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THEME

*The Shabbat
and the Feasts*



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INTRODUCTION



The Shabbat and the Feasts

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Nothing may be so defining of Judaism as the sanctification of time. In the Bible, God commissioned the people of Israel with a detailed festival calendar. And as a weekly recurring festival, Shabbat (Sabbath) stands as the source from which all other festivals spring. Shabbat is the pivotal Jewish holiday, given by God as a sign of His covenant with Israel (Exodus 31:12-17). Besides, God ordered that three times a year, the Israelites should appear before Him in the place that He would choose to dwell His Name in. These feasts of pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot, are called *regalim* in Hebrew, which literally would translate as 'foot feasts'.

The Jewish calendar has more festive days. Cohen Stuart, in his article on the Feast of Tabernacles, also refers to New Year and the Day of Atonement, as one is the continuation of the other. However, apart from that reference, in this volume we focus on the Shabbat together with the three pilgrimage feasts, and Purim. We read the testimonies of Jews who give us an insight in how they celebrate the feasts. At the same time, they reveal the deeper meanings and concepts involved.

The articles have previously appeared in Dutch in *Israël en de Kerk*, or in abridged form in *Israel & Christians Today*. This is a first encounter with the feasts. Some lines are drawn to the New Testament already in this issue, but in the next volume, we will go deeper into the relevance of the Jewish feasts for Christians.



DR. BLOEME EVERS-EMDEN

Shabbat in a Jewish family

I need not enumerate for the readers of this journal the commandment mentioned in various places in the Torah to rest on the seventh day. However, the command is vaguely worded and would be difficult to make sense of due to its generality, if not for the efforts of our scholars many centuries ago to provide the necessary rules for it. The prohibition of work includes servants and even animals; truly a progressive commandment. The only emphatic instruction the Torah gives is the prohibition, on Shabbat, to make fire.

Shabbat is the only day that has a name; in Hebrew the days, from Sunday, are called the first day, Monday is the second day, etc., until Shabbat. That does outline the importance, I think. If you see something special in the shop, you buy it beforehand for Shabbat. It's also the social day for many, because mostly the spouses work for bread and the children work for school; on Shabbat, so much is forbidden, that it leaves time for intense engagement with your family, for receiving and visiting. Sometimes I think: it's not: not allowed, but not required. Delightful!

SMELLING SHABBAT

For me, Shabbat is part of an incredibly creative "concoction" that permeates week-day life beforehand. Sounds a bit pathetic, doesn't it, but it is. It is the blending of the earthly with the higher, that earthly is lifted to the spiritual. Why? We have to have the house cleaned on Friday, because Shabbat starts on Friday evening with sunset. The Shabbat table is set with whatever nice things we have in the house, you put on your Shabbat clothes (if a guest comes in a pair of those sallow blue trousers I may not say anything; the guest can't remove those trousers on the spot anyway, but I don't think Queen Shabbat is honoured by that). I cooked tastier food than on weekdays, although I am by no means a kitchen princess. Still, I am in the kitchen on Friday afternoons and when the children came home from school at the time, they said, 'you can already smell Shabbat!' All these preparations create the expectation of something festive.

But the spiritual matters in themselves must not be forgotten, which is why I already check on Thursday evening what the Sidra of the week is (the part that will be read from the Torah that Shabbat in the synagogue) in order to prepare for it. Because I know that little of it comes on Friday. Now I am not one of those praiseworthy housewives who on Tues-

day already think about what they will bring to the table on Friday night, but I worryingly watch what time Shabbat starts. In autumn towards winter every Friday is earlier because the sun sets earlier and then you have to have everything, really everything ready. In spring towards summer it gets later and later, which is lovely, but you think you can prepare a lot more things other than Shabbat, because it is late 'night'. The strange thing is that I always have to run at the end, whether Shabbat starts at half past four or half past seven....

We could rejoice in a large family and enjoyed it; now the youngest has turned 40, they have all flown out, of course, but still I enjoy making Shabbat, with guests. The children helped out in the household on Friday afternoons, without the weekday grumbling. Children want to do real things. So I taught them to bake cake or cookies at a young age. First they were allowed, later they had to.... Our youngest was very skilful with this; he made the batter, set the oven, pushed the baking tins in and went off to play football. I kept an eye on the timer, but there was no need. Besotted and sweaty, he rang the bell at just the right time, looked into the hot inside of the oven and turned the knob with satisfaction.

My - unfortunately deceased - husband usually came rushing in at the nick of time. Nevertheless, he would neatly lay the contents of his weekday bags side by side on the bedroom table before putting on his Shabbat suit. Coming downstairs, he asked, 'who do we have as a guest tonight?' because I was and am the one who maintains social connections. I think in most families the women do that.

I chase the kids into the shower, hurry up, move forward. And when it is almost Shabbat and a knot falls off somewhere it's almost a disaster. A repeated glance at the clock shows that Shabbat is dangerously close. Onward, onward, onward. Of course the soup boils over to the delight of one of our descendants,

who loves to hear my foaming at my clumsiness, the bum.

NOT MAKING A FIRE

What needs to be finished, what is 'working'? That is: creating something new. For example, writing a letter, but also repairing something and much more. Jewish scholars have drawn up 39 main activities and, in addition, many activities derived from them. For instance, you are not allowed to promote the growth of crops, e.g. pour some water over your lawn, but (derivatively) you are also not allowed to water the fallen flower vase. Hurts my heart, to see the flowers thus prematurely wilt, so put the bouquet bought especially for Shabbat out of reach of children.

The ban on making fire has caused a lot of difficulties. With the fire sources of (very) long ago, one had to keep food warm; how my foremothers did that I don't know. What I do know is that in cold regions people used to put a nutritious meal in a fireproof pot and take it to the baker, who managed to keep the oven on all Shabbat. After the synagogue service on Shabbat morning, one went to collect her/his meal from the baker.

