



These are the appointed festivals of the Lord, the holy convocations, which you shall celebrate at the time appointed for them. LEV 23:4

The Feasts of Judaism

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught that the festivals of Judaism are the great cathedrals of the faith. Instead of creating material shrines, Judaism's sacred architecture consists of sanctuaries in time. He explains: "Judaism teaches us to be attached to holiness in time, to be attached to sacred events, to learn how to consecrate sanctuaries that emerge from the magnificent stream of a year." By creating an architecture of time, the Jewish people consecrate days within the cycle of weeks, months, seasons, and years in order to remember and celebrate the events and themes of the covenant.

The word "remember" is found throughout the Scriptures. The process of remembering God's saving deeds is not just a mental recall; remembering is active, tangible, and personal. The challenge of relating the past to the present is accomplished by appealing to the whole person: the mind, heart, and five senses. The feasts of the year enshrine the memories of what God has done and allow each new generation to participate in the effects of God's saving work. An old proverb says, "Put something where you can see it so your eye will remind your heart." Through the symbols, rituals, foods, and customs of the annual feasts, the Jewish people see, hear, smell, taste, and feel the living word of God.

Because the Jewish people created sanctuaries in time with their religious festivals, they produced something that the Babylonian conquerors, Roman armies, and German Nazis could not destroy. Repeating the Sabbath blessing every Friday evening, breaking the unleavened bread of the Seder, fasting in repentance on the Day of Atonement, lighting the candles of the Hanukkah menorah—

these remembrances have played an essential role in unifying and preserving the Jewish people through the centuries in both joy and persecution. Children who participate in the family festivals sense that they belong to an ongoing tradition that has deep significance. The family and communal bonds created by the cycle of feasts build identity and security that gives life purpose and direction. With joy and thanksgiving, the feasts honor the Jewish tradition and pass on the experience of faith throughout the generations.

Reflection and discussion

- What feast of Judaism is most familiar to me? What do I know about that feast's traditions?
- Why is tangible remembrance so necessary in building meaning and security in a person's life?

Herman Wouk, in *This Is My God*, wrote: "Time on earth is a pattern of wheels within wheels—the day, the week, the seasons, the year—and on each of the wheels Judaism has set its stamp."

The most deeply rooted of all Judaism's cycle of time is the weekly Sabbath. In the Genesis narrative, God blessed the seventh day and made it holy. Keeping the Sabbath has long been Israel's most important requirement for honoring the covenant and inclusion within the community. As a distinguishing mark of Judaism,

Sabbath consists of a strictly regulated pause in the busy and burdensome routine of daily life. This weekly stoppage is not just a suggestion to better one's life with leisure; it is God's gift of emancipation in an anxiety-burdened world.

The Jewish year has twelve moon months of twenty-nine or thirty days. In biblical times, the day of the new moon, the first day of each lunar month, was a day of rejoicing and festivity, not only in Israel, but throughout the cultures of the Middle East. In ancient Israel, the new moon was a sign of God's fidelity and was celebrated with blowing trumpets, special sacrifices, ceasing from work, and festive meals (Num 10:10; Ps 81:3).

Three times a year the people of Israel celebrated pilgrimage feasts: the feast of Passover (Pesach), the feast of Weeks or Pentecost (Shavuot), and the feast of Booths or Tabernacles (Sukkot). During the period of the temple (until A.D. 70), these three feasts were characterized by pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The feasts of Passover and Booths began on the fifteenth day of their respective lunar months, when the moon is full—Passover in the spring (in our March-April) and Booths in the autumn (in our September-October). The feast of Weeks is celebrated seven weeks after Passover begins, falling on the fiftieth day after Passover (in our May-June).

These three feasts have both agricultural and historical significance. Agriculturally, Passover represents the beginning of the barley harvest in Israel. The feast of Weeks commemorates the time when the first fruits of the wheat were harvested and brought to the temple. The feast of Booths is a harvest festival marking the ripening of the grape and fruit crops and is sometimes referred to as the festival of ingathering. This annual tribute to the seasonal cycles of the earth is combined with the historical significance of the feasts. Passover remembers the exodus from Egypt after generations of slavery; Weeks celebrates the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai; and Booths commemorates the forty-year period during which the children of Israel were wandering in the desert, living in temporary shelters, before entering the promised land.

The High Holy Days are the ten days starting with Rosh Hashanah, commonly known as the Jewish New Year, and ending with Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. These are days of serious introspection, a time to consider the sins of the previous year and to repent before God. Rosh Hashanah, occurring on

the first day of the month of Tishri, is designated the festival of Trumpets in the Bible, and it is today marked by the sounding of the *shofar* (the ram's horn) in the synagogue. Yom Kippur is Judaism's most solemn day, a day of fasting, bowed heads, and wrung hearts. These Days of Awe fall in the first ten days of the lunar month in which the feast of Booths is celebrated.

The feasts that are not rooted in the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) are called minor holy days. The three most important of these minor, post-Mosaic feasts are the Ninth of Ab, Purim, and Hanukkah. The ninth day of the month of Ab marks the greatest disasters in Jewish history, the destruction of Jerusalem's first temple by the Babylonians and the destruction of the second temple by the Romans. It is marked with fasting, mourning customs, and readings from the book of Lamentations. Purim is a joyful holiday, rooted in the biblical story of Esther, a Jewish queen who saved her people from extermination in Persia. It is celebrated on the fourteenth day of Adar, a month before Passover begins (in our February-March). Hanukkah is an eight-day festival, also called the feast of Dedication. It celebrates the victory of the Maccabees over the Syrian ruler, Antiochus, and the rededication of the temple after its desecration. It is marked by the lighting of the eight candles of the Hanukkah menorah.

