

Jewish Holidays -- What Makes them Different? They Are Human-Centered!

By Rabbi Dr. Zvi A. Yehuda

What is unique about the Jewish holidays? What distinguishes them from non-Jewish holidays?

The answer is obvious: Jewish holidays celebrate the human experience; they deal with real life, not mythology. They focus on mundane struggles and accomplishments of the people, their environment, destiny and aspirations, and not on the saga of God or gods, their genealogy, nativity, adventures, death or resurrection.

Jewish holidays, far from Hero-worshipping (be the hero human or Divine), celebrate the heroic drama of Jewish existence, the wonder of the people's providential endurance throughout the ages. Symbolically and ritually they underline the indivisible, triadic bond between the people of Israel, its Torah and Land.

Jewish holidays all have three dimensions: temporal, spatial and personal (time / place / person). They concurrently display three basic aspects: the historical-national, the agricultural-ecological, and the existential-spiritual.

Underlying the historical-national element is a fundamental philosophy: that human history has meaning. It is not merely a collection of isolated incidents, but a purposeful involvement of events, humanly executed and divinely directed. By celebrating these events, we stress our ties with our past, present and future, each generation being a viable link in the ever-growing chain of generations.

Concerning the environmental aspect, Jewish holidays have their roots in the ecology of the land of Israel, reflecting the seasonal cycles of that area. The philosophy of this facet of celebration is that a human being is an integral part of nature, and must neither ignore nor worship the natural forces. Destined to master and enjoy the natural order, human beings must respect and care for their natural environment; they must learn to develop and utilize their natural resources, not exploit and ravish them, realizing that God is ultimately the Ruler of all.

This element of Jewish holidays also develops within the people a love for their land, the land of Israel. In the Diaspora, the agricultural and climatic conditions often differ

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greatly from that of the land of Israel. Should we therefore just ignore this element of Jewish holidays? We don't, especially now after the establishment of the State of Israel. Celebrating the Jewish holidays throughout the world, in correlation to the agricultural calendar of the Jewish State, deepens our emotional attachment to and strengthens our real ties with Israel.

Now let us look into the third, all-embracing aspect of Jewish holidays, the existential-spiritual: Through the celebration of Jewish holidays, as a three-dimensional experience involving educational, social, and religious facets, we enrich ourselves on many levels, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. The observance of the holiday rituals affords us a rewarding opportunity to express our religious feelings, national aspirations as well as our striving for perfection. This element is especially evident on the Days of Awe. These days (commonly, yet groundlessly, called the High Holidays) provide an opportunity for each individual within the community to experience an elevating encounter with oneself, others and God.

All of these three basic elements of Jewish holidays -- historical (time), agricultural (place), and spiritual (person) -- are found in varying degrees of intensity or priority in all Jewish holidays. For example, there are holidays that are originally historical, such as Hanukah and Purim. They celebrate specific events of the people's deliverance and resistance. There too the other elements are present, being tied to the general ecological calendar of the land and involving deep spiritual commitment.

There are other holidays that are mainly agricultural, such as the three pilgrimage Festivals -- Pesach, Shavuot and Succot -- which all celebrate the harvest. Even there, however, both the historical and the spiritual dimensions are remarkably evident. The Seder and the Succah, both potent filial-educational tools, focus on the Exodus story, a national historical event. In the same vein, rabbinic sources tie in Shavuot to the culmination of the Exodus -- the granting of the Torah at Mt. Sinai.

There are holidays that are in their essence, spiritual, emotional and personal, such as the Days of Awe (Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur). But even in these holidays we may trace historical and ecological elements. We traditionally celebrate Rosh Hashanah as the birthday of the universe, which ties cosmogony with history. Tradition also considers Yom Kippur as the day on which Moses brought down to the people the second set of the Tablets of the Decalogue, from Mount Sinai, replacing the broken ones; thus illustrating

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Yom Kippur as the day on which Moses brought down to the people the second set of the Tablets of the Decalogue, from Mount Sinai, replacing the broken ones; thus illustrating Divine forgiveness for the people's idolatrous debauchery in the Golden Calf episode -- thus establishing this day for posterity as Day of Forgiveness.

All Jewish Holidays -- whatever their primary element may be, historical, agricultural or spiritual -- clearly display their non-mythological quality. Pesah celebrates the birthday of the Jewish nation; Rosh Hashanah, the birthday of the world and all humankind. Notice that unlike ancient, pagan religions, Judaism does not celebrate events in the life of a deity, but rather events that have a direct bearing on the human experience.

Jewish holidays, therefore illustrate Judaism's positive approach to the world and the human role in it. They teach us that human life on earth is intrinsically sacred; that human creativity is a divine duty, and that human freedom is the fulfillment of God's Will.