Sukkos as the festival of ingathering are bundles of plants, usually imported from the Holy Land: the *lulav*, the tall palm branch bound with willow and myrtle, and the *esrog*, the aromatic citron. Both in the synagogue and in the *sukkah*, or booth, at home (when urban living allows for building one), the worshipper holds fruit and boughs together, symbolizing one human brotherhood mutually responsible for the welfare and good name of the whole, and shakes them up and down in the direction of the four corners of the earth while chanting a Hebrew

prayer of gratitude for divine blessings. The two festive days of Sukkos, on which work is forbidden, are followed by five intermediate days, *chol ha-moed* (literally, "the weekly [weekdays] within the holy days"). The climax of the eight-day holiday (Reform Jews observe seven days) comes in the synagogue on Simchas Torah (Rejoicing with the Torah), when the end of the reading of the Torah scrolls is celebrated.

On the eve of Simchas Torah, gaiety fills the synagogue as the Torah scrolls, with their gleaming satin covers and silver crowns, are taken out of the Ark. Each scroll is carried around the *bimah* (pulpit) at least seven times, and each adult man carries one around once. The men are called to *Ha'kofos* (circling), as they are invited to the reading of the Torah. The circling process is long and festive, and the cantor leads each tour, chanting a prayer over and over. Among the *Chassidim*, a pietist group, this is an especially joyous observance since the members are devoted to serving God in *simchah* (cheerfulness). The *Ha'kofos* prepares for the next day of Simchas Torah, when the last verses and then the opening verses of the Five Books of Moses are read, which begins the yearly cycle of Torah reading. Since the days of the *G'onim*, the seventh to the eleventh centuries, it has been deemed a great honor to be either the *Choson Torah* (the bridegroom of the Torah) and be called to the reading of the last section of the Fifth Book of Moses or to be the *Choson B'reshis* (the bridegroom of Genesis) and be called to open the reading of the First Book. All over the world on this day, with the same prayers and the same intonation, Jews rejoice over the Torah and renew their loyalty to the Covenant.

Shemini Atzeres

## V'SOMACHTOH

"And You Shall Rejoice"

This is a gay, popular song that reflects the spirit of rejoicing over the Torah, the theme of Simchas Torah.

## SISU V'SIMCHU

"Rejoice and Be Happy"

The text of this song, translated into English, is:  
Rejoice and be happy in festive glee  
And gaily clap your hands.  
Clang brass cymbals, loud and free,  
And sing in merry bands.





# Chanukkah

Festival of Lights



Chanukkah, which brings festive joy and the light of the *menorah* (candelabrum) in the midst of the drab winter season, is rapidly becoming one of the greatest Jewish folk festivals, although traditionally it is a minor event not even mentioned in the Bible. It commemorates one of the great events in Jewish history, the revolt and victory of Judah the Maccabee and his followers over the forces of the Syrian monarch Antiochus. In their struggles against Hellenism and to preserve the right to follow in the path of their God, the Maccabees became the first fighters for freedom of conscience known in world history.

After triumphing over their oppressors, the Maccabees undertook as one of their first acts the cleansing and rededication of the defiled Temple, whose service had been interrupted for three years. On the twenty-fifth day of *Kislev* (December) in 165 B.C.E., they rededicated (Chanukkah means dedication) the Temple with great ceremony and decreed that an eight-day festival commencing on that day be observed yearly. The concept of eight days derives from the tale that when the Maccabees searched the Temple, they found only one small flask of sacred oil, enough to light the *menorah* for one day. A "miracle" occurred, and the tiny quantity

of oil lasted for eight days.

In commemoration of these acts, Jews today light oil lamps or candles each Chanukkah evening at dusk. The practice is to light one candle the first night and to increase the number by one on each successive evening, the candles being lighted from right to left, the direction of Hebrew writing. Special blessings over the candles, prayers and songs are chanted as part of the religious ceremony. In many ways, Chanukkah has become a children's holiday, erroneously thought of by some as a Jewish equivalent of Christmas. Although these festivals are completely different in meaning and ritual, apparently the giving of gifts on both of them has become the common bond. In addition to the fascination of participating in lighting the *menorah*, Jewish children are delighted by eight nights of *Chanukkah-gelt*, the present of money and other gifts to which each child is entitled from every adult relative. The holiday's festivity is increased by the serving of *latkes* (potato pancakes) and the spinning of the *dreidel*, the four-sided top decorated with four Hebrew letters that symbolize the sentence: "A great miracle happened there."