Reflection and discussion

- Our Hebrew ancestors associated the new moon with God's faithfulness and the full moon with the abundance of God's blessings. What do I associate with the waxing and waning of the moon?

- In what ways do I remember and celebrate the natural cycles and seasons of the year?

The great feasts of Israel were occasions for renewing the covenant, for strengthening the bonds that held the Israelites together as the people of God. The annual cycle of festivals acknowledged God as the provider of his people and celebrated God's gracious gift of choosing the Israelites and personally delivering them. The physical expressions that characterized the feasts—processing, festive meals, singing, and dancing—were expressions of a lively religious faith and a heartfelt joy.

Israel's feasts were communal celebrations—the opposite of solitary piety. Everyone was involved, from the oldest to the youngest members of the community. Moses told the people to make sure no one was left out: “Rejoice during your festival, you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, as well as the Levites, the strangers, the orphans, and the widows resident in your towns” (Deut 16:14). The festivals are repeatedly called “holy convocations” (Lev 23:4), a time characterized by a break in life's ordinary routine, a time in which work was forbidden. The pilgrimage feasts involved travel from home and festivity with the whole community in Jerusalem. The most dramatic break from the routine was the feast of Booths, during which everyone camped out for seven days in huts covered with tree branches and leaves.

The biblical accounts of Israel's festivals are filled with ceremonies and rituals. Some of these were rites involving the whole community at the temple of Jerusalem; others were family rituals performed in the home. These symbols and rituals expressed an interior faith and taught the next generation how to live the faith of their ancestors. Teaching with words alone cannot compare to vivid actions like clearing the home of leaven, leaving a place setting for Elijah,

marching with the palm branch, listening to the trumpet sound, and lighting the menorah. Carrying out the ceremonies of Israel's feasts over the course of a year can teach far more than can be learned in a classroom. The festival ceremonies expressed the living covenant, the active relationship between God and the community of faith.

During the era of the temple, most of the feasts were accompanied by either animal sacrifice or a harvest offering to God. These sacrifices and offerings were specifically prescribed in the Scriptures, for example: "You shall present with the bread seven lambs a year old without blemish, one young bull, and two rams; they shall be a burnt-offering to the Lord, along with their grain-offering and their drink-offerings, an offering by fire of pleasing odor to the Lord" (Lev 23:18). The sacrifices and offerings were exterior expressions of interior dispositions, a desire to return thanks to God for blessings received and to be forgiven and reconciled for offenses. Yet, there was no sharp line of demarcation between the spiritual and social dimensions of the festivals. The animals and grain offered to God also provided for a community meal. Although meat was relatively scarce in Israel's everyday life, it was noticeably present at most of the festivals, where the requirements of animal sacrifices insured a large banquet. Wine, also an expression of abundance and celebration, was in full evidence at the festivals.

Along with the solemnity of the festivals was the biblical commandment to "rejoice during your festival." The holy convocation was also a holiday filled with high spirits and the letting go of usual inhibitions. Isaiah describes the joy of the feast: "You shall have a song in the night when a holy festival is kept; and gladness of heart, as when one sets out to the sound of the flute to go to the mountain of the Lord" (Isa 30:29). Feasting, drinking, singing, dancing, and rejoicing—these are expressions of Israel's communal life in celebration of God's blessings.

The feasts celebrated by the Jewish people of today are diminished in their pomp and display from the lavishness of the festivals during the biblical period with its temple. The pilgrimage processions to Jerusalem, the radiantly decorated and crowded streets of the city, the glorious temple of the Lord, with its white-robed priests, fragrant sacrifices, and awesome solemnities are long-departed parts of an ancient past. Yet, the spirit of those feasts remains within contemporary Judaism, and the essence of those festivals are remembered in

word and ritual in the homes and synagogues of Jewish people throughout the world. These sanctuaries in time consecrate the cycle of weeks, months, seasons, and years in order to enshrine for each generation the memories of what God has done.

Reflection and discussion

- In what way do the religious feasts of Israel express the whole person in relationship to God: refusing to separate the spiritual and physical, the sacrificial and social, solemnity and rejoicing?
- What can I learn about the joy of my religion through discovering the feasts of Israel?

From their roots in the Old Testament, these feasts also form the background for the New Testament. The festivals of Israel were at the heart of the religious life of Jesus. He went on pilgrimage to Jerusalem with his family and his disciples for the feasts of the Lord. He honored the Sabbath and celebrated the cycle of the year as he lived within the tradition of his Jewish ancestors.

Sometimes Christians believe that the Jewish feasts are no longer valid since Jesus proclaimed himself as Lord of the Sabbath and the gospels demonstrate that his saving deeds fulfilled the ancient feasts. Yet, Jesus taught that he had not

come to abolish the Torah and that not one letter would pass from it until it is all accomplished (Matt 5:17–18). God’s covenant with the Jewish people remains, for as Paul wrote, “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom 11:29).

As Gentiles grafted onto the vine of Israel, we who are Christian are privileged to study the feasts of our elder brothers and sisters in Judaism. In Jesus, these festivals have become our heritage too. Learning the feasts of Judaism will enrich our understanding of the Scriptures, help us understand the roots of our tradition, and bring us closer to the faith of Jesus.

Reflection and discussion

- What are the main reasons I have been attracted to this study of the biblical feasts of Judaism?
- In what way can a study of the feasts of Judaism enrich my Christian faith?

Prayer

Lord God of Israel, you have created the heavenly bodies of sun and moon, and you have given us the rhythm of days, months, seasons, and years. We praise you for the cycles of fasting and feasting, mourning and rejoicing, struggle and celebration which mark our lives on earth. During this study of the biblical feasts of Judaism, give me a new respect and understanding for this part of my religious heritage, and lead me closer to the faith of Jesus. Guide, encourage, and enlighten me as I read and contemplate your inspired word.