

## **What It Means to Be a Jew Part VI**

### **Why all Those Holy Days and Festivals?**

**By Rabbi Stephen Fuchs**

I have this enduring fantasy that one day CNN will come with a camera crew into my office and say, "Rabbi we will give you thirty seconds to tell the world the essence of the Jewish faith." I would have a choice. I could either say, "Thirty seconds for four thousand years, forget it!" Or I can take the challenge. I decide to take the challenge.

Our religion bases itself on a Covenant that is over 4,000 years old. A Covenant that God first made with Abraham and which still binds us today. A Covenant, of course, is an agreement in which both sides have obligations to fulfill. And God promises to protect us, to give us children, to make us a permanent people, and to give us the land of Israel and we in turn must be a blessing in the lives that we lead, follow God's teachings and work to create a society based on justice and righteousness.

Imagine if you will a rope coming out from the epicenter of the Jewish star in the ceiling of the sanctuary. Think of it as a rope with nine strands to each of the nine discs, which sit in the arches that comprise this edifice. Think of the star as the symbol of the Covenant. That rope connects the Holy Days and Festivals, which mark our Jewish year, to the core beliefs of our people. The Holy Days and Festivals are not isolated events. They all connect directly to our Covenantal quest.

On Rosh Hashanah, our New Year, we proclaim, "This is the day the world came to be." The shofar sound, so distinctive to this occasion is a spiritual alarm clock that calls us to repentance; it calls us to consider the quality of our deeds.

We celebrate our New Year by reminding ourselves of the potential of creation. We remind ourselves that we are created in God's image. And that means that we are in charge of and responsible for what goes on in this world. The shofar's haunting sound reminds us that it is an awesome responsibility.

Notice the balance scales in the roundel representing Rosh Hashanah. The rabbis taught that each of us on Rosh Hashanah should consider that our good deeds and our evil deeds weigh equally. So, the next deed that we do—for good or for ill—will determine our fate in the future. It is no accident that some of our sages have pointed out that the zodiacal symbol for this Hebrew month is Libra, the balance scale. At this time of the year all of our deeds weigh in the balance.

In contrast to the way in which the shofar Rosh Ha-Shannah roundel proclaims the world's creation with a loud blast, the disc representing Yom Kippur speaks to us of quietude and looking into our inner souls. The symbol represented is the arc of the Covenant in the ancient temple. Once each year the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies with the entire congregation waiting outside. The priest prepared himself for the ritual for no fewer than seven days. The people believed that when he emerged, still alive and well after pleading with God for the future of our people, that a new year of health, joy, meaning, and prosperity was assured.

Today, we have no more priests to make atonement for us. Today, each of us must look into our own Holy of Holies. Each of us must look into our own arc of the Covenant to examine our deeds—to regret the things we have done wrong and to say we are sorry to God and to one another for those transgressions. When we have done these things sincerely, we may indeed enter the New Year feeling cleansed and renewed.

Just as Yom Kippur speaks of inner examination and quiet, the festival of Sukkot represented by the third disc speaks of action. In fact we are taught that at the end of Yom

Kippur—as soon as we appease our hunger just a little bit—we are supposed to go out and hammer the first nail into our sukkah. The sukkah, of course, represents the frail huts we lived in when we marched in the desert for forty years. But they mean oh so much more to us today! When we build that sukkah, when we sit in it and feel the sun, the wind, and the drops of rain, we become more acutely aware than at any other time that there are so many people in this world who live in nothing more secure. And so the sukkah reminds us of our Covenantal obligations to use our talents to create a world of justice and righteousness, of comfort and compassion, not just for us and our family, but also for everyone.

At the end of Sukkot, we celebrate Simchat Torah. The open scroll in the roundel represents the conclusion of the annual Torah reading cycle. As soon as we complete the reading of the Torah, we then start all over again, because the study of Torah is never ending. It is no accident that our sages taught that the world stands on three things, and the first of these is study. In a 1970 vintage book the late sociologist, (non-Jewish) of Columbia University, Eric Van den Haag, addressed the question, “Why are Jews so smart?”

There is no doubt that on the whole Jews have succeeded out of all proportion to our numbers in areas that require study and learning. If we represent little more than two percent of the American population, is there a single profession— those that require higher education such as teachers, college presidents, lawyers, doctors, social workers, musicians, and scientists—in which Jews number anything nearly as low as two percent?

Van den Haag, noticing that reality, came to a very interesting conclusion. Success, he noted, rests on two factors: The emphasis in the Jewish community on marriage and the emphasis on study. The Jewish world always frowned on celibacy, and our tradition teaches that marriage is an important goal in life. The emphasis on study, he concluded, was vital because in the societal norms of the Jewish community, a poor but promising scholar was considered to be a prime catch for the daughter of a wealthy Jewish merchant. The merchant was not only willing, but he was proud to support that couple while they presumably had lots and lots of bright Jewish children who also were reared with the value of study of utmost importance.