When electricity came into vogue, a problem arose: is electricity fire or not? Scholars decided that although the spark that sparks when turning a light switch is invisible, it falls under 'fire'. This has had a lot of consequences. You cannot turn your electric oven on and off on Shabbat, the lights ditto, nor make a cup of fresh coffee with your coffee machine. And so on. A lot has been thought of: there are timers that you can connect to the various lights before the entrance of Shabbat, there is also a central option. You can set the time of going

The ban on making fire has caused a lot of difficulties

on and going off. So too with heat sources. However, my son the rabbi does not think it is right to connect the timer to the coffee machine, because it is an emergency measure after all: heat and light are indispensable for the joy of Shabbat, but as far as coffee is concerned, one has to be content with powdered coffee. So the smokers can't smoke either, because you have to light such a smoking stick, which is not allowed; I see with some surprise that when it is Shabbat, their addiction wears off; how is that possible? But towards the end of Shabbat they frequently look at their watch, only then do they start to crave.

FRIDAY NIGHT

Shabbat is now very much upon us. All the food has been cooked and what is meant for tonight is in our oven which stays on for two hours and then turns itself off. Most households have a metal plate placed over the heat source in the kitchen under which small gas or electric elements are turned on that keep the food hot. The water we need for the entire Shabbat is boiled and also kept warm; these days, people have large electric kettles like those sometimes used in cafes.

A quick check that everything is in order: are there no unwanted lights on and the desired lights on, have the children dressed properly for Shabbat, are the candles ready to 'make Shabbat', are the guests inside? Surely it has worked out again!

We are all clustered around the candles. Women light them, first the female guests, then the housewife, because when she has lit the candles, it is Shabbat in that house. If a man is without female company he must light the Shabbat candles.

Queen Shabbat has entered, satisfied you sit down. You are relaxed, there is nothing more to do, well, for a housewife it is disappointing, because you have to go back and forth to the kitchen anyway, if you have small children they can't do without your care of course. And if you have animals, they need to be fed before you go to the table yourself.

However, the relaxation also has drawbacks, as you do get very sleepy from that release of tension. Our children, whom we could never drive to bed during the week, now suddenly get tired! De-stressing too.

Unfortunately, few guests have enough imagination to bring something other than 'flowers for the hostess' as a tribute; it is how we maintain our relationships. You will understand that so close to Shabbat I definitely don't have time to properly care for the mostly laborious flowers, so I just stuff them in a vase and I am not allowed to touch them until tomorrow night after nightfall. So readers, if you are ever invited to Orthodox Jews on a Friday night, think of something else - although, maybe I am the only exception?

Before going to the table, we bless our children with the ancient priestly blessing. Taking turns, my husband and I placed our hands on their newly washed hair and pronounced the blessing, concluded with a kiss and 'Shabbat shalom'. I don't know if it ever happens to you, dear readers, but sometimes you are quite angry with a child. Yet we never skip it, I think it would be bad for the child and for yourself. Now when I am with one of the children, I get to give our grandchildren and even our

Before going to the table, we bless our children with the ancient priestly blessing

great-grandchildren, our children-in-law and, of course, our own children the blessing, a very lovely ritual. Now we go to the table, but no dish has been served yet. First some songs are sung together, the housewife is praised (deserved or not), the wine sanctified with a special text and the hands are doused with water as a prelude to eating (at least a bite of) bread. Then comes the meal, interrupted by Shabbat hymns praising God and Shabbat. They are almost all upbeat melodies that invite participation, as it were, with beautiful lyrics, imagery,

quotes from our religious literature. Since the food does not get cold, we do not have to rush. The children have learned something about the weekly portion that will be read in the synagogue or, if a feast or mourning day is near, about that, and they are eager to let it be heard. The adults also try to share something that not everyone knows yet. After the meal,

the thanksgiving prayer is said/sung, preceded by Psalm 126. Many who have strayed from practising Judaism still remember something from their childhood - either from grandparents or parents - and sing it along a bit nostalgically.

TO BIKE OR NOT TO BIKE?

The next morning, there is no sleeping in; we leave home early to go to the synagogue on foot. Even starting a car sparks - ouch, that's fire and therefore forbidden. In itself, cycling would not be forbidden, but there are two main objections: suppose it has rained and your tyres are making a trail on the road; that is making something new, so forbidden. The second objection concerns the possibility of something breaking on your bike along the way and you going to repair it. That too is not

allowed. My husband, who was extremely clumsy, cried out that he could go on the bike, because he could promise with his hand on his heart that he would not repair.... But he never did, we walked for over half an hour to the synagogue, an unsuspected opportunity for good conversation, which you often get poorly at during the week. Because then the bell rings, then the phone, a TV-programme has to be watched; all kinds of interruptions occur, but not on the walk on the early, so still traffic-quiet Shabbat morning.

I ENJOY JUDAISM

Arriving at the synagogue, I feel a joy rise up within me for being with fellow believers, with kindred spirits, with, at least for this, my sisters and brothers. I share with them the motivation to keep Judaism alive, to enjoy the often uplifting texts in an increasingly warm mood. To follow the varied yet so familiar ritual, with the only drawback for the undersigned feminist, that women - in an Orthodox synagogue - have no part in the service. In a progressive one they have, though. I can be quite a bit jealous. It doesn't matter whether women attend or not, maybe for the coffee after the service.... That makes me quite angry but I'll write about that another time. Oh no, don't, I'm not fouling my own nest; this is my club and when I'm not annoyed by the male dominance, I enjoy my Judaism.

After the shul service, the sanctification of the wine, the coffee and the opportunity to catch up, we go home for the second meal. (The first was on Friday evening, before we pray we don't eat bread, so we make do with cake and such...). After another hand-washing ritual and a piece of bread, that second meal follows, also with singing, and many then take a nap to gather strength for the coming week. Or one delves into Jewish teachings, the Sayings of the Fathers being especially popular.



In winter, the (obligatory) third meal is usually small, because you can cook again after night. In the long summer Shabbatot (plural of Shabbat), you do eat a third meal, which can consist of bread and toppings, but also whatever is still simmering on the plate from last night.

