

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, Jewish Literacy  
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NEW YEAR/ROSH HA-SHANA

High Holy Days

Days of Awe/Yamim Nora'im

Shofar

Makhzor

Apples and Honey

PERHAPS THE STRANDEST FACT ABOUT THE JEWISH NEW YEAR, ROSH ha-Shana, is that it falls in *Tishrei*, the seventh month of the Hebrew calendar; it is as if the Western world's secular New Year were to be celebrated on July 1 instead of January 1. Indeed, Jews date as the first month, *Nissan*, the month of the Exodus from Egypt, when the Jewish people began to be forged into a nation. On the other hand, *Tishrei* commemorates the month in which God created the world.

Most Jewish holidays celebrate national events in Jewish history. \*Passover, for example, commemorates the Exodus; \*Shavuot, the giving of the Torah; and \*Purim, the deliverance from Haman. Rosh ha-Shana and \*Yom Kippur are much more personal in nature. In Hebrew they are known as *Yamim Nora'im* (Days of Awe); in English they are commonly referred to as the High Holy Days. On these two holidays, and during the weeks preceding them, Jews are instructed to scrupulously examine their deeds and, more significantly, their misdeeds during the preceding year. Rosh ha-Shana and Yom Kippur's goal is nothing less than an ethical and religious reassessment of one's life. Of equal concern, however, is the year that is about to begin. On these Days of Awe, Jewish tradition teaches, God decides who shall live and who shall die during the coming year. The liturgy prayers attempt to influence God's decisions.

One powerful instrument used to motivate repentance during Rosh ha-Shana is the *shofar* (ram's horn), which is blown in the synagogue one hundred times on each of the two days of Rosh ha-Shana. When one of the two days falls on the Sabbath, the *shofar* is not blown.

\*Maimonides describes the goal of the piercing cry of the *shofar* as "an allusion, as if to say, 'Awake, O you sleepers, awake from your sleep! O you slumberers, awake from your slumber! Search your deeds and turn in \*teshuva [repentance].'"

Blowing the *shofar* is not as simple as blowing a horn. It requires a compression of the lips that is difficult to perform, and even experienced *shofar* blowers often have to make several attempts before achieving the right sound. Three specific notes are blown on Rosh ha-Shana: an unbroken sound, called *teki'ah*; a wailing sound broken into three parts, known as *shva'rim*; and a sobbing sound broken into nine parts, called *tru'ah*.

The Rosh ha-Shana prayer service is long—the only one longer is the service on \*Yom Kippur—and usually runs from the early morning until one-thirty or two in the afternoon. Even small congregations that cannot afford a full-time cantor try to hire someone with a commanding voice to lead the High Holy Day services. Because there are so many special prayers that are distinctive to Rosh ha-Shana and Yom Kippur, a special prayerbook known as the \**Makhzor* is used on these holidays.

One of the most famous prayers in the Rosh ha-Shana liturgy, the *U-neh-taneh Toh-kef*, addresses a fundamental theme of the holiday: life and death. "On Rosh ha-Shana," the prayer reads, "it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed, how many shall leave this world, and how many shall be born into it, who shall live and who shall die, who shall live out the limit of his days and who shall not, who shall perish by fire and who by water . . . who shall be at peace and who shall be tormented. . . . But penitence, prayer, and good deeds can annul the severity of the decree." Famous also is the *Avinu Malkeinu* (Our Father, Our King) prayer. Traditionally, the entire congregation sings the last verse in unison: "*Avinu Malkeinu, khaneinu va-aneinu, kee ein banu ma'asim. Asei eemantu \*tzedaka va-khesed vehoshee-einu*—Our Father, our King, answer us as though we have no deeds to plead our cause; save us with mercy and loving-kindness."

The theme of life and death could easily have turned Rosh ha-Shana into two days of morbidity. To prevent this, the rabbis encouraged Jews to observe Rosh ha-Shana in a spirit of optimism, confident that God will accept their repentance and extend their lives. For example, they ordained that honey be served at all Rosh ha-Shana meals, and that slices of apple be dipped into it. A special prayer is then recited: "May it be Thy will, O Lord, Our God, to grant us a year that is good and is sweet."

others are classified as *beinonim* (in the middle), and their fate is decided between Rosh ha-Shana and Yom Kippur. In Jewish tradition today, all Jews are advised to consider themselves *beinonim*.

For that reason, the days between Rosh ha-Shana and Yom Kippur assume tremendous significance; how one acts during these days may well influence God's decree. This ten-day period is known as the "Ten Days of Repentance" (*Aseret Y'mei Teshuva*), and during this time, religious Jews take special care to give to charity, to avoid gossiping (see *Tzedaka* and *Lashon ha-Ra*), and to be helpful to others. If one has a big favor to ask of a religious Jew, it is not a bad idea to wait until the *Aseret Y'mei Teshuva* to do so.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READINGS: S. Y. Agnon, *Days of Awe*, and the books mentioned in the note to entry 292.



### YOM KIPPUR

Kol Nidrei  
Ne'ilah

THE ERRONEOUS PERCEPTION OF YOM KIPPUR AS A DAY OF SADNESS IS due in large measure to it being a fast day. The holiday's goal, however, is not self-mortification but rather to bring about reconciliation between people, and between individuals and God. Concerning the character of the holiday, the rabbis of the Talmud wrote: "There were no days as happy for the Jewish people as the fifteenth of [the Hebrew month of] Av [a day on which marriages were arranged] and Yom Kippur" (*Mishna Ta'arui* 4:8).

Another popular myth about Yom Kippur is that all-day attendance at synagogue, accompanied by earnest praying, wins forgiveness from God for all sins. In fact, the only sins forgiven on Yom Kippur are those committed against God. As for offenses committed against other people, the Mishna writes, "Yom Kippur does not atone until [one] appeases his neighbors" (*Mishna Yoma* 8:9). Therefore, Jewish tradition encourages people to begin the process of

repenting (see *Teshuva*) well in advance of the holiday. If one has injured or offended another person, one is obliged to request forgiveness sincerely. Even if the request is refused initially, at least two more attempts at reconciliation should be made. The victim of the offense likewise is required to be forgiving, provided the request for forgiveness is made sincerely. The rabbis regard a person as cruel who withholds forgiveness even after three requests. Obviously, this designation would not necessarily apply if the offense committed was extreme or if it inflicted irrevocable damage.