By contrast, Van den Haag noted, in the Christian world if there was a poor but promising scholar, that individual had only one way by which he could pursue his academic interest. That was to enter the monastery where presumably he had no children at all.

Torah, then, is our most important religious symbol as well as the basis for Jewish learning. Simchat Torah, which celebrates Torah, is a wonderful celebration at which we also consecrate our first grade students to the beginning of what we hope will be a life long engagement with Jewish learning.

The next roundel, with its nine branched candelabra, represents Chanukah. If you ask most Jews about Chanukah, they will tell you it is the story of a miracle. The Assyrian Greeks conquered Judaea, then polluted our Temple in Jerusalem and used it as a shrine to sacrifice pigs in pagan rites. After a courageous struggle, under the leadership of Judah and the Maccabees, we rededicated our Temple and went to light the eternal flame on the altar. There was, however, only a little cruse of oil enough to last for one day. Miracle of miracles took place, though, and the oil lasted for eight days.

In truth, the legend of the cruse of oil does not appear in any Jewish source until at least three hundred years after the actual events of Chanukah took place in 165 BCE. The “oil story” is about as central to the real meaning of Chanukah as Santa Claus is the real reason Christians commemorate Christmas.

The real story of Chanukah is much more complex and much more contemporary. The real story pitted two groups of Jews in Second pre-Christian century Judaea against one another. On the one hand there were those who wanted to assimilate. They wanted to abandon much of

Jewish life and practice in order to follow the Greek way of life and culture, which was sweeping the world at that time.

On the other side of the conflict were the Jews who resisted the strong pull of assimilation. These Jews proclaimed, "We have a Covenant with God. We must maintain it." It was not until the tension between those two groups, the Jews who were willing to give it all up and the Jews who wanted to remain loyal to our tradition, came to blows. There was civil war in the streets in Judea until Antiochus, the emperor of Assyria, intervened

Of course, if he was going to intervene between those who wanted to be more like him and those who wanted to be more Jewish, there is no question as to what side he would take. In taking over the Temple and forbidding the practice of Judaism in any way, shape, size, or form, though, Antiochus went too far. It is similar to today. Many Americans rarely practice their faith, but they would protest strongly or even be willing to fight if the government forbade them to practice their faith. So it was in ancient Judaea.

For the first time in human history, a people took up arms in order to preserve the freedom to practice their religion. After a difficult three-year struggle, the Jewish fighters, led by Judah Maccabee, drove out the Assyrian soldiers. We commemorate that victory by celebrating Chanukah for eight days.

Why eight days? Not because of the little cruse of oil but because we were forbidden during the time of the struggle to celebrate our major festival of Sukkot. The real message of Chanukah, then, is a message about values. We almost lost the right to be Jewish 2200 years ago, not because of a Syrian oppressor but because of our own apathy. Such religious apathy is rampant today.

The Chanukah roundel can be thought of as a ladder. We can either climb to the top to embrace the values our Covenant teaches or we can simply remain at the bottom and think of religious values and practices as relics of a bygone era.

After Chanukah comes Tu B'Shevat. In the United States we began celebrating something called "Earth Day" about 30 years ago. Earth Day responded to a need to recognize and take cognizance of our human responsibility to protect our environment. Tu B'Shevat also reminds us of our responsibility to take care of this earth.

In chapter seven of the Midrash (everyone should know what a Midrash is) Koheleth Rabbah, we read: "After the creation of the world God addressed the first couple, Adam and Eve, and told them to take care of this world and all of its beauty and abundance." Beware, though, God reminded them, of destroying or polluting this earth because it is the only one we shall have.

Tu B'Shevat is first mentioned in the Mishnah which was compiled between 200 BCE and 200 CE. That means we began observing it no later than 1800 years ago.

It gives me pride as a Jew to realize that our people institutionalized the sense of responsibility for our environment at least 1800 years before the modern world concretized that concern into a day of national observance.

In the late 1980s, when I served as Rabbi in Nashville, a Senator from Tennessee, Albert Gore, began doing research and convening seminars. These led to his books and movie about the environment which recently won him the Nobel Prize for Peace. At the first of these occasions held in Nashville, Senator Gore asked me to share a closing homily that concretized this concern. On that occasion I told the following story:

*Once upon a time there was a goat—who lived long ago—with horns so long that when he stretched his neck they grazed the sky and caused the stars to sing the most beautiful melody anyone had ever heard. One day a man was walking through the forest thinking of buying a gift for his wife’s birthday when he encountered the goat. Seeing his beautiful horns he thought to cut a small piece off of one to make a jewelry box for his wife. He asked the goat if he could do so, and the goat, being a friendly sort agreed. When friends saw the lovely jewelry box, everyone wanted one. Then many people each took just a little bit of the goat’s precious horn for his or her own use. As a result, the stars no longer sing.*

For me, this story conveys the essential message of Tu B’Shevat. We are in charge of and responsible for this earth. If we destroy it, we shall never have another one.