The special, festive Shabbat atmosphere lifts you above everyday doings every week

If there are at least three stars in the sky - and if they are covered by clouds then the Jewish calendar gives the decisive answer as to the right moment of 'night', i.e. when Shabbat is over, then we make 'havdalah', which is the separation between Shabbat and the weekdays. This is done with yet another sip of wine after some other actions, the most important of which is lighting a candle with several wicks, i.e. making fire again, thus ending Shabbat. We wish each other 'shavua tov' = a good week and had to say goodbye to the Queen. Until next week, we call out to her.

Am I bothered by the many prohibitions? The special, festive Shabbat atmosphere lifts you above everyday doings every week. I am not bothered by the prohibitions, although I do find it difficult not to write, but that's just the way it is. I love not having to answer the phone and it goes without saying that there is no radio or television on. Sometimes visitors are surprised that we can do without them!

I wish you all a good week.

Bloeme Evers-Emden (26 July 1926 – 18 July 2016) was a Dutch Jewish lecturer and child psychologist who extensively researched the phenomenon of 'hidden children' during World War II and wrote four books on the subject in the 1990s. [See Wikipedia for her amazing life story.]

What does Passover mean to me?

For a boy from the Bible Belt who became a rabbi

RABBI S. KATZ

This year, I have experienced my 65st Passover in health.

From my earliest childhood, this feast was obviously a highlight of my existence. I grew up in the Dutch Bible belt, in the town of Veenendaal. I attended a Christian primary school. At home, I led an Orthodox Jewish life. I learned to cope properly with life at home on the one hand and the hours spent at school on the other.

However, there was no greater moment in the year that reminded us that we were different than on Passover.

For those days, almost everything really had to come to 'het Veen' from afar. Even a jar of Calvé mayonnaise or Hero jam that we just used throughout the year was not to be seen then. My mother started cleaning months in advance. That started upstairs on the second floor, slowly the focus shifted to the living room and kitchen, which were the last to be done.

The morning before Passover, the house was free of even the most minuscule crumb. The sandwiches for breakfast were kept separate and consumed in the playground opposite our parents' house. Once, Passover was at the end of March. It was actually not yet spring weather at all. We were somewhat lost in a chilly playground. Then the neighbour said: I don't have Passover, at most Easter, come and eat the sandwiches at my house. Those are moments that still stick with me now, over 50 years later. But those moments did help reinforce with me the Passover feeling.

In these lines, I am going to take you on the road to Passover. I want to go through the seider night ceremony with you, at the same time I want to show you how some verses from the Tenach, the Old Testament, crystallised in that ceremony. This ceremony stands alone but it does not come out of a vacuum. The ceremony contains the essential message, mission and purpose of the Jewish people here on earth.

1 - DEUTERONOMY 32:8

When the Most High distributed hereditary property to the nations, when He separated Adam's children, He established the territory of the nations according to the number of Israelites.

The Torah here harks back to the moment when G-d gave each people their inheritance, the place where they would come to live. That was when he separated the people at the scattering after the tower of Babel. Indeed, that was when he determined the boundaries of those peoples, according to the numbers of the *Bne Yisrael*, of the Jewish people.

Jewish tradition teaches that there are seventy nations on earth. Jacob descended to Egypt with seventy people at the time of the famine, at the invitation of his son Joseph. Those seventy were a reflection of those seventy peoples. What the Bible conveys to us is that if we want to understand anything about the world, we must look to the Jewish people. Not because

the Jewish people love to be in focus, but because that way the task of all humanity becomes clear. The spiritual essence of the creation of the earth is expressed by the Jewish people. It has an exemplary role in this. If the Jewish people play their role well then G-d is pleased. But if the Jewish people neglect their duty, the same G-d absolutely makes it known.

What the Bible conveys to us is, if we want to understand anything about the world, we must look to the Jewish people

That duty again has seventy aspects, just as the Torah has seventy faces. Each of those seventy faces is the spiritual inheritance of each of those seventy peoples. The United Nations has around two hundred members. But very many of those members are also closely connected.

Gd now hoped that that world would indeed achieve its goal. For that, he revealed himself to Abraham. Abraham was also successful in doing so. There were many who joined him, but not enough. There were also in Abraham traces of the idolaters among his family. He came a long way, but still asked G-d: How do I know that I will take possession of the land? (Genesis 15:8) To which G-d replied: I had expected you to trust me more. Therefore, your children must go to the learning school of

Egyptian slavery. When that course is complete, only then will they be ready to truly be my people and serve me. I will then, through my children, have my message spread across the earth.

The Passover cleaning, arranging the jar of special jam and that meal in that cold playground ask us to reflect on those bitter years leading up to that exodus. Even then, Passover is a redemption and a moment of reflecting on yourself to find out who you really are.

2 - EXODUS 4:22

And you shall say to Pharaoh, thus said G-d: the people of Israel are My firstborn.

During all those moments leading up to the exodus, Moses at one point gets the message: go to Pharaoh and tell him: that people you despise, the people you are trying to exterminate, that people are very special; to me they are my firstborn. What does G-d mean by this?

To that end, we need to explain something about the Hebrew language. The Hebrew language uses three-letter roots. These stems are inflected. For example, the root of the Hebrew word for to go: *halach*-הלך is a he, a *lamed* and a *chaf*.

Now the root of the word for firstborn is בכר, *bet* - *chaf* - *resh*. Three random letters? No! Why? Because in Hebrew, each letter also has a numerical value. The *bet* is 2, the *chaf* is 20, and the *resh* is 200. So, in the three letters at the base of this word, the concept of 2 keeps recurring. Why is that? Because the firstborn makes the father the father. He, the second generation, ensures that there is a continuation of the elder, the first generation. But there is more. The deep backgrounds of Hebrew teach us that even if the letters of a particular root are written differently, they still have a connection to that first root.

How does that work in this case? That same root *bet-chaf-resh* can also be written differently as *resh-chaf-bet* (רכב). Then it means chariot, a

medium for moving things forward. Arranged differently again, they are the basic letters of the word *berachah* (ברך): blessing.