Yom Kippur is the only fast day mandated in the Torah (Leviticus 23:27; the verse specifically speaks of "afflicting your souls"). The fast commences an hour before the holiday begins, and concludes twenty-five hours later. On Yom Kippur, Jews are also forbidden to drink any liquid, bathe, engage in sexual relations, or wear leather shoes. The latter prohibition was intended to somewhat diminish comfort on this holiday of introspection. A popular modern explanation for the ban on leather shoes suggests that it would be presumptuous to appear before God asking for mercy while wearing shoes made from the skin of a slaughtered animal. As a result of this ban, traditional Jews dress incongruously on Yom Kippur—attired in their most formal suits and dresses, but with running or tennis shoes on their feet.

The last meal before the holiday is known as the *se'uda mafseket* (closing meal). It is usually a fairly light early dinner; traditionally, boiled chicken is served. Many Jews serve only one course. Salty and spicy foods are avoided so as not to make the fasters thirsty.

Children under age nine are forbidden to fast and are served regular meals. Children older than nine are encouraged to eat less than usual during the holiday, but not to fast the whole twenty-five hours. Females, twelve years and older, and males, thirteen years and older, are obligated to fast the whole day (see *Bar and Bat Mitzvah*). Anyone suffering from a potentially life-threatening illness, and women who have given birth in the preceding three days, are freed from the requirement of fasting. Pregnant women who feel tremendous hunger pangs are given the option of eating something until their hunger abates. A general operative principle in Jewish law is that endangerment of life takes precedence over observance of the law (for the few exceptions to this principle, see *Where Life Is at Stake/Pikuakh Nefesh*).

Yom Kippur has the longest synagogue service of any day in the Jewish year. On the first night, the service is inaugurated with a haunting prayer called the *Kol Nidrei* (All Vows). In this prayer, one asks to be released in advance from any vows made and not kept. In the nineteenth century, Samson Raphael

\*Hirsch, the leading figure of German Orthodox Judaism, suspended recitation of the *Kol Nidrei* for several years, fearing that it would cause non-Jews to think that Jews do not feel obligated to fulfill their oaths. In actuality, the release requested in the *Kol Nidrei* does not apply to vows made to other people.

The service on the day of Yom Kippur generally lasts from morning till nightfall, with short breaks. A characteristic, recurring prayer is the *Al Khet* (For Sins [that we have committed]), an acrostic in which one confesses to a multitude of sins committed during the previous year. While reciting the prayer, people beat their fists lightly against their chests as they enumerate each of the sins. The overwhelming majority of offenses designated in the *Al Khet* prayer are moral: wronging others, deriding parents and teachers, using foul speech, being dishonest in business, swearing falsely, and gossiping.

The strangest *Al Khet* confession reads, "For sins that we have committed under duress." Generations of Jews have pondered how an act committed under duress could be regarded as a sin. The late Jewish scholar Ernst Simon suggested, however, that although people sometimes claim they were forced to do something, very often it is not true. As Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis once wrote, "The irresistible is often only that which is not resisted."

The sins enumerated in the *Al Khet* prayer are confessed to in the plural. Even if one has not committed the particular offense mentioned, Jewish tradition teaches that each Jew bears a certain measure of responsibility for sins committed by other Jews.

During the afternoon *\*minkha* service, the Book of Jonah is read. Its predominant theme is God's willingness to grant forgiveness to those who sincerely repent (see *Jonah and the Whale*).

The final Yom Kippur service is called *Ne'ilah* (Shutting) because of the prayer imagery, which refers to the "shutting of the gates." Jewish tradition regards Yom Kippur as the day on which God decides the fate of each human being. As the holiday comes to an end, the liturgy vividly depicts gates beginning to close. During the *Ne'ilah* service, people pray with special intensity, hoping to be admitted to God's loving presence before the gates leading to Him are closed. At the very end of Yom Kippur, a single long note is sounded on the *\*shofar*.

Given the life-and-death issues dominating the day of Yom Kippur, why does the Talmud regard it as a happy day? Because by its end, people experience a great catharsis. If they have observed the holiday properly, they have

made peace with everyone they know, and with God. By the time the fast ends, many people therefore feel a deep sense of serenity.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READINGS: See the list of books mentioned in the note to entry 292.



## SUKKOT, SUKKA, LULAV AND ETROG

### SHMINI ATZERET

TISHREI IS THE JEWISH MONTH MOST FILLED WITH HOLIDAYS. IT starts with Rosh ha-Shana, followed just over a week later by Yom Kippur. Then, only four days after Yom Kippur, comes the longest Jewish festival, in which three distinct holidays are combined into one continuous celebration: Sukkot, Shmini Atzeret, and Simkhat Torah.

Prior to the start of Sukkot, Jews are instructed to erect a *sukka*, a temporary dwelling large enough for a family to eat and live in. While many Jews build *sukkot*, very few people today live in the *sukka* during the holiday. The *sukka* symbolizes the booths or tents in which the Jewish people lived during their forty years wandering in the desert (Leviticus 23:42-43). The walls are normally made of wood or canvas, and the whole structure is covered by *sekhakh*, a covering that must be made of material that grows in the ground and has been detached from it. Usually, cut branches, plants, or bamboo sticks are used. The *sekhakh* should loosely cover the roof, so that people inside the *sukka* still can see the sky and stars.

Children characteristically decorate the *sukka* with beautiful fruits and with signs quoting verses from the Bible or depicting beautiful scenes from Israel. In Jerusalem the municipality annually conducts a contest to find the most beautiful *sukka* in the city.

According to Jewish law, all food eaten during Sukkot should be eaten in the *sukka*. At the meal's beginning, a special blessing is made to God "who

has commanded us to dwell in the *sukka*." If there is heavy rain, the requirement to eat in the *sukka* is suspended, although on the first night of the holiday, Jews wait until midnight before giving up on having a meal in the *sukka*.

Sukkot also is an agricultural holiday (Leviticus 23:39), celebrating the harvest in the land of Israel. Special prayers are recited during which one holds four varieties of plants in one's hands (Leviticus 23:40). The largest of these plants is the *lulav* (palm branch), which is bound together with two willow twigs and three myrtle twigs. The fourth plant is the *etrog* (citron), which looks like a large, somewhat elongated lemon. Jews try to acquire an *etrog* with no blotches, spots, or other discoloration on the skin. To be ritually valid, the *pitom*, the stem at the tip of the *etrog*, must be unbroken.