The next disc represents the festival of Purim, a joyous celebration based on the Book of Esther. Purim, though, is not just a children’s holiday to celebrate with costumes and groggers (noisemakers). It is a holiday with an important message expressed on the wall of this sanctuary. If I had to pick one verse from the entire Bible as my very favorite, I well might choose this one. In the story, Mordecai sends a message to Esther that says: You must go to the king, and tell him you are Jewish because the wicked Haman has issued a decree proclaiming that all the Jews of the realm must die. Esther responds by sending a message back to Mordecai that says: I cannot do it. No one goes to the king unbidden. If you do, and he does not hold out his scepter in acceptance, it is a death sentence.

So, Mordecai responds: Do not just think of yourself at this time because this is your hour. The verse says, “*Oo mee yo day ah eem l’ayt ka-zote hee-ga’at l’malchut.*” “Who knows, Esther, if you have reached your position as Queen just for this occasion?”

There can be no more appropriate question for us to ask ourselves every day of our lives. Who knows if we are where we are just for the opportunity to do good that it gives us. We stand with a wonderful opportunity every day to make a difference in the lives of others. Will we take it or will we let it go by? That is the question of Purim and that is a question that goes beyond all of the fun and joy we share on that holiday.

Passover speaks to us of our debt to God. Put most simply, if God had not intervened in history to get us out of slavery, we would not be sitting here in freedom. We would not enjoy the wonderful lives and countless opportunities that we have as citizens of this great and free land. We would be breaking bricks in Egypt.

Passover should remind us not just to drink from four cups and teach our kids the four questions of the Seder but also to remember that because God got us out of slavery, we owe God a debt we can never repay.

Think of it this way: think of yourself as a parent and your child is playing in the street. All of a sudden, a car comes by, about to run over your child, when, at the very last moment, someone runs into the street and grabs your child and saves him. As a parent, surely you know that you owe that person who saved your child a debt that you can never ever repay no matter what you do. That is our debt to God. We were slaves, but now because of God, we are free. That does not mean we are simply to do whatever we want. Nor does it mean we should feel free to embrace the values of everybody else, values that seem to sink lower every day.

No, God freed us so that we could march to Sinai as we did on Shavuot to receive the Torah. At last, we were free to leave behind the values of Pharaoh’s Egypt, a society whose values allowed the ruler to keep slaves, work them to death, beat and kill them as you wished. That was a society where if the ruler, who was worshipped as a god, felt threatened by another people, it was all right to take their babies and throw them into the Nile.

Yes, those are the values of Pharaoh's Egypt. In leaving Egypt behind and marching to Mount Sinai, we traded those values with God's values. Shavuot, which the next roundel commemorates, is the festival that celebrates our binding ourselves to God's values at Mt. Sinai. In complete contrast to Pharaoh's values, God's values teach that we must use the powers and abilities that God has given each of us—not just for our own gain but to make a just, caring and compassionate society.

The rabbis taught that in some inexplicable way all the generations of our people stood at Sinai and bound ourselves to God's Covenant. That brings us to Shabbat, our people's weekly reminder of our relationship to the Almighty.

In the roundel we see the candles, which symbolize God's presence; the wine, which symbolizes the joy of the Sabbath; and the star, which symbolizes our heritage as a whole.

Now, I imagine the star in the center of the sanctuary like the hub of a wheel. The spokes connect to each of the nine roundels. They turn, and I see revolving before me the forceful statement of interconnected Jewish values that the celebrations of the Jewish year represent.

Our Holy Days and Festivals are not isolated occurrences. They forge themselves to one another and to us by proclaiming our connection to the Covenant God first made with Abraham and which we renew each time we turn our hearts to the Almighty. Each of these nine discs connects us to and reminds us of the responsibilities we have accepted.

May we never isolate our celebrations from our values and may we never isolate our values from our celebrations.  
 If we weigh our deeds on the scale of balance on Rosh Hashanah—  
 And if we stand in humility before God's judgment on Yom Kippur—  
 If we dwell in the Sukkah and heed its lessons about the environment and our responsibility to the less fortunate—  
 If we engage in the ongoing and never ending study of Torah and its teachings as Simchat Torah reminds us to do—  
 If we remember the warning against assimilation of Hanukah—  
 If we allow Tu B'Shevat to inspire us to work to preserve and protect our environment—  
 If we heed our internal call to accept the responsibility of our destiny as human beings and Jews that Purim teaches—  
 If we remind ourselves that God freed us on Passover from slavery in Egypt and Pharaoh—  
 So that we could freely choose to accept God's Covenant and God's values when we stood at Sinai on Shavuot—  
 And perhaps most important of all, if we see Shabbat each week as a time of special joy, a time to step back, a time to thank God for our blessings and to remember our responsibility to God and God's world—

Then, our Holy Days and Festivals will truly help us to fulfill the responsibilities of our Covenant with God. Our lives will be a blessing—as God charged Abraham to make his life a blessing four thousand years ago—to our people and to all humanity. Amen.