So together, these three spellings have as their message: Firstborn > brings, transports > the greatest blessing possible

ברך >> בכר >> רכב

He, the firstborn, represents the greatest blessing because he, as it were, takes the father and carries him on into the future. He continues that father, as it were. And to top it off, the Hebrew word for father is אב, *alef-bet*: 1 and 2, for the father does not become a father until there is a second generation.¹ God is at the cradle of the Hebrew language and has expressed in it the essence of every word and concept.

All this Moses indicates when he says that above sentence to Pharaoh. A people born as common people, as a result of the carnal being together of men and women, that will go and proclaim my message here on earth.

The people, Pharaoh, that you wanted to exterminate in the Egyptian gulag, carries my future. Does that make it chosen? Yes. Did that make it easier? No, absolutely not! G-d also indicated that. He said (Exodus 12:3): In front of the Egyptians, take a Passover lamb, the animal that to them is an idol. Show that you trust in me by smearing the blood of that animal on your doorpost after you have slaughtered it (Exodus 12:7). This will show that you trust in Me. That same night, the men also had to circumcise themselves as a sign of the covenant.² After a night in which all Egyptian firstborns died, they moved out of this land. In the desert, they depended on the heavenly manna and the spring that provided them with water. There they were also given the Torah, the book that meticulously states what is expected of that firstborn and chosen son.

This is what passes through me as I raise the cup of wine and pronounce the kiddush (sanctification). The kiddush opens the seider evening. The kiddush articulates the synthesis

between flesh-and-blood people who become carriers of a chunk of divine essence. This is the cornerstone of the Jewish people. Every family anywhere in the world is filled with emotion. Is it the sabra mother whose two sons have come home from the trenches on the Hermon and at Sderot. Is it grandma of 88 who will again tonight tell her Dutch grandchildren about that last Passover in 1930s Germany. Is it grandpa on the West Coast below San Francisco who will make it clear that his grandson the banker on Wall Street, the PhD student at MIT, or the producer in Hollywood, too, should not miss out on the traditional seider.

3 - ISAIAH 43:21

This people I have created for Me. They will proclaim My praise.

On the outskirts of Tel Aviv, in the living room of the Riverside neighbourhood or under the gaze of the Golden Gate, the family then travels. Horrifying slavery. Deplorable conditions: hopeless people cry out in distress. Those cries were heard and Moses was given his mission (Exodus 7:1-5): Go and, above all, do not be afraid. You will be stronger than Pharaoh, believe in this mission because I will lead you. Pharaoh is stubborn; he is recalcitrant, he does not give an inch: So who is this God that I will listen to Him?

Then a tsunami of ten plagues broke out. Pharaoh finally got down on his knees to be totally defeated one more time by the sea. This teaches the people one thing, they are tasked with proclaiming not only that spiritual mission but also who G-d is, how great, special and extraordinary He is. That is the emotion of pronouncing the second cup of wine when one has been told off and has felt and experienced, as if it were today, what the exodus actually was now.

4 - EXODUS 15:2

This is my G-d, I will bring glory to Him.

But the emotion goes a little deeper. The most special thing we as humans have is the ability to speak, the moment G-d breathed into the first human being the spirit of life was also the moment he could start speaking. That ability was used to speak to

each other and to God. God spoke to Adam, to Noah and to the patriarchs. However, no one used that ability to sing to G-d. The first to do so were the Jewish people. Speech then became pure spirituality. That was the seed from which King David's beautiful psalms would one day emerge. In them, he revealed the wonderful power of the Jewish tongue to all mankind. This is an aspect of psalms that is all too often forgotten.

The Jewish people were given the commandment to recount the exodus and given the ability to sing to G-d. These expressions express that speech has a special function. In them, the Jewish people express how, as the chosen people, the firstborn, they express their deep soul connection in telling the story and singing the song.

This is what it says in the song at the Red Sea (Exodus 15:2): 'This is my G-d and I will bring glory to Him.'

In Hebrew, the word there is *we-anwehu*,³ which can also be read as *ani we-hu*, or 'I and he'. The song at the Red Sea was an articulation of that deep connection.⁴ Until then, there had never been a man who had imparted such tremendous spirituality, connection and loftiness to his words.

You should be at a Jewish family's house on Seider Eve for this when the last part of the Seider Eve is experienced while singing. It is a chant of a chain of generations of grandfathers and grandchildren singing about the greatness of God filled with deep emotions. For a moment, there is a flashback. The *hag-gadah* is shaking us up and takes us back to dark, bitter times. The text refers to those peoples who refused to acknowledge you, our great God. 'God, destroy them, pursue them, sweep them away from under your heavens,' it sounds. Gone prize, gone praise, gone exaltation. How should we understand that? Let us be sincere, there have been those generations. What did you do in 1492 you

had seen your father burnt alive, if your son had given up everything and become a communist, if you had managed to save yourself but your thirty member family had been gassed? This deeply human emotion of anger and that cry for revenge is an indelible part of Jewish history. But besides this, these words also demand something else. We know what history has brought, we know the feelings. But that does not get us there. We invoke and say immediately afterwards, 'Not for us G-d, not for us G-d, but give honour to your name' (Psalm 115:1). We turn the camera away from Auschwitz, from Lisbon, from Moscow, and we settle on a world that focuses only on the glory of God, and we pray and we hope that one day all humanity will participate in this.

5 - HOSEA 2:21

The lesson of Koreich, matzah and maror
I will take you as my bride forever

This was also the lesson of *Koreich* after all. *Koreich* stands for the following. During the seider, *matzah* is eaten as a memento of freedom, maror is also eaten. Maror is the memory of slavery. The scholar Hillel did not eat the matzah and maror separately, he did them together. That's called *koreich*. And we still do that during the seider. Why the two together? Surely freedom and slavery are two completely different experiences? The answer is that the seider night calls us to put everything into an overall picture. In the plan laid out by G-d as mastermind, everything man experiences here on earth, every step is one on the way to G-d's ultimate glory here on earth. Is that feeling challenging? It certainly is. Is it impossible? No. For someone who experiences the seider numbly, these words are a problem; for the somewhat deeper person, they are an affirmation.