Non-Jews and irreligious Jews are often shocked to learn that pious Jews routinely spend fifty, even one hundred dollars or more for a perfect *etrog*. On the Sunday before Sukkot, one can find an active outdoor market where *lulavim* and *etrogin* are being sold, on Manhattan's Lower East Side. On occasion, I have seen people inspecting *etrogin* with magnifying glasses to ensure that the skin is unblemished. In all of Israel's major cities, there are also active markets where one can purchase the four plants.

During certain prayers on Sukkot, congregants wave the *lulav* and *etrog* together, up and down, left and right. The Talmud teaches that we wave toward the four points of the world in honor of God, to whom the four corners of the world—upward and downward, heaven and earth—belong (*Sukkot* 37b).

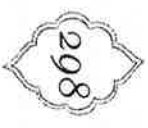
On each morning of Sukkot, near the end of the prayer service, men carry the *lulav* and *etrog* around the synagogue while reciting a penitential prayer. On the holiday's seventh day, Hoshana Rabba, all the Torah scrolls are withdrawn from the Ark, and the congregants march around the synagogue seven times carrying the *lulav* and *etrog*.

The eighth day of the holiday is known as Shmini Atzeret. Its major feature is the recitation of the prayer for rain; the holiday falls at the beginning of Israel's rainy season. Rabbi Irving Greenberg has called Shmini Atzeret the "Zionist holiday" because it kept alive a strong identification between world Jewry and the land of Israel. Reciting the prayer for rain when it was needed in Israel, and not in their native lands, "was the Jews' way of maintaining an unbroken tie, a statement that as Jews they were living on Jerusalem Standard Time, not Greenwich Meridian or Central Mountain Time."

### ON SUKKOT AND THE JEWISH HISTORICAL CONDITION

The *sukka* provides a corrective to the natural tendency of becoming excessively attached to turf. It instructs Jews not to become overly rooted, particularly not in the exile. For thousands of years Jews built homes in the Diaspora, and civilization of extraordinary richness . . . were created. But, outside of Israel, all such Jewish homes and civilizations have proven thus far to be temporary ones, blown away when a turn of the wheel brought new forces to power. Often, self-deception and the desire to claim permanent roots led Jews to deny what was happening until it was too late to escape (Irving Greenberg, *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays*, p. 101).

SOURCES AND FURTHER READINGS: Irving Greenberg's comment on Sukkot as a "Zionist holiday" is found in his *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays*, p. 109. See also Isaac Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice*, pp. 155-173, and the books mentioned in the note to entry 292.



### KHOL HA-MOED

KHOL HA-MOED IS THE ONLY HEBREW OXYMORON WITH WHICH I AM familiar; *khol* means "secular" and *moed* means "holiday." The "secular holidays" referred to are the days that fall in the middle of \*Passover and \*Sukkot. Both these holidays start and finish with two days of *Yom Tov* (literally "good day," it is observed for only one day in Israel), during which work is forbidden and there are extended prayer services. Between the two sets of *Yom Tov* come four days of *Khol ha-Moed* on Passover and five on Sukkot. During these days, the prohibitions of work are greatly relaxed. Aside from that, the distinctive features of each holiday remain in force; on Passover one must not eat bread or any leavened products, and on Sukkot one must eat all meals in a *sukka*. At the conclusion of *Khol ha-Moed* come the final days of *Yom Tov*, during which the restrictions on work again apply.

iday's observance received a tremendous inspiration in recent years from the Jews of Russia. During the 1960s, Soviet Jews adopted Simkhat Torah as their special day of celebration; among many Russian Jews, it became more widely observed than \*Passover or \*Yom Kippur (see *Russian-Jewish Simkhat Torah Celebrations*). Although from the perspective of Jewish law, Simkhat Torah is less significant than either Passover or Yom Kippur, Soviet Jews were so limited in the Jewish rituals they could practice (or were knowledgeable about) that they instinctively chose to identify with a holiday that is totally joyous.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READINGS: See the list of books mentioned in the note to entry 292.

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HANUKKA

Menorah  
Dreidl

A JEWISH PROVERB CLAIMS THAT EVERYTHING DEPENDS ON LUCK, even the fate of a Torah scroll in the Ark (if a particular scroll is lucky, it will be the one chosen to be read publicly; if it is unlucky, it will be left in the Ark and another scroll will be chosen).

Hanukka's good fortune in the Western world results from a singularly unusual circumstance, its close proximity to Christmas. The holiday begins on the twenty-fifth of Kislev: Because of the vagaries of the Jewish lunar calendar, this can occur any time between late November and late December. In the United States, Hanukka is the most widely observed Jewish holiday after \*Passover and \*Yom Kippur, although in Jewish law it is less significant than the \*Sabbath, or \*Rosh ha-Shana, \*Sukkot, and \*Shavuot.

Because Western Jews live in a predominantly Christian society, and because of Hanukka's proximity to Christmas, many parents have converted it into a Jewish form of this major Christian holiday. Jewish children are given daily gifts throughout the holiday. By making it into a fun-filled occa-

sion, many parents hope that their children will not feel they are missing out on Christmas trees and gifts brought by Santa Claus. For many years, my father was the accountant for a Jewish company that produced Hanukka candles, toys, and decorations. The closer Hanukka fell to Christmas, the more business the company did.

Hanukka is, indeed, one of the happiest of Jewish holidays. In 167 B.C.E., the Syrian emperor \*Antiochus set out to destroy Judaism by making its observance a capital offense. In one horrible instance, two Jewish mothers who had secretly circumcised their sons were paraded through the streets of Jerusalem and then executed along with the infants. A Jew named \*Mattathias, along with his five sons, initiated a revolt against the Syrian monarch. Three years later, the rebels ousted Antiochus's troops from Palestine.

The Jewish revolutionaries, known as \*Maccabees or \*Hasmoneans, regained control of the \*Temple in Jerusalem, which during the years of Syrian control had been spiritually raped. Antiochus had even arranged for swine to be sacrificed in the Temple. The Jewish troops wept when they saw the Temple's degradation, and immediately resolved to restore it to a state of ritual purity. According to Jewish tradition, they could find only one cruse of uncontaminated olive oil; unfortunately, it contained oil sufficient for only one day. The Jews were very upset because it would take eight days to prepare ritually permitted oil. However, a miracle happened and the small quantity of oil continued to burn the full eight days.