## MO'UZ TSUR

"Fortress Rock" or "Rock of Ages"

One of the most popular songs of Chanukkah, "*Mo'oz Tsur*" preserves the religious character of this festival. It is a hymn recalling the redemption of Israel from Egypt, the Babylonian exile, Haman's threat of extermination of the Jews of Persia, and finally the rescue from the terror of Antiochus. "*Mo'oz Tsur*" appeared for the first time among the Ashkenazic Jews in the Middle Ages.

## MI YIMALLEL

"Who can retell the mighty deeds that befell Israel?  
Who can count them?"

Although Chanukkah is observed as a religious festival, there is inevitably the reminder of the national and political background of the holiday, the militant revolt of the Maccabees and their martial victory. This song, which emphasizes the physical redemption of the Jewish people through perennial heroism, is especially popular in Israel.



# Chamishoh Osor Bi-Sh'vot

New Year for Trees



religious  
significance  
of New Year  
of Trees

Chamishoh Osor Bi-Sh'vot occurs on the fifteenth of *Sh'vot* (February) and is a purely popular celebration of no historical significance. Originally observed by the Jewish farmers of ancient Palestine as a nature festival on mid-winter day, it is said now to mark the date when the sap begins to rise in the trees of the Holy Land. It is customary on this day to eat of the fruit of trees that grow in Israel and to recite a blessing over it—apples, almonds, carobs, figs, nuts and pomegranates. The carob (known in European folklore as St. John's Bread after John

the Baptist, who ate carobs rather than locusts when he went into the wilderness preaching repentance) is especially favored by Jews on this day because in Jewish tradition the carob betokens humility, a necessary element of penitence. It has become a widespread custom among school children in present-day Israel to observe the day by planting new trees. There are no special synagogue services and no liturgy for this holiday, although among certain pious Jews it is the practice to sit up late the previous evening, reciting passages of the Bible that deal with trees,

fruits or the fertility of the earth.

## HASHKEDIYAH

"The Almond Tree," also known as  
"Tu Bi-Sh'vot Is Here"

This is a Jewish Arbor Day song hailing the New Year for Trees.

## ATSEY ZEYTIM OMDIM

"Olive Trees Are Standing"

This folk song, in the form of a round, is very often sung in honor of Chamishoh Osor Bi-Sh'vot.

use  
Ashkenazi



Purim is celebrated on the fourteenth of *Adar* (roughly, March) and commemorates the triumph of Esther and Mordecai in foiling the plot of Haman, vizier of King Ahasuerus (Xerxes) of Persia, who sought to exterminate the Jews of the Persian Empire and who had chosen that day by lot (*pur*) to carry out his plans. The story is related in the biblical Book of Esther, which is read in the synagogue from a *megillah* (scroll) both in the morning and on the preceding evening. Although some Jewish scholars hold the origins of Purim to be obscure, it has become the most joyous festival of Jewish deliverance. The Book of Esther, perhaps more a historical novel than a book of history, has been read for generations not only as the encounter between Mordecai, the Jew, and Haman, the Agagite, but as an allegory of the struggle that Jews have had against the enemies that sought to destroy them. Thus, whenever a Jewish community was saved from a horrible fate, from pogrom or exile, which a Haman-like despot tried to impose, the community would celebrate yearly the day of deliverance as a special local *Purim* in the same manner as the universal Jewish Purim; for example, there are the *Purim* of Egypt based on an event in 1524, the *Wintz Purim* of Frankfurt Jews of the seventeenth century, and many others. The thirteenth day of *Adar*, the day before Purim, is the Fast of Esther, which is observed by very few people since it is not strictly ordained. The day after Purim is *Shushan Purim*, named for the capital of the old Persian kingdom. The Jews of Shushan celebrated the victory over Haman a day later than did the other Persian Jews.

*Purim* is the merriest day in the Jewish year, and from its beginnings amongst the Jews of Persia, it has been celebrated as a spring masquerade, a festival of play and frolic, of merry-making and mischief, the one day of the year when frivolity is permitted and when the law of moderation in all things may be briefly relaxed. Drinking, even to excess, is regarded as a *mitsvoh* (commandment). Practical jokes, masquerading in odd costumes and boisterousness are taken for granted; on this carnival day, it is right to be the way one should never be at any other time.