To that end, we do two things at the end of the seider. We go through the numbers from one to thirteen and indicate for each number what it stands for. And finally, we talk about how in nature the wrongdoing of one

is punished by the act of another. This teaches us, on the one hand, to make our own contribution and, at the same time, to realise that everything is connected but that God can also arrange it Himself. Do we also live like this, then it is time for *mashiach*. And in the meantime, is there nothing? Absolutely, there is something: We continuously believe in those words of the great prophet Hoshea, who says we are Hashem's bride forever and he will never let us go.

Having written these lines, I wonder. What can you do with this as a reader of this journal? What I wrote to you sounds very abstract. Moreover, I do not expect you to celebrate the seider. You have your own spiritual experience and background. Therefore, I want to end with a story told by Shlomo Carlebach. In this story, a boy called Moishele and his father are in the Warsaw Ghetto, it is April 1943. A month later, the Warsaw Ghetto would no longer be there. They celebrate the seider together. None of the usual attributes of the seider are present. However, Moishele can ask the four questions that the Jewish child has traditionally asked at the beginning of the seider for many centuries. After asking those customary questions, he says: 'Father I have one more question, a fifth question.' Father replies, 'Dear son go ahead.' To which he says: 'Father will you and I sit at the table together again next year Passover, will I be able to ask you those same questions again?' To which father replies, 'Whether you will be there I don't know, whether I will be there I don't know either. But one thing I do know, somewhere in this world on Passover there will be a Moishele sitting at the table together with his father and that Moishele will ask his father exactly the same questions you have now asked.'

Rabbi Shmuel Katz is rabbi of the Gerard Dou shul in Amsterdam and teacher at the Jewish Seminary.

NOTES

- ¹ Rabbi Isaac Hutner (1906-1980), *Pachad Yitzhak Pesach*, ch. 81.
- ² Mechilta, ch. 3.
- ³ The word *anwehu* is split in *an-we-hu*, which leads to *ani-we-hu*, I-and-He.
- ⁴ *Pachad Yitzhak Pesach*, ch. 56 and 57.

KEES DE VREUGD

Shavuot Festival of Weeks



Seven weeks are counted starting from Pesach (Passover), according to the biblical commandment (Leviticus 23:15). On the fiftieth day, it is Shavuot (Festival of Weeks; Pentecost). Shavuot means 'weeks', from the Hebrew root sheva – seven. And Pentecost is derived from the Greek word 'fiftieth'. So, in the name of the Christian feast there is still a connection with the Jewish roots.

FIRST-FRUIITS

The seven weeks counting is traditionally called the Omer counting. The Hebrew word omer means 'sheaf'. In biblical times, the counting started when the first sheaf of the new harvest was brought as a first-fruit offering in the Temple. In that season, the wheat harvest would start, and on Shavuot, the first wheat was brought to the Temple. Besides, it was the first day on which individuals could bring *bikkurim* (first-fruits of any kind) to the temple.

RECEIVING THE TORAH

In Jewish tradition, Shavuot also became connected with the receiving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. In Hebrew, this is called *Mattan Torah*, the 'Giving of the Torah'. When you calculate the data in the Exodus story, you will find that God gave Moses the Torah on Shavuot.

The celebration of the revelation of the Torah has been the most important aspect of Shavuot, but since the return of the Jews to the Land of Israel and the establishment of the State of Israel, the agricultural aspect has also gained strength again. Homes and synagogues are decorated with plants, flowers and leafy branches, possibly reminding a tradition that Mount Sinai started to blossom when Israel received the Torah. It is also a custom on this day to have only vegetables and dairy food like milk and cheese and no meat. The Torah is as milk and the people of Israel entering the covenant as new-born children.

The celebration of the revelation of the Torah has been the most important aspect of Shavuot

The People of Israel standing at the foot of Mount Sinai had to prepare themselves three days before God was to reveal the commandments. But immediately after, they sinned with the golden calf. It is therefore a custom in Judaism to stay awake throughout the night of Shavuot, studying the Word of God together, as a preparation for receiving the Torah. In Jerusalem, for example, every synagogue and every Jewish institute offers study sessions and lectures during this holy night. And at dawn, after a long and inspiring time of study, everybody draws to the Western Wall to say the morning prayers together.

The ecstatic joy of studying the Divine Word makes everybody sing and dance. Such must have been the ecstatic state of the apostles when they received the Holy Spirit on the Pentecost after Jesus' death and resurrection (Acts 2).

True, we don't know for sure whether the giving of the Torah was already celebrated on Shavuot in the Second Temple period. However, the signs of the wind and the tongues of fire in Acts 2 are remarkable references to the revelation on Mount Sinai. Moreover,

there is a clear connection between the Holy Spirit and the Word of God.

HARVEST OF THE NATIONS

Finally, back to the bringing of the first fruits and the Omer counting. The 'Scroll of Ruth', as it is called in Hebrew, is read on Shavuot. Obviously, it fits the time of the year, as the story takes place in the harvest season. Moreover, in Judaism Ruth is taken to be the first proselyte, who, descending from the gentile

nations, came to worship the God of Israel and joined the people of Israel. Ruth is the great-grandmother of King David. And King David is believed to have died on Shavuot.

A Psalm that is related to this season is Psalm 67. In Hebrew, this Psalm counts 49 words, one for every day of the season. It sings of the earth that has yielded its increase, and the (gentile) nations praising God. Just as the risen Christ was the 'firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep' (1 Cor. 15:20), on Pentecost the ingathering of a great harvest of believers from all nations has begun. And finally, all nations will praise God and fear Him.