In commemoration of this happy event, Hanukka is celebrated for eight days. On the first night, one candle is lighted, on the second, two candles, and so on, until the last night, when eight candles are lighted. The candles are placed in a *menorah*, a candelabrum that has eight openings, and a ninth, elevated opening known as a *shamash*. The *shamash* candle, which is lit first, is used to light the others.

Jewish law dictates that the candles be placed near a window, so that passersby can see them from the street. This is in fulfillment of the rabbinic dictum "to publicize the miracle." Indeed, this is the sole function of the Hanukka candles; it is forbidden to use them for any other purpose; one cannot, for example, read by the Hanukka lights (it is fully permissible, however, to use the Sabbath lights for illumination). During the time the candles are burning, it is also customary that women relax and not work.

A popular Hanukka children's game is spinning the *dreidl*, a four-sided cylindrical figure that spins like a top. On each side, a Hebrew letter is printed: *Nun*, *Gimmel*, *Hay*, *Shin*, which make the acronym "*Nes Gadol*

*Hoya Sham*—A Great Miracle Happened There [in Israel].” Bets are taken on what letter will be showing when the *dreidl* stops spinning. If it stops on the *nun*, no one wins; on the *gimmel*, the spinner takes the pot; on the *hey*, half the pot; and on the *shin*, he or she puts money into the pot.

Among American Jews, the *latke*, a pancake made of potatoes and onions fried in oil, is the food most associated with Hanukka. And because the Hanukka miracle concerned oil, all the preferred holiday foods are fried in oil; in Israel the most popular Hanukka delicacy is the *sufganiyah*, a fried jelly roll.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READINGS: See the list of books mentioned in the note to entry 292.

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## TU B'SHVAT

JUST AS JEWISH TRADITION REGARDS THE FIRST DAY OF *TISHREI* AS THE New Year (\*Rosh ha-Shana) for mankind, so it regards the fifteenth day of *Shvat* as the New Year for trees. Tu B'Shvat—*tu* expresses the number fifteen in Hebrew—generally falls between mid-January and mid-February, and is celebrated in Israel by planting trees. Many American and European Jews observe the holiday by making contributions to the Jewish National Fund, which uses the funds to develop forests in Israel. The holiday, however, is an old one, predating the State of Israel by thousands of years.

Throughout the world, religious Jews strive to eat foods on Tu B'Shvat that are distinctive to, or characteristic of, the land of Israel, specifically the seven types of fruits and grains mentioned in Deuteronomy 8:8. When I was a child, my father used to bring home an Israeli-grown carob, a fruit with the decidedly un-Jewish name of St. John's Bread. In Yiddish it was known as *buxer*. Carob is incredibly hard and has little taste, though I have been told that if it is eaten right after falling from the tree, it is deliciously sweet.

Some Jews, basing themselves on a tradition initiated by Jewish mystics (see *Kabbalah*) in the sixteenth century, make a special \*Seder on Tu B'Shvat, largely modeled on the structure of the \*Passover Seder. Four cups of

wine, for example, are served during the meal. Thirteen biblical verses that speak of the vegetation of Israel are read, and many different foods are blessed and eaten. Among the foods served at such a Seder are olives, dates, grapes, figs, pomegranates, apples, walnuts, carob fruit, pears, cherries, sunflower seeds, and peanuts. Currently, the Tu B'Shvat Seder is not widely observed; in recent years, however, it has become increasingly popular among mystically and ecologically oriented Jews.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READINGS: See the list of books mentioned in the note to entry 292, particularly Irving Greenberg, *The Jewish Way*, pp. 418–420.

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## PURIM

PERHAPS THE ODDEST COMMANDMENT IN JEWISH LAW IS THE ONE associated with Purim in which Jews are instructed to get drunk until they can no longer differentiate between “Blessed is \*Mordechai,” and “Cursed is \*Haman.”

Although recovering alcoholics, people with health problems, and those planning to drive are freed from observing this commandment, a fair number of Jews do get drunk on Purim. After all, how often can one do something normally regarded as wrong, and be credited with fulfilling a commandment?

The obligation to drink stems largely from Purim's being one of the happiest holidays in the Jewish calendar. Haman, an ancient Persian forerunner of \*Hitler, plotted to kill all the Jews. They foiled his plan, however, and then avenged themselves on this would-be mass murderer and his supporters (see *Esther*).

The rabbis were so enamored of Purim that they declared in a maxim, “From the beginning of *Adar* [the month in which Purim falls], we increase our happiness” (*Ta'arit* 29a). In fact, they predicted that Purim would be observed even in the messianic days, when almost all other Jewish holidays would be abolished (*Midrash Mishlei* 9).

Purim is observed on the fourteenth of *Adar*, just a month and a day before \*Passover; in Jerusalem, Hebron, and the Old City of Safed, the holiday is observed one day later. This odd scheduling is because a statement in the Book of Esther (9:18-19) ordains that Purim be observed one day later in walled cities (Jerusalem was still a walled city at the time Esther was written). Thus, in Israel anyone so inclined can observe Purim twice, on the fourteenth of *Adar* throughout most of the country, and on the fifteenth in Jerusalem, Hebron, and the Old City of Safed.

Women as well as men are commanded to hear the public reading of the biblical scroll of \*Esther. The reading is conducted in the synagogue amid much revelry. Almost all children, and some adults, come to the service with *groggers* (noisemakers), which they sound whenever Haman's name is read. Since Haman is mentioned more than fifty times in Esther, the reading is constantly interrupted by shouts, screams, boos, and the rattling of *groggers*. Because Jewish law requires people to hear every word of the scroll of Esther, the person chanting the book is forbidden to resume until the noise abates.

While Jews normally come to synagogue in suits and dresses, their attire on the playful holiday of Purim is more likely to be costumes and masks. Although many women model themselves on Queen \*Esther and many men on Mordechai, I have seen people come to services dressed as robots or as members of the Women's Liberation Army of Shushan (the Persian city where the Purim story takes place).

