

JEWISH  
DAYS

*A Book of Jewish Life and Culture*

*Around the Year*



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## *The Times of Our Lives*

J EWS AS A PEOPLE HAVE BEEN MORE OFTEN CONNECTED TO TIME THAN TO PLACES OR THINGS. The Bible, the Talmud, and other Jewish texts tend to pay greater attention to the nature of events than to the places where they occurred. Twice in Jewish history there has been a great Temple in Jerusalem where people came to worship and priests performed majestic ceremonies. But when each of those Temples was destroyed, worship and ceremony continued in homes and synagogues wherever Jews lived. The Temples were less important than the time hallowed within them.

The philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel spoke of "holiness in time" as a basic characteristic of Jewish religious practice. Prayer in the morning, afternoon, and evening punctuates time in every day. Each week the Sabbath sanctifies time in an evening and day set apart from all others. Jews greet every new month as sacred time, celebrated through prayer and ceremony. And throughout the year a continuous cycle of holidays and festivals gives a sense of spiritual renewal to the passing time.

But even when not sacred, time has special meaning in the four-thousand-year-old history of the Jewish people. The biblical commandment to remember

events and peoples in that history forms the core of Jewish identity. So time and memory become intensely intertwined in Jewish thought, and historical occurrences make up the underpinnings of the Jewish calendar. Feast days, for example, that may have begun as seasonal celebrations at planting or harvest times acquired other, more significant, historical meanings over the years. Thus Passover, originally a spring harvest holiday, became a great festival of freedom, honoring the deliverance from slavery in Egypt.

Other historical experiences may not be observed as regular feasts or fast days but are deeply embedded in Jewish consciousness as decisive moments never to be forgotten. The expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, for instance, continued to be noted on Jewish calendars more than a hundred years after it happened. Five hundred years later, Jews in many lands still saw fit to memorialize it for an entire year with lectures, concerts, books, and exhibitions.

And then there is a kind of time in Jewish life that does not fit into the cycle of holidays, is rarely commemorated with public ceremonies, and cannot even be pinpointed in history. Who can say precisely when the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed, or Miriam the Prophetess died, or Aaron fashioned the golden calf? Yet tradition has assigned dates on the Jewish calendar to such biblical episodes because of their lasting imprint on Jewish imagination.

This is a book about time—the sacred and historical days in the Jewish experience and the biblical days marked on the calendar by tradition. It is a book about the Jewish holidays but also about historical events that have shaped Jewish life, and persons whose lives have made an impact on Jewish history. Neither an encyclopedia nor a standard book of days, it does not attempt to cover every key date in Jewish existence or present capsule information about every day on the Jewish calendar. Its aim instead is to analyze, interpret, and illustrate a variety of subjects that together present a diverse tapestry of Jewish culture, a weave of holiday practices, historical remembrances, biblical narrative, and rabbinic explanation—with a thread of mystical thought woven through.