DR. G.H. COHEN STUART

*You shall
rejoice
at your Feast*

*Four walls and a thin thatched roof...
That's all it is – that's all it is.
Our little house is crafted swiftly;
Some reeds, some nails and a bit of wood
Joined together done and dusted
Lo and behold: the Sukkah is crafted!*

It is a biblical command for the Jewish People: to live in a booth for a week. By rabbinic precept, the roof is the most important thing about the booth. The roof of the temporary dwelling should provide shade, but at the same time you should be able to see the sky through it. The roof must be made of plant material, such as a woven reed mat or loose branches. So it is not enough to sit under your vine and put some walls under or around it. The walls may be made of any material, as long as they do not blow loose like the walls of a tent. The leaf hut is temporarily your home. And guaranteed that you will always forget to bring something from the kitchen that really cannot be missed!

LIVING BY GRACE

The Feast of Tabernacles is inextricably linked to Jewish New Year and the Day of Atonement. The ten-day period between those two days is dominated by reflection on the life of the past year, the attempt to come to terms with one's neighbour and acknowledgement of failure before God. The person aware of failure and guilt returns to God expecting to be forgiven by Him and receive atonement for sin. At the end of the Day of Atonement, those who have sincerely repented before God may believe that God is the Merciful One. This makes Sukkot the feast of living in gratitude for God's mercy. Sukkot is an annual exercise to discover what living by grace practically means. No sermon on grace can beat that.

LIVING IN THE BOOTH

The Feast of Tabernacles, Sukkot, is the most grand and elaborate feast known to Judaism. Sukkot is a seven-day celebration. You do not sit in your sukkah, the booth, only on the first

night, but you 'live' there for seven days and eat all the meals. Adult males (13 years and older) sleep there every night. For children, it is great fun to (be allowed to) sleep in the booth. The whispers and suppressed giggles in our neighbours' crowded hut were reminiscent of sleepovers in a tent on a hot summer night. Since the feast lasts for seven days, all the children of the neighbours, sometimes with their friends, have ample time.

The temporary house is also a place to host guests. Because on the working days during the feast either holidays are taken or work is done only for half a day, a lot of time is left to visit or receive guests. Thus, it is the feast of friendship and hospitality. The guests you receive symbolically represent the great forefathers of the Jewish People. The first day Abraham comes and the following days Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron and David. The tabernacle is always festively decorated, for example with drawings recalling these guests. The festive week is concluded festively. The seventh day, Hosanna Rabba (John 7:37 speaks of the 'last, great day of the feast'), has some highlights. Especially since the Middle Ages, the night of Hosanna Rabba has been a night of study. On the next morning, the day of the feast, there is a special service in the synagogue. When night falls after Hosanna Rabba, the final feast (Shemini Atseret) begins. For the first time, food is eaten in the house again. You celebrate the return to your permanent home. In Israel, that feast is combined with the Feast of Joy for Torah, Simchat Torah. That is celebrated outside Israel on the ninth day, the second day of Shemini Atseret.

PILGRIMAGE FESTIVAL

What is this feast that seems to know no end about? Sukkot is one of the three 'ascension' or pilgrimage festivals. Like the other two (Passover-Pesach and Shavuot-Feast of Weeks / Pentecost), the Feast of Tabernacles is primarily an agricultural feast, 'after you have gathered in from your threshing floor and your wine vat' (Deuteronomy 16:13) 'be-

cause the LORD your God will bless you in all your produce and in all the work of your hands, so that you will be altogether joyful' (vs. 15). Since it is now the end of the harvest, there is time for an elaborate feast. During Passover and Shavuot, that time is missing, because with Passover the harvest begins and during Shavuot the harvest is in full swing. And then work has to continue. On Sukkot, you can celebrate that the harvest has been brought in. You can enjoy the many different fruits of the land, which are then eaten to your heart's content. Depictions of the traditional seven fruits of the 'land of wheat and barley, of vines, fig trees and pomegranates; a land of olive oil and (date) honey' (Deuteronomy 8:8-9) also hang in many of the leaf huts.

RAIN

Sukkot falls at the end of summer. Israeli summers are hot and dry. The climatic situation is reflected in the Eighteen Benedictions.²

All year round is the beginning of the second prayer 'You are mighty forever, LORD. You revive the dead, You are great in redeeming.' In the winter and rainy season (from the Final Feast, Shemini Atseret to the first day of Passover), the words 'Who causes the wind to blow and the rain to fall' are added. During the winter months in Israel, it must rain enough to be able to harvest again in the coming year. Jews throughout the world pray that prayer, even when it would be unfavourable for the country in the diaspora where they live. The prayers of Israel worldwide are

focused on living in the land of promise. In Israel, between Passover and the beginning of Sukkot, the second supplication is added: 'Who causes dew to descend'. Dew is sufficient in the summer period to help the grain and fruit continue to ripen after the rains of winter and keep them from drying out.

WATER

Traditionally, water plays an important role during the Feast of Tabernacles. One of the regulations in Leviticus 23 is to assemble a bundle of plants, the lulav. According to the rabbinic interpretation of the text, it consists of an etrog (a special citrus fruit), a young branch of the date palm, whose leaves are still completely attached to each other, three branches of the mirt and two of the brook willow. All four of these plants need a lot of water to grow and flower. Because the fruit and branches are for worship, they are selected with

the utmost care. Many - and by no means always well-off - Jews spare no expense to buy the most beautiful etrog and intact branches. After all, there are not many things besides words with which we as humans can show our gratitude to God for having preserved our lives and for still having food to eat despite all economic hardships. The collection of plants underlines that Sukkot is more than a Day of Prayer, it is above all a Day of Thanksgiving.

Long before the beginning of the common era, the custom arose of going to Shiloam to fill a golden pitcher daily from the second day

The Feast of Tabernacles is inextricably linked to Jewish New Year and the Day of Atonement

of the Feast of Tabernacles. That water was taken by a priest to the great altar of the Temple to be poured at the foot of the altar. The ritual is described in Mishnah Sukkah 4:9: 'A golden decanter with a capacity of three logs (about 9 dl) was filled from Shiloam. Arriving at the water gate, they blew three notes on the ram's horn... To the priest, who was to pour the water, they said 'raise your hand'. For it had happened once that a priest threw the water on his feet. Then all the people pelted him with their *etrogim*.'