The highlight of Purim, however, is the reading of the *Megillah* of Esther in the synagogue. When the reader pronounces the name of Haman for the first time, at the beginning of the third



chapter, a deafening tumult breaks out as children twirl their tin or wooden noisemakers and the elders stamp their feet, all designed to beat out the name of the tyrant.

Children in religious schools participate in spectacles and plays on Purim themes. After returning from the synagogue on the morning of Purim, *hamantaschen*, three-cornered cakes filled with poppy seed, are served, and at the noon meal, *kreplach*, three-cornered pastry filled with meat, is served with soup—based on the legend that Haman wore a three-cornered hat. There is an extensive interchange of gifts (*shalach-monos*) among Jews. The gifts consist mainly of food delicacies. Poor people are encouraged to give modest gifts and are rewarded with presents of money. After the evening prayers (*Maariv*), the family sits down to the Purim feast and makes merry in honor of the day.

In Israel, Purim has become a national carnival day known as *Ad-lo-yoda* (literally, "until one does not know")—that is, one makes merry until

one does not know whether he is Mordecai or Haman! It is customary both in Israel and in Jewish schools in the diaspora to elect a Queen Esther to reign at the Purim festivities.

#### SHOSHANAS YA'AKOV

"The Lily of Jacob"

Although "*Shoshanas Ya'akov*," which comes from the last paragraph of a Purim meditation, is usually translated as "The Lily of Jacob," it is evidently a poetical name for the Jews of Shushan, the capital of old Persia.

The Jews of Shushan rejoiced and were glad when they all of them saw Mordecai in the purple. Thou hast ever been Israel's salvation, and its hope in every generation, to make known that all who hope in Thee shall not be ashamed, neither shall any be confounded who put their trust in Thee.

#### CHAG PURIM

"The Festival of Purim"

The theme of this folk tune is: Purim, with its songs, dances and masks, is a merry day for us.

In Jerusalem, Purim is observed on Shushan Purim



# Pesach

## Passover

Pesach, the oldest of the Jewish festivals, dates back to the nomadic and agricultural past of Israel. As a seasonal observance, described in the Book of Exodus 12, it marks the beginning of the barley harvest and is celebrated at full moon in the first month of spring by the family paschal meal and the six-day Feast of Unleavened Bread. As a historical occasion, it commemorates the beginning of Israel's national existence, the redemption from bondage to Pharaoh in Egypt. Known in Jewish tradition as the Season of Our Freedom (*Z'man cheim-senu*), the saga of the liberation of the Israelites from slavery has become a universal parable, whose symbolism has meaning for all people who strive toward freedom and new life. Pesach not only celebrates redemption as a past event but is celebrated, through the Jewish ceremonial at the *Seder* service on the first two nights of the festival, as a present experience. "Every Jew should regard himself as if he had personally come out of Egypt," are the words recited each Pesach by every Jew who reads the *Haggadah*, the running commentary of legend, prayer and exhortation by which the *Seder* (order of service) is conducted. Past and present are joined with future hope as Pesach also reaffirms the belief that the future deliverance from war and oppression will come about through a Messiah, a second Moses, who will free the Jews and mankind on the very eve of Passover.

The famous *Seder*, which brings the whole family together for the long, dramatic service and meal, is the most important feast of the holidays. Jewish adults cherish childhood memories of going to their grandparents' homes for the first day's *Seder*. They recall the *matsoh* (unleavened bread), the strange and symbolic dishes that are served at the proper moment, the goblets of wine for the family and the prophet Elijah, the candles, the white tablecloth that symbolizes purity and cleanliness, and the head of the household reclining on pillows, which shows that though once the Jews were slaves, he is now a free man.

The rabbis deemed it a sacred obligation to spread a full understanding of the eternal significance of how a God of justice and freedom espoused the cause of brick-making slaves against a royal oppressor. They evolved the *Seder* service,

whose ceremonies became a notable pedagogic device for educating generations in religion, sacred history and morality. The *Seder* service begins with the four questions, asked by the youngest child. "*Mah Nishtanoh?*" ("Why is this night different from all other nights?") the child begins in Hebrew, sometimes translating into Yiddish or his native language. With his questions he starts the whole ritual; the *Seder* is then performed to answer his questions.