The synagogue service is usually followed by a party where the command to get drunk is carried out. Very often, members of the congregation perform skits based on the Purim story (see *Esther*). At many \*yeshivot, *Purimshpiels* are performed, and fun is poked—through plays and skits—at the school, its teachers and rabbis, as well as at traditional texts that are usually treated with reverence.

Another Purim commandment is to send *mishloakh manot* (gifts of food and drink) to other Jews. The minimum gift one must give is two portions of different foods; they must require no preparation but be ready to eat. In recent years, as the Jewish community has become more affluent, *mishloakh manot* have grown more elaborate, and many people send them to large numbers of friends.

On Purim one is commanded to be charitable to everyone, even to beggars whose requests for charity one has reason to believe are bogus. On this day of unbridled joy, no questions are to be asked. When I was a student at \*Yeshiva University, there were two women who used to accost students every morning and afternoon, asking for money. A rabbi I knew there—a generous man—never contributed to them; he told me he knew for a fact

that they had independent and substantial means. Nonetheless, on Purim he made sure to give them a donation.

Throughout Jewish history, many communities and families established their own special Purim holidays to commemorate annually the anniversary of events in which Jewish communities or individuals were saved from death at the hands of antisemites. In the 1970s, a prominent American rabbi was among those kidnapped and held hostage by Muslim terrorists at the \*B'nai B'rith headquarters in Washington, D.C. All the hostages survived, and ever since the rabbi conducts an annual special Purim celebration with his family on the Hebrew date on which he was released.

Another commandment associated with the holiday is to enjoy a large, festive repast known as the Purim *se'udah* (meal). The dessert normally served at this meal, and eaten throughout the whole holiday, is *hamantashen*, small cakes of baked dough filled with prunes, apricot, poppy seed, or other filling. During the \*Birkat ha-Mazon (Grace After Meals), a special prayer is recited, thanking God for the miracles that occurred during the days of Mordechai.

The observance of Purim was apparently well known to the Nazi leadership. Julius Streicher, perhaps the most vicious antisemite among the defendants at the \*Nuremberg Trials, shouted out as he was marched to the gallows, "*Purimfest*."

SOURCES AND FURTHER READINGS: See the list of books mentioned in the note to entry 292.



## MA'OT CHITTIM

PASSOVER (SEE NEXT ENTRY) IS THE MOST EXPENSIVE OF JEWISH HOLIDAYS. One needs to have a special set of both milk and meat dishes that cannot be used the rest of the year; also, almost all regular food supplies must either be discarded or locked away during the holiday's eight days. Finally, one must purchase large quantities of \*matzah and other foods.

Concerned over the economic strain Passover imposed on poor Jews,

the rabbi established an annual fundraising campaign, known as *Ma'ot Chittim*, whose sole purpose is to enable all Jews to observe Passover. This charity has been taken very seriously throughout Jewish history and in Jewish communities throughout the world. My grandfather, who was the rabbi in a small *\*shtetl* in Russia, would go to every single house in the village before Passover: "There was only one rule. Every Jewish family had to either give or receive help." Because he visited every house in the village, no one else knew the identity of the people who needed help.

A famous story is told of the nineteenth-century rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik. A man once came to him with a legal question. "Can I use milk rather than wine," he asked, "to satisfy the requirement of four cups [of wine] at the *\*Seder*?" Instead of answering the question, the rabbi simply gave him twenty-five rubles to buy the necessary provisions.

After the poor man left, a bystander asked the rabbi, "A few rubles would have been sufficient to buy the wine he needed. Why did you give him so much money?"

"If he was intending to use milk at the *Seder*," the rabbi answered, "it meant he had no money for meat either [Jewish law forbids the consumption of meat and milk at the same meal—see *Kosher*], and I wanted to ensure that he could observe the holiday properly."

In recent years, as many American Jews have become more affluent, *Ma'ot Chittim* funds are sometimes used to airlift *Seder* provisions to poor Jews living in other countries, including the former Soviet Union. It must be remembered, however, that there are poor Jews in the United States, particularly elderly ones, who are in need of help.

## PASSOVER/PESACH

*Searching for Leaven/Bedikat Khametz*

PASSOVER (PESACH) IS THE MOST WIDELY OBSERVED JEWISH HOLIDAY. It celebrates not only God's freeing the Jewish slaves from Egyptian slavery, but the beginning of Jewish nationhood as well.

The story of the first Passover dominates Exodus, the second book of the Torah. Pharaoh enslaved *\*Jacob's* descendants, who were living in Egypt, and attempted to murder all male infants born to them. One of the Hebrew babies, *\*Moses*, was saved by Pharaoh's daughter, who adopted him.

When *Moses* grew up, he saw an Egyptian overseer mercilessly whipping a Hebrew slave. He killed the overseer. Pharaoh, hearing what *Moses* had done, sought to kill him, and *Moses* was forced to flee Egypt.

Many years later, God summoned *Moses* from his exile in Midian to liberate the Egyptian Jews from slavery. When Pharaoh resisted *Moses'* entreaties to free the Hebrews, God afflicted Egypt with *\*Ten Plagues*, the last of which was by far the most devastating: The firstborn son in every Egyptian family died, perhaps in retaliation for the earlier murder of the Hebrew infants.

The day before the killing of the firstborn, *Moses* instructed the Israelites to slaughter a lamb (an animal that was also an Egyptian deity), and to sprinkle some of its blood on their doorposts. Thus, when the Angel of Death saw the blood, he would know that the house was occupied by an Israelite and would *pass over* (in Hebrew, *pesach*) it when he came to slay the firstborn.

After the tenth plague began, Pharaoh became terrified and announced that the Hebrews were free to leave. They fled Egypt so quickly that the dough they had started to prepare for bread did not have sufficient time to rise. As a result, the slaves departed from Egypt with the flat bread that became known as matzah. Since that first Passover, Jews commemorate the holiday by eating matzah, which symbolizes, among other things, that it is better to live in freedom and eat poor food than to remain in slavery and eat well.



For most of the twelve hundred years after the Exodus, the major ritual of Passover was to bring a lamb to the \*Temple in Jerusalem as a sacrifice, in commemoration of the sacrifice made by every Hebrew family that last day in Egypt. At the Temple, the lamb was first slaughtered by a priest, with part of the animal offered as a sacrifice, then the family who had brought it gathered together to eat the rest of the lamb. During the celebratory meal, parents and children engaged in a lengthy discussion of the Exodus, fulfilling the Torah's command that fathers tell their children the story of how God freed the Jews (Exodus 13:8, 14-15). This meal is the origin of the Passover Seder (see next entry).