The priest's journey to the Temple was a daily triumphal march, with many following him with palm branches in their hands. Once they arrived at the temple square, they went at a walking pace. At each of the fifteen steps, which separated the women's court from the inner court, they stopped. Then piece by piece the fifteen songs of ascent, 'staircase' songs (songs hamaalot - Psalm 120-134), were sung. I can't get rid of the 'heretical' feeling that Palm Passover falls six months late in the church calendar and belongs with Sukkot.

Against the backdrop of this impressive ceremony, John 7:37-39 can be read. Jesus speaks of water on the seventh and last day of Sukkot, Hosanna Rabba. He was used to 'going up to the House of the Father' for the pilgrim feast. While this ceremony is taking place, Jesus speaks words about the 'living water': 'Whoever believes in me, as the Scrip-

ture says, streams of living water will flow from within him.'

Today, on Hosanna Rabba, bundles of twigs from the brook willow are struck on the ground during seven rounds in the synagogue. This is to keep alive the memory of the ritual that took place in the temple on this day. On Hosanna Rabba, the final procession was made from Shiloam to the temple. These words of Jesus echo the motif familiar even from rabbinic Judaism that the Word of God, the Torah, and its study and teaching are compared to the spring of 'living water'. Living water is flowing water, water in rivers and from springs.

The significance of water is revealed during the Feast of Tabernacles in yet another way. Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:2 says: 'on the Feast of Tabernacles justice is pronounced on them concerning water.' Judgement in respect of water concludes the judgement period that begins on Jewish New Year. From New Year to the Day of Atonement, it is about God's judgement of the single person, the individual. It is then that the future of the in-

dividual is determined. After the judgement of each person as an individual is completed on the Day of Atonement, during the Feast of Tabernacles the judgement of the entire community is determined by the heavenly court. By water, the first thing to think of is rain. The right rain at the right time means an abun-

dant harvest. From the history of Ahab and Elijah, we know that drought can be considered judgement. The patriarchal stories of the various periods of drought in the land (and even in Egypt; think of Joseph) show that in periods of drought faith is tested.

JUDGEMENT

This highlights the importance of judgement, which determines when and where rain will fall. Excessive rain (deluge) can be as disastrous as drought. The rabbinic view that water is judged during the Feast of Tabernacles shows their awareness that human behaviour has great importance for the future of the environment. The amount of rain largely determines prosperity and well-being for the entire (not just agricultural) community.

Since there is an interaction and mutual influence of the individual and community, the idea has increasingly taken hold that the final verdict on the life of the individual is given only on Hosanna Rabba. Until the last moment, the individual and the community to which he belongs remain interdependent.

That this issue has been pondered for a long time is clear from Matthew 5. In vs 45, Jesus says: 'He makes His sun rise on the wicked and the good, and rains on the righteous and the unrighteous.' In the context of the judgement of water, this points to the situation after the judgment of water is passed. In the verses that follow, Jesus points to everyone's personal responsibility.

PROPHECY

Water is also a key motif in Zechariah 14, the synagogue prophets' reading for the first day of Sukkot. Zechariah 14 expects that in the



future all peoples will go up to Jerusalem to acknowledge God as King and celebrate the feast of Sukkot. Only those peoples who do so will share in rain and in the joy of fruitfulness and prosperity. Thus Zechariah 14:16 says: 'All who are left of all the nations that have marched against Jerusalem will go up from year to year to bow down before the King, the Eternal of hosts, and celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles.'

The same peoples go up to Jerusalem who first went up hostile to Jerusalem. Peoples who do not repent of their enmity and do not go up to Jerusalem to honour God during Sukkot will be punished with drought - no rain will fall on their land.

Zechariah has a fascinating addition. He addresses Egypt's exceptional situation. It was not known in ancient times that Egypt depends on rainfall in central Africa. Egypt

receives its fertility through the floods of the Nile, depositing Nile silt. At the time, Egypt seemed to be the only country that did not depend on rain. That is why Zechariah writes in 14:18: 'And if the generation of the Egyptians shall not draw near and come, upon whom no rain falls, yet shall come the plague with which the Eternal shall afflict the nations that do not draw near to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles.'

THANKSGIVING

The Feast of Tabernacles is a thanksgiving for the harvest brought in. That there is harvest means that God has made provision for there to be food in the coming year too. God still provides, albeit in a different way than during the forty years the people spent in the desert: 'so that your generations may know that I made the Israelites dwell in booths when I led them out of the land of Egypt' (Leviticus 23:43).

The Feast of Tabernacles is a biblical command, regardless of whether or not you 'prospered' in the past year. During the forty years in the desert, there was nothing to farm and then there was never lack. When it comes down to it, we do not create the prosperity but it is God who bestows the prosperity (rain). This is why the parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:16-21) fits Sukkot so well. Jesus uses some elements from the period surrounding the feast: it is the end of the harvest; the harvest has been more than plentiful; how-

ever, the rich man is a fool because he forgets that it is God who gives both prosperity and life.

The 'rich fool' is clearly the antithesis of the 'rich sage', who is speaking in the book of Ecclesiastes. The book of Ecclesiastes is the festive scroll read in the synagogue on the first day of Sukkot. Ecclesiastes 6:2 says: 'a man to whom God gives riches and treasures and wealth, so that he lacks nothing, but God does not enable him to enjoy them'. Jesus does not only refer to

Ecclesiastes in this critical sense. He alludes to Ecclesiastes in two ways in the second half of Matthew 6. First, He warns (in verse 19ff) 'do not gather your treasures on the earth, where moth and rust make them uninhabitable.' In 6:25-34, He teaches that it is wisdom not to let life be dominated by concerns about food, drink and prosperity, but to trust that 'your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.'