The *Haggadah* is read, chanted and sung by all at the table to well-loved melodies, to be interrupted only by the distribution of ritual foods, which symbolize phases of the exodus. These are: *matsoh*, the unleavened bread of affliction; *maror*, the bitter herbs recalling the bitter lot of the Israelites in Egypt and of Jews in many other lands after Egypt; *charoses*, a mixture of chopped apples, nuts and wine, symbolizing the clay from which the children of Israel fashioned bricks to build the pyramids of Egypt; a burned shank-bone commemorating the paschal sacrifice in the Temple; a roasted egg, which is dipped in salt water as a reminder of mourning and tears for the destruction of the Temple; Four cups of wine must be drunk, recalling the four expressions used to describe God's deliverance of Israel (Exodus 6:6-7). An elaborate meal follows, climaxed by a bit of child's play over a "stolen" piece of *matsoh*, called the *afikomen*, and the second phase of the *Seder* begins.

The second phase consists entirely of reading the *Haggadah*, which is a repetition of the biblical story of the exodus with rabbinic comments, and the chanting of psalms, hymns, folk songs and children's rhymes. The high point of this section is the throwing open of the door to the prophet Elijah, who, according to the children, enters the room and sips from his goblet. The prophet has arrived today; the Messiah will come in the future. The service concludes with the singing of the story of "*Chad Gadyoh*" (Only One Kid), a children's fancy replete with legend and symbolism.

On the following night, the second *Seder*, a replica of the first (but not as exciting) is observed by Orthodox and Conservative Jews, but not by Reform Jews, who observe only the first and last days of Passover as full holidays. The four in-between days are *chol ha-moed* (the weekly

[weekdays] within the holy days) during which work goes on but no *chomets* (leaven) is eaten. The services in the synagogue contain special *piy-yutim* (hymns) taken from the *Machzor*, the special prayer book for the festivals.

### MAH NISHTANO?H

"Why is this night different from all other nights?"

The four questions asked at the *Seder* by the youngest child are found in the *Mishnah* (*Pesachim* 10:4), the compilation of sayings and statements of the rabbis covering the period 30 B.C.E. to 220 C.E. The practice is ancient, dating back to the Temple in Jerusalem. The number four is prominent throughout the *Seder* service: the four questions, the four cups of wine and the parable of the four sons.

### DAYENU

"Alone it would have sufficed us."

This passage from the *Haggadah* is a Litany of Wonders that summarizes the favors that God has bestowed on Israel since the exodus. As each of these benefits is recited at the *Seder*, the family responds loudly with the word "*Dayenu*," meaning "Alone it would have sufficed us," or "We should have thought it enough." The fifteen divine favors enumerated in this passage are said to correspond to the fifteen psalms known as the *Shir Ha'malos* (Songs of Ascent) and also to the numerical value of the Hebrew letters *Yud Heh*, which spell the divine name *Yah*. The general theme of "*Dayenu*" is that the liberation from Egypt was not completed until Israel had received the *Torah* and settled in the Promised Land.

The third and fourth cups of wine are drunk

ELIYOHU HANOVI  
"Elijah the Prophet"

The theme of this Chassidic chant is:  
May the prophet Elijah come soon,  
In our time,  
With the Messiah, Son of David.

### CHAD GADYOH

"Only One Kid"

This song is intended as entertainment for the children to help keep them awake until the conclusion of the *Seder* service. It is an allegory of the various empires and nations that sought to consume Israel but were in turn consumed.

Seven days

who observe eight days



**Pesach**  
Passover





# Lag Bo'Omer

"Mid-Lenten" Period

Lag Bo'Omer (the word *Lag* derives from the Hebrew letters *Lamed* and *Gimmel*, which have the numerical value of thirty-three) marks the thirty-third day, virtually the middle, of the *Omer*, the seven-week period of austerity between *Pesach* and *Shovuos* (Pentecost). It falls on the eighteenth day of *Iyar* (April-May) and has no formal, ritual observance. During the *Omer* days, which are observed as a kind of *Lent*, it is not permitted to marry, to cut the hair or nails, to wear new clothes, or to attend any form of public entertainment. Also, the very pious fast every Monday and Thursday. On Lag Bo'Omer, the restrictions are relaxed for twenty-four hours, or according to some rabbinic authorities, right up to *Shovuos*.

*Omer*, a Hebrew word meaning sheaf, refers to the scriptural commandment (Leviticus 23:15) that from the day when the first sheaf of barley is offered to God in the sanctuary, seven full weeks must be counted until two loaves of new bread are offered to Him at harvesttime. The counting, known in Hebrew as *S'firoh*, is begun on the second night of Passover and is performed in a ceremonial manner every evening at sunset during the forty-nine days.