Since the \*destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E., Jews no longer offer animal sacrifices. Rather, the Seder now serves as the ritual commemoration of "the going forth from Egypt."

Bread products are forbidden during all eight days of the holiday (seven days in Israel). During the weeks preceding Passover, the house is systematically cleaned, and all bread and other *khameitz* (leavened products) are removed. *Khameitz* is any foodstuff containing flour that has fermented (such as breads, cakes, and pasta), and dough made from wheat, barley, rye, spelt, and oats. Whiskey and other alcoholic beverages made from fermented grain are also forbidden.

On the last night before the holiday, a ceremony called *bedikat khameitz* (searching for the *khameitz*), intended to arouse the curiosity of children, takes place. Even in modern, electrically equipped dwellings, every family member is given a lighted candle to carry around the house (to avoid any danger, some people use flashlights). Before the search begins, the parents strategically place ten small pieces of bread in different rooms. The searchers then find them and put them into bags. The following morning, these pieces of bread, along with all other *khameitz* not previously discarded, are burned. *Khameitz* that is too valuable to be destroyed can be sealed up and sold to a non-Jew for the duration of the holiday. It is sold because Jews are forbidden to own *khameitz* during the holiday. Such sales are generally arranged through one's rabbi.

Of all the holidays, none falls harder on the Jewish housewife than Passover. The thorough cleaning of the house, coupled with the need to use different plates and silverware, cause much onerous work. Throughout Jewish history, some wealthy Jews would build an extra kitchen into their homes, which they would use only during the eight days of Passover. In

recent years, it has become increasingly common for more affluent Jews to go away to \*kosher hotels for the holiday.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READINGS: See the list of books mentioned in the note to entry 292.



## HAGGADA

ASK JEWS WHO IS THE FIGURE THEY MOST ASSOCIATE WITH \*PASSOVER and the \*Exodus from Egypt, and the most likely answer will be \*Moses. How surprising then that in the *Haggada*, the text that is read at the Passover Seder (see next entry), Moses' name is mentioned only once, and that in passing. The rabbis almost left him out to ensure that God remains the hero of the Passover story.

To commemorate the Exodus, the rabbis composed the *Haggada*, a small book that is read aloud at the Seder, the festive meal celebrated on Passover's first two nights (in Israel the Seder is celebrated only on the first night). Some parts of the *Haggada* quote the Torah, other parts were written some two thousand years ago, and still other parts date from the Middle Ages. Reading the *Haggada* aloud fulfills the Torah's command to all fathers to tell their children the story of the liberation from Egyptian slavery (Exodus 13:8, 14-15). Indeed, few other \*mitzvot have been as widely observed in Jewish history. For that reason, the *Haggada* is probably familiar to more Jews than is the Torah.

Perhaps the most famous passage in the *Haggada* is the *Ma Nish-tana*, which begins, "Why is this night different from all other nights?" The paragraph is recited by the youngest person at the Seder; for most Jewish children, this reading constitutes their first experience of public speaking. In the *Ma Nish-tana*, the child asks the reason behind some of the holiday's unusual rituals, for example, "On all other nights, we eat bread and matzah, why tonight do we only eat matzah?" The remainder of the *Haggada* is designed to answer the child's questions.

Another well-known passage speaks of four sons: one wise, one wicked, one simple, and one too young even to ask questions. The reading describes the different responses the father should give each child to inspire his or her observance of the holiday.

The spirit of Passover is summarized in one characteristic teaching of the *Haggada*: "In every generation, a man is obligated to regard himself as if he personally was liberated from Egypt." To reenact the experience of becoming free, some Sephardic Jews have the custom of throwing a bag over their shoulders and walking around the table.

One of the familiar songs in the *Haggada* is a recurring refrain called "Dayeinu," which means "It would have been sufficient." The song recounts every miracle and kindness God performed for the Jews when He took them out of Egypt, and it insists that each one alone would have been sufficient. More than a few Jews have been puzzled by the line that reads: "If He had taken us out of Egypt but had not split the Red Sea, it would have been sufficient" (see *The Splitting of the Red Sea*). Had God not split the Red Sea, the Egyptians would have killed all the Hebrews and there would be no Jews today. The statement might be understood, rather, as an ecstatic declaration of faith, similar to the unrealistic verse at the end of the \**Birkat ha-Mazon* (Grace After Meals), "I was a young man and now I am old, and never have I seen a righteous man deserted and his children lacking for bread."

The *Haggada's* most famous song is the one that concludes the Seder: "Had Gadya." The verses tell of a man who buys a goat for the very small sum of two *zuzim*. Unfortunately, a cat eats the goat, following which a dog bites the cat, a stick beats the dog, a fire burns the stick, water quenches the fire, an ox drinks the water, a slaughterer kills the ox, and the Angel of Death takes the slaughterer. Finally, God Himself comes and slays the Angel of Death. Jewish commentaries generally regard the goat as symbolizing the Jewish people, and the animals, objects, and elements that attack it and each other as standing for the nations that have subjugated Israel. Those who harass the Jews will ultimately be destroyed by others: In the end, God will vanquish the Angel of Death, and redeem the whole world.

After "Had Gadya," the Seder is concluded by singing, "*Le-Shana ha-Ba'ah Be-Yerushalayim—Next Year in Jerusalem.*"

The *Haggada* is the most widely reprinted book in Jewish history; well over two thousand editions have been published since the first *Haggada* was printed in Spain about 1482. In the United States, each Jewish denomina-

tion has produced its own *Haggada*, and new editions of the *Haggada* are published every year.

**SOURCES AND FURTHER READINGS:** Among the more recent *Haggadot*, I have found Shlomo Riskin, *The Passover Haggadah*, to be particularly helpful to those leading a Seder. See also Daniel Goldschmidt, *The Passover Haggadah*, translated and edited by Nahum Glatzer. A fine book about the *Haggada* is Chaim Raphael, *A Feast of History*. A contemporary Jewish artist, David Moss, has produced a *Haggada* entitled, *A Song of David*, of stunning beauty and depth. Irving Greenberg has called it "a magnificent work of art, possibly the most beautiful *Haggada* of all time."