REJOICE

The Feast of Tabernacles seems like a trouble-free, easy feast to celebrate, as simple as 'four walls and a roof of reeds... that's all it is - that's all it is'. It is not that simple. That's because of Deuteronomy 16:14: 'you shall rejoice at your feast.' It is a commandment to rejoice seven days at a stretch 'with your son, and your daughter, your servant and your maidservant, the Levite, the stranger, the orphan and the widow, who dwell within your gates'. That may sound like music to our ears, but we must re-

The Feast of Tabernacles is a biblical command, regardless of whether or not you 'prospered' in the past year

main realists. 'Thou shalt rejoice' - even if the children gurgle, the staff blunder, storm and rain plague your booth or hordes of wasps bother you. It can all happen to you that week. So how do you keep 'rejoicing' for seven days uninterrupted?

The Hebrew word 'rejoice' used here comes from the root *sa-mech-mem-chet* (שמח). It does not mean having fun. It is about inner joy that radiates to those around. It is not about a whim, but a lasting experience. It is therefore one of the most duplicitous commandments in the Torah. The moment a person is admitted to Judaism, he must be taught a difficult commandment and an easy one. In Matthew 5:19, Jesus says 'Whoever therefore dissolves one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called very small in the kingdom of heaven.' According to some, building a booth is the smallest or easiest of all the commandments. In my book *Jewish Feasts and Fasts*, I described our experience; as easy as building a booth can be, it is difficult to learn to celebrate Sukkot afterwards. Perhaps they are right who say that rejoicing in the Feast of Tabernacles is the greatest, the heaviest and the most difficult of commandments.

END TIME

According to Zechariah, only at the end of time will the nations be ready to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles, the feast that, according to Revelation 7:9, will be celebrated in heaven by 'a great multitude that no one can count from every nation and tribe and nation and language'... 'before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes and with palm branches (lulavim) in their hands.' And 'Therefore they are before the throne of God, and they worship Him day and night in His temple; and He who is seated on the throne will spread His tent (sukkah) over them. They shall hunger no more and thirst no more, neither shall the sun fall on them, nor any heat, for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will pasture them and lead them to the springs of water of life. (vs. 15-17)

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NOTES

¹ A Dutch nursery rhyme, written in 1918 by Clara Asscher-Pinkhof (Amsterdam 1896-Haifa 1984), who survived Bergen-Belsen and then made Aliyah. It was translated by Rudolf van Neijhof.

² Daily Jewish prayer



THEME
THE SHABBAT
AND THE FEASTS

Purim

The name Purim, Lots, is taken from the book of Esther ch. 3 verse 7. Ordered by, and in the presence of Haman, the lot (pur) was cast to determine the best day to extinguish the Jewish people. Purim celebrates the failure of Haman's plot (the final solution of the Jewish question). That single failure has never lost its horrible and shocking reality.

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STEPS

Purim is celebrated in steps, representing different aspects of the feast. The first step is set during the morning service on the Sabbath before the feast. The usual Torah reading is followed by a special reading from Deuteronomy 25:16-19. There, Israel is called not to forget to blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven after entering the promised land. What is the connection with Esther? The last king of Amalek, mentioned in 1 Samuel 22, was Agag. The Agagite Haman was his descendant.

The plot of Haman was a continuation of the cowardly assault by Amalek on Israel's rear, right after the exodus from Egypt (Exodus 17). The reading of Deuteronomy 25 remembers Israel that it is the most principal struggle in all of Tenach (OT): "The LORD will have war against Amalek from generation to generation" (Exodus 17:16). It is not just a fight against (meanwhile extinct) Amalek, but a combat against any form of anti-Semitism – until today. When in the evening the celebration starts, the second preparation is also finished. Convinced of the seriousness of Haman's threat (Esther 4:14), Esther called through her uncle on all Jews in Susan, the capital of the empire, to fast with her for three days. Then she risked her own life to save her people: "If I perish, I perish" (4:16). To commemorate this, 13 Adar (in 2019 on 20 March) is a fast day. According to tradition, upon entering the throne hall, she said: "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me" (Psalm 22).

MASKS

The fast ends at sunset, when the 14th of Adar begins. Synagogues fill up with people. Many visitors are dressed up, often masked. That masquerade is to not forget that people often act different than who they really are. Haman, too, kept up the appearance of a loyal servant to King Ahasuerus, while in fact he was not just after blotting out the Jews, but in particular after royal power (hence his arrogant suggestion, Esther 6:6-9). Mordecai, by refusing to kneel for Haman (Esther 3:3) seems a rebel,

but at the same time prevented a conspiracy against Ahasuerus (Esther 2:19-23). In the second part of the book, the masks fall.

Everything is turned around (Esther 9:1). The day on which Haman had wanted to destroy all Jews becomes a day of punishment for Jew-haters. When the masks have fallen, Haman appears to be a Jew-hater, Ester a Jewess, Mordecai her uncle, and the Jews loyal subjects to King Ahasuerus. Haman's accusation (Esther 3:9) of a nation that does not observe the king's laws, appears a lie.

GIFTS

Both in the evening and the following morning, the entire book of Esther is read. As 'the memory of Amalek' is to be blotted out, the name of Haman, when read, is made inaudible by trampling the feet and the noise of rattles and tooters. It causes young and old to attentively read the text. The morning service is followed by a festive meal. During the preparations, neighbours and friends bring each other gifts and deliver food packets to people with limited income, so they can celebrate the feast (cf. Esther 9:19, 22). From all neighbours you can expect plates with sweets and Haman's ears, the special Purim cookies. It is the only feast in Judaism where one is allowed to drink without limits, to the extent that one does not know anymore whom to bless or to curse, Haman or Mordecai.

VICTORY

Pesach celebrates the Divine intervention in history. In the Purim story, the Jewish people act themselves. No name of God appears in the book of Esther, though hidden references were discovered in the text. Against the divine intervention of the exodus, Purim seems just a secular happening. This least religious (?) of Israel's feasts is one of the most beloved, not just in secular, but especially in strictly religious circles. According to rabbis, Purim is the only feast that will be celebrated in the coming new world (olam haba): the victory over anti-Semitism and Jew-haters.



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