Various explanations for the austerity are offered in Jewish tradition by seeking to link this folk festival with some event in Jewish history. On Lag Bo'Omer, it is said, the scourge of death ceased among the thousands of pupils of the

second-century sage Rabbi Akiba who were stricken by a plague. But this explanation is based on a misreading of a passage in the *Talmud*. Another historic connection was sought in the claim that on this day the manna first began to fall in the wilderness. But Exodus 16:13 asserts that this event occurred on the sixteenth, not the eighteenth, of the month.

The Kabbalists, religious mystics, declared that on Lag Bo'Omer, Rabbi Simeon ben Jochai, the legendary father of Jewish mysticism, revealed his mysteries to his disciples just before his death. In tribute to him, a pilgrimage is made on the evening before the festival to the traditional site of his grave in the village of Meron, in Israel. At the grave site, the pilgrims light bonfires and sing and dance all night.

An old custom associated with Lag Bo'Omer is that of children going to the forest with bows and arrows and enjoying the outdoor world of woods and fields.

## ALEY GIVAH

"Go Up to the Hills of Judah"

The English translation of the text of this song begins:

On Judah's hills, far from the throng,  
A shomer's flute hums plaintive song.  
A shepherd tune he softly plays  
To call back lambs and colt that strays.  
Lee, lee, lee.



# Shavuos

Pentecost, Festival of Weeks

Shavuos, which follows the "Lenten" period of *Omer*, is known in Jewish tradition as *Chag ha-Kotsir*, the feast of the harvest, and also as *Yom ha-Bikkurim*, the day of the offering of the first loaves of the new crop to God, as enjoined by Leviticus 23:17. These designations, linking the festival with the end of the barley harvest in ancient Palestine, emphasize the biblical view of the presence of divine salvation in nature and of man's partnership with God in creation. But what has elevated this nature festival into a historic festival of great spiritual significance has been its association with the giving of the *Torah* to Israel. Biblical narrative states that the Israelites, after wandering for seven weeks in the wilderness, reached Mount Sinai in the month of *Sivan*, exactly three months after their departure from Egypt (Exodus 19:1). It was on the sixth day of *Sivan*, asserts Jewish tradition, that the Ten Commandments were given to Israel, thus establishing *Shavuos* as *Z'man Matan Torah-senu* (the Season of the Giving of Our *Torah*). The rabbis speak of *Shavuos* as the concluding festival to Passover, for the deliverance from bondage was not an end in itself; it was the prelude to Sinai, where Israel crowned the freedom obtained on Passover with the vow to become "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

The dominant theme of the giving of the Law and the Covenant concluded between God and His people is reflected in the services of the synagogue. On the first day of *Shavuos*, the lesson from the *Torah* includes the solemn reading of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 19-20). The Book of Ruth is read as a prelude to the ~~*Minhah*~~ *(afternoon service)* because it expresses the two main features of the Festival of Weeks: the ingathering of the harvest, and the acceptance of the Law and Revelation of God by a pagan woman who embraced the faith of Israel. On the second day, the reading is from Deuteronomy 15:19-16:17, which deals with the observance of the Feast of First Fruits.

The universal meaning of the Decalogue for all mankind was affirmed by the rabbis who taught that the Revelation at Sinai was given in desert territory which belongs to no one nation exclusively, and it was heard not by Israel alone but by all the inhabitants of the earth. A *Midrash* (rabbinic commentary) points out that the divine voice divided itself into the seventy

tongues then spoken on earth so that all the children of men might understand the redemptive message contained in these one hundred twenty Hebrew words that form the fundamentals of universal morality.

Unlike *Pesach* and *Sukkos*, *Shavuos* has no distinctive ceremony. In many homes and synagogues, it is customary to decorate with flowers and branches, harking back to the ancient rejoicing in the gifts of the earth. Orthodox and Conservative Jews observe two days of *Shavuos*, which fall on the sixth and seventh of *Sivan*; in Israel and among Reform Jews, one day is observed, as originally ordained. In modern Jewish life, it has become customary in Conservative and Reform congregations to confirm boys and girls on *Shavuos*; in this ceremony, the adolescents pledge their adherence to the Covenant, which was concluded on this day with their forebears. It has also been customary that the Jewish child be initiated into the study of the *Torah*, Jewish religion and the Hebrew language on *Shavuos*

so that to him too the Festival becomes a personal experience of revelation.