**SEDER**

MATZAH

MAROR

FOUR CUPS OF WINE

ELIJAH'S CUP

AFIKOMAN

THE PASSOVER SEDER COMBINES BOTH THE RELIGIOUS AND NATIONAL aspects of Jewish identity. Even the most secular, antireligious \**kibbutzim* in Israel conduct a Seder. Indeed, because the Seder celebrates the liberation of the Jewish slaves from Egypt, and commemorates the beginnings of the Jewish people, it appeals to identifying nonreligious and antireligious Jews.

The traditional Seder has more rituals than any other Jewish ceremonial meal. Most important, participants are expected to read through the *Haggada* (see preceding entry), a short book detailing the story of the Jewish Exodus from Egypt. At the Seder, participants are supposed to lean on pillows and recline in their chairs, in the style of free men of leisure.

The food that most typifies the Seder meal is matzah, a form of flat and unleavened bread (see *Passover*). Many observant Jews eat a special matzah

during Passover, particularly during the two *Sedarim* (plural of Seder). This unleavened bread is called *shmurah matzah* (guarded matzah). From the time the wheat used in *shmurah matzah* is harvested, it is kept under guard to ensure that no water or leavening agents have contact with it.

Another Seder ritual involves eating *maror*, a bitter herb that represents the bitterness of Jewish servitude in Egypt. Oddly, one herb commonly used at Seders is romaine lettuce, which is not particularly bitter. Other Jews prefer horseradish, which would seem to represent more closely the bitterness of *maror*. Another food item, *kharoset*, is made of nuts and apples crushed together into a mortarlike substance; it symbolizes the mortar the slaves were required to produce for their Egyptian masters.

Despite the *maror* and *kharoset*, the Seder is basically a joyous meal. Its spirit of good cheer is most obviously represented by the four cups of wine drunk at various points during the recitation of the *Haggada*. Unless a Jew has a health problem that would be exacerbated by consuming liquor—alcoholism would be such a problem—he or she is expected to drink wine at the Seder. The ancient rabbis disputed whether four or five cups should be drunk. Jewish law ultimately ruled that four cups were sufficient, but in deference to the minority view, a fifth cup of wine—Elijah's Cup—is filled and put on the table. According to Jewish legend, Elijah visits every Seder, and drinks a few drops from his cup. Jewish children invariably watch Elijah's cup during the "*She-fokh Kha-Matka*—Pour Out Thy Wrath" prayer to see if there is any diminution in the contents. According to Jewish tradition, Elijah is the prophet who will announce the arrival of the Messiah. Presumably, he will also reveal at that time whether four or five cups are needed.

Some of the Seder's ceremonies are performed by children, such as the reading of the *Ma Nish-tana* ("Why is this night different from all other nights?"—see preceding entry). Since the Seder's goal is to teach children that the Jews once were slaves in Egypt, and that God led them out with "a strong hand and an outstretched arm," the rabbis introduced other rituals to ensure their active participation. For example, at the beginning of the Seder, three matzot are placed under a large cover. Early in the Seder, half of one matzah, known as the *afikoman*, is broken off and hidden away. At the end of the Seder meal, the *afikoman* is distributed to all participants. It is the last food Jews are commanded to eat at the Seder, and without it the traditional meal cannot be concluded. Children are encouraged to take advantage of this law, steal the *afikoman* from its hiding place, and hide it themselves. They then demand a ransom to reveal its whereabouts. All this is obviously done in good fun. It pro-

vides an opportunity for children to bargain for a toy or some other desired treat while ensuring their involvement in the Seder until the very end.

A friend of mine once volunteered to conduct a Seder inside an Israeli prison. Everything was done according to traditional Jewish law, he later told me, but the warden did announce that the stealing of the *afikoman* would not be permitted.

The Seder meal is interspersed with much singing and readings from the *Haggada*. At many Sedarim, the *Haggada* is read in both Hebrew and English to ensure that its contents are understood by all participants.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READINGS: See the list of books mentioned in the note to entry 292.



## H O L O C A U S T M E M O R I A L D A Y / Y O M H A - S H O A

H O L O C A U S T M E M O R I A L D A Y (Y O M H A - S H O A) IS SO RECENT AN OBSERVANCE that it still has no set rituals. Only in Israel is there a uniformly observed practice: the sounding of sirens for two minutes throughout the country at eleven A.M. All people stop whatever they are doing and stand at attention. Highway traffic pulls over to the side of the road as the sirens begin; drivers park and exit their cars. As deeply moving as this observance is, no doubt other, more spiritual, practices will develop in the future to commemorate Yom ha-Shoa.

One problem with establishing rituals for Yom ha-Shoa is that the Holocaust's horror overwhelms the religious imagination. What ritual can adequately convey Auschwitz, and what the Nazis did there?

Another problem is that Jewish holidays generally express gratitude toward, and love of, God. For most Jews, those are hardly the emotions Yom ha-Shoa evokes. A number of years ago, I heard a prominent Orthodox rabbi suggest that Jews congregate in synagogues on Yom ha-Shoa—and say nothing. "They should sit there quietly," the rabbi said. "They should not say the *Kaddish*

Nowadays, most religious Jews who are Zionists also celebrate weddings on two other new Jewish holidays that fall during the period of the *Omer*: Israeli Independence Day/*Yom ha-Atzma'ut* (see preceding entry) and Jerusalem Day/*Yom Yerushalayim* (see next entry). Marriages also are permitted on the last days before Shavuot.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READINGS: See the list of books mentioned in the note to entry 292.

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### JERUSALEM DAY/YOM YERUSHALAYIM

JERUSALEM DAY (YOM YERUSHALAYIM), THE NEWEST JEWISH HOLIDAY, was declared in the aftermath of the 1967 \*Six-Day War, during which Israel captured the Old City of Jerusalem, which contains the Temple's still-standing \*Western Wall. When Israel's \*War of Independence concluded in 1948, the Jewish state controlled the new city of Jerusalem, while Jordan held the Old City. In the subsequent armistice agreement, Jordan agreed to permit Jews to visit and pray at the Western Wall. This clause, however, was never honored, and for the nineteen years before the Six-Day War, the Jordanians forbade Jews from entering the Old City.