The great family feature of *Shavuos* is the serving of dairy dishes in all possible combinations: *blintzes*, *kreplach* with cheese, cheese *strudel*. One explanation for this custom is that when the Jews returned to their tents after receiving the *Torah*, they were so tired and hungry that they could not wait until the women prepared a meat meal, so they hastened to eat whatever dairy products were available.

## BORUCH ELOHEYNU

"Blessed Is Our Lord"

Blessed is our Lord Who created us for His glory,  
Who distinguished us from the erring,  
Who gave us *Torah* and everlasting life.

## YISMACH

"He Will Rejoice"

Moses rejoiced in the gift of his portion,  
For Thou didst call him a faithful servant;  
A crown of glory didst Thou set upon his head.



*Torah  
Reading  
in the  
morning*

*custom of studying all night and reciting Bikur Shavuos*



Jewish calendar, together with the major Jewish festivals, fasts and holy days they contain:

NISAN (March-April)—Pesach (Passover)

IYAR (April-May)—Lag Bo'Omer (the "Mid-Lenten" period)

SIVAN (May-June)—Shovuos (Pentecost, the Festival of Weeks)

TAMMUZ (June-July)—Shiv'ah Osor Be'Tammuz (the fast commemorating the breach of the walls of Jerusalem)

OV (July-August)—Tishoh Bo'Ov (the fast recalling the destruction of the Temple).

ELUL (August-September)—Rosh Chodesh (the first day of the month, commencing preparations for the penitential season)

TISHRI (September-October)—Rosh Hashonoh (the New Year)

Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement)

CHESHVON (October-November)—

Sukkos (the Festival of Booths)

Simchas Torah (Rejoicing with the Torah)

KISLEV (November-December)—Chanukkah (the Festival of Lights)

TEVES (December-January)—Asarah Be'Teves (the fast commemorating the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem)

SH'VOT (January-February)—Chamishoh Osor Bi-Sh'vot (the New Year for Trees)

ADAR (February-March)—Purim (the Festival of Lots)

Within this calendar, Jews observe three seasonal festivals which also have historical meaning, Pesach, Shovuos and Sukkos; the fast days linked with tragic events, the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple on Mount Zion; and the solemn High Holy Days of Rosh Hashonoh and Yom Kippur, also known as Yomim Noraim (the Days of Awe), which are neither seasonal nor historical but illustrate the universal human need for self-purification through penitence. The Jewish calendar also includes four minor holidays which are popular celebrations rather than sacred ones, Purim, Chanukkah, Chamishoh Osor Bi-Sh'vot and Lag Bo'Omer.

Each of these groups has some days that are glad

(the joyous, seasonal festivals) and some that are sad (the fast days), some that are easy and some that are hard to prepare for, some marked by feast and some by fast. The feasting as well as the fasting is a *mitsvah* (commandment); one is enjoined to rejoice as well as to grieve.

The Sabbath and the religious holidays mean translation into a different life. The Jew leaves the maelstrom of daily life and enters into the peace of the holiday world. The clothes one wears, the food one eats, the religious songs one sings and the very spirit of the house in which one lives are different from those of the weekday world. The atmosphere is steeped in history and symbolism. One lives in communion with ages past and with all the dispersed members of the House of Israel (*Klal Yisroel*) who, in all parts of the earth, are celebrating at the same time and in the same way.

As in the case of the Sabbath, the coming-in of the festivals is consecrated by the *Kiddush*, the prayer for the sanctification of wine, offering thanks for the divine gift of the festival; and their going-out is marked by the *Havdalah* (literally, "separating"), the ceremony observing the distinction between the holy and the worldly. Each of these sacred days has its individual liturgy in the synagogue as well as its lesson from the *Torah* and the Prophets (*Haftorah*), which are explained by the rabbi, the religious teacher, and applied to man's tasks and duties in daily life. The liturgy for daily and Sabbath services is contained in a prayer book called the *Siddur* (the order of the service). The prayer book for the holy days and festivals is the *Machzor* (the cycle of prayers).

Each holiday, like each Sabbath, brings its combination of anxiety and joy. As it approaches, the work of preparing for it seems overwhelming, especially for the Jewish mother—so much to be done, so little time. But when the holiday arrives, worry and tension are forgotten, and all workaday cares are thrust aside. Then everyone relaxes, enjoys and wishes to all "*Gut Yontev*" (A good holiday). It is in this spirit that this album is dedicated to our listeners, Christian and Jew alike.

Yom Atzmaut  
(Iyar 5th)