This was a particularly painful deprivation, since for Jews Jerusalem has been the holiest city since the reign of King \*David, about 1000 B.C.E. Its liberation in 1967 was not only the high point of the Six-Day War, but one of the highlights of Israel's existence. Even today, although many Israelis would willingly trade land to the Arab world in return for peace, few would consider returning the Jewish holy sites of Jerusalem to non-Jewish rule. As General Moshe \*Dayan declared the day the Old City was captured, "Jerusalem is united, never again to be divided." For the first time in almost two thousand years the holiest spot in Jewish life was under Jewish control.

When Israel gained control of the entire city in 1967, frustrated and infuriated Muslim leaders claimed that Jerusalem was Islam's third holiest city,

after Mecca and Medina. (For Muslims, Jerusalem's sanctity derives from the belief that \*Mohammed ascended to heaven from there; Muslims today have full access to their religious sites in the city.) Yet it seems clear that the Arab furor about Jerusalem has less to do with the city's sacredness than with its being under Jewish control. Between 1948 and 1967, when Jerusalem was under Jordanian rule, only one Arab leader, King Hassan of Morocco, bothered to visit the city. Today, Yom Yerushalayim is celebrated by many Jews with special prayers, most notably \*Hallel, a collection of joyous \*Psalms.

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### COUNTING THE OMER

#### SHAVUOT TIKKUN

HOW MANY DAYS ARE THERE BETWEEN NEW YEAR'S DAY AND JULY 4? Or between \*Sukkot and \*Hanukka? It is unlikely that almost anyone knows the answers to these questions off the top of his or her head. But all religious Jews know that there are precisely fifty days between the second day of \*Passover and \*Shavuot. During the first forty-nine days of this period, known as the *Omer*, each day is counted aloud during the evening service. After reciting a special blessing—"Blessed are You, Lord our God . . . who has commanded us to count the *Omer*"—congregants say, "Today is the third day [or the twentieth or the fortieth] in the *Omer*." On the fiftieth day, Shavuot is celebrated.

In Hebrew, *omer* means sheaves of a harvested crop. When the \*Temple stood, priests would offer there, on behalf of all Israel, newly harvested barley (an *omer*) on the second day of Passover. Their doing so signaled the beginning of Israel's harvest season, a period that lasted seven weeks.

In the Torah, Shavuot is thus referred to as *Hag ha-Katzir*—the Holiday of Harvest (or, more precisely, the holiday celebrating the harvest's end).

Although one would think of the harvest period as joyous, in Jewish life the *Omer* is considered a time of semimourning. To this day, no scholar is sure why this is so. The Talmud speaks obscurely of a plague occurring on one *Omer* that killed 24,000 students of the second-century rabbi Akiva. Given Akiva's role in supporting Simon Bar-Kokhba's rebellion against Rome, it is possible that the students were slaughtered in battle. Whatever the origins of the custom of semimourning, traditional Jews do not get haircuts or celebrate weddings during this period (for the exceptions, see *Lag Ba'Omer*). The *Omer* period is often called by another name in Hebrew, *Sefirah*, the word for "counting."

Shavuot is not as widely observed by contemporary Jews as Passover or Yom Kippur, yet it celebrates the most important event in Jewish history: the giving of the Torah. The Talmud teaches that God gave the Jews the Ten Commandments on the sixth of *Sivan*, the first night of Shavuot. In commemoration, many religious Jews convene the whole night at the synagogue, or in a home, to study Torah, other biblical books, sections of the Talmud, and additional sacred writings. This annual all-night gathering is known as a *tikkun*, and in recent years, there seems to have been a growth in the number of Jews observing this custom. At daybreak, the participants break from study and recite *shakharit*, the morning prayer service. By about 7:30 A.M., well before others have arrived in the synagogue, the service is over.

In Jerusalem tens of thousands of Jews who have studied Torah the whole night walk down to the *Kotel* (Western Wall) at the break of dawn to recite the morning service. This custom received a particular impetus in the aftermath of the 1967 Six-Day War. Israel captured Jerusalem in early June of that year, but, for security reasons, the civilian populace was initially not allowed to visit the Old City. On Shavuot the Western Wall was first opened to civilian visitors, and an estimated 200,000 Israelis flocked to the *Kotel* on that day.

An interesting Shavuot custom, whose origins are unknown, mandates that only dairy foods be eaten on the holiday's first day. A popular folk tradition explains that, in the aftermath of the Exodus, the Jews had slaughtered many animals, but after receiving the Torah, they learned that this meat was unkosher, so they ate dairy instead. In imitation of them, we likewise refrain from eating meat. Somehow this explanation hardly seems definitive, but it will have to do until someone comes up with a more convincing one.

By the way, there are 185 days between New Year's Day and July 4—186

days in a leap year—and, depending on the year, either 69 or 70 days between Sukkot and Hanukka.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READINGS: See the list of books mentioned in the note to entry 292.

### THE THREE WEEKS/THE NINE DAYS

THERE ARE PRECISELY THREE WEEKS BETWEEN THE FAST DAY OF THE seventeenth of *Tammuz* (see *Minor Fast Days*) and the fast of Tisha Be'Av (see next entry). It was on the seventeenth of *Tammuz* in 70 C.E. that the Romans breached the walls of Jerusalem. For three weeks, Roman troops ransacked and destroyed the city until, on the ninth of *Av*, they burned down the Temple. Ever since, Jews have observed this three-week period, which falls between mid-July and mid-August, as a time of mourning. During "the three weeks," weddings are prohibited.

The spirit of mourning intensifies during the final nine days of "the three weeks"—from the first until the ninth of *Av*. The Talmud teaches: "From the beginning of *Av*, we diminish happiness" (*Mishna Ta'anit* 4:6). During "the nine days," Jews are not supposed to cut their hair or shave—in ancient times, to let one's hair grow long was a sign of mourning—and are not permitted to drink wine and eat meat except on the Sabbath. For people who are particularly "carnivorous," there is a legally mandated way around the restriction on eating meat. One can attend a *siyyum*, a public reading and explanation of the concluding passage of a talmudic tractate. Anyone who participates in a *siyyum* is entitled to join in a festive meal afterward (known in Hebrew as a *se'udat mitzvah*, a "commanded meal"), at which eating meat is permitted.

During "the nine days," many religious Jews do not engage in any activity whose sole purpose is pleasure, for example, swimming. The Talmud also proscribes washing clothes during "the nine days," except for those needed for immediate wear. Because wearing freshly cleaned clothes is

