



A Sermon by  
Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt

The Cycle of the Holidays  
Emor 2009

Thomas Mann in his book The Magic Mountain writes, "Time has no divisions to mark its passage, there is never a thunderstorm or blare of trumpets to announce the beginning of a new month or year. Even when a new century begins it is only we mortals who ring bells and fire off pistols." He is absolutely correct, for, the marking of time to recognize significant events is a uniquely human phenomenon and creation. It is not something that is inherent in nature.

This kind of reckoning of time is one of the gifts of Judaism to the world. From the very outset, with the story of creation, the Torah marks time and wants us to understand the significance of this endeavor. Rabbi Avraham Feder writes, "The creative force which brings the world into being in six segments of time sets aside a seventh segment of time for a cessation of creative effort with no loss of numinous power."

On a profound and deeply philosophical level, the Torah seeks to link and bridge the worlds of time and space through the marking of time and celebrations of festivals. In so doing, Judaism seeks to bring God and a sense of the Divine into the equation of our daily lives and offers a bridge between God and humans.

A story is told about a man who wanted with all his heart to speak to God. Having tried everything, he whispered, "God, can you hear me?"

Much to his surprise, a voice answered him, "Yes." So the man asks, "What is a million years to you God?" The voice answers, calling the man by his name, "Shlomo, a second to me is like a million years to you."

He was astounded, for this is similar to what the Book of Psalms says. So then he asks, "And what O God is a million dollars to you?" "My dear Shlomo, a penny to me is like a million dollars to you. It means almost nothing to me."

Amazed by the consistency and parallel between God's reckoning of time and money, he is feeling bold and so he asks, "So God, then can I have a million dollars?"

And God, who clearly has a sense of humor replies, "Sure. In a second."

This might not be exactly what the sages had in mind when they saw sanctifying time as a manifestation of man replicating the holiness God plants in the world and advised us to "number our days." We are currently, for example in the cycle which marks the days between Pesah and Shavuot, wherein we count the omer. The counting and the sanctifying of days is a means of structuring one's awareness which puts us into a relationship with our history, and our identity, as well as with nature, creation and the natural world.

Today's Torah reading refers to the holidays and festivals of the Jewish calendar as "moadim", appointed times, as if to reiterate that the days become holy when we mark them. It is our role to create calendars and to designate which days are to be celebrated. (And it is the role of Jewish funeral homes to print them.) This function of creating a calendar plays an important role in creating community and linking us to our fellow Jews as well as to those who came before us.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, as quoted in our Art Scroll humash notes, "the moadim summon us to submit ourselves entirely to the contemplation and inner realization of those ideals which lie at their foundation....it is a point in time which summons us communally... They summon us from our everyday life to halt and to dedicate all our spiritual activities to them....They interrupt the ordinary activities of our life and give us the spirit, power, and consecration for the future..."

Holidays are so important to our very essence and to the perpetuation of Judaism. Yet I would shudder to inquire and to contemplate which holidays are truly celebrated among our people. Nowadays, there is an assumption that observing the holidays is something done just by the Orthodox among us. How sad that so few of us actually take off of work or school for the second day of Rosh Hashana, for the first and last day of Sukkot, Pesah and Shavuot.

We ignore these days at our peril. A holiday is called in Hebrew a yom tov, in Yiddish it is a yontov, a good day. It is a time to cease and desist from our usual activities. Turning our back on their observance, and just doing what we do every other day deprives us of the opportunity to connect with our fellow Jews, with our history and the very philosophy underpinning our faith.

With so many special days I know it can sometimes be confusing – so here is an easy guide, for our festivals alternate between fast and famine. Rosh Hashanah – feast. Tzom Gedalia – a minor fast day. Yom Kippur – major fasting. Sukkot – feast. Chanukah – cholesterol heaven – potato latkes and fried foods. Fast of the Tenth of Tevet – no potato pancakes or anything. Tu B'Shevat – feast. Ta'anit Esther – fast. Purim – eat, and drink. Passover – eat, but be careful of what you can and cannot eat. Shavuot – feast on dairy blintzes and cheese cake. Tisha B'av – fast, don't even think about eating blintzes or cheesecakes. Elul, the month before the cycle begins – enroll in Center for Eating Disorders to prepare for the cycle starting up all over again.

All in all, it is a cycle, a holy cycle. I know that for me, personally, observing the Jewish holidays gives a sense of rhythm to life. Sanctifying these days helps me to set my priorities and to be sure that I am in touch with my heritage. I invite you to join me. Even if you do not consider yourself religious or observant, come to services this year on Shavuot when we celebrate the giving of the Torah on Thursday evening, May 28. Take off of work on Friday morning May 29 or don't go to school that day. I guarantee you it will be refreshing, rewarding and invigorating. I urge you to join us on the other holidays as well.

There are many ways to celebrate our festivals.

A story is told about the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, who lived in Poland in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He had learned in a dream that an especially pious man lived in a nearby town. He travelled to the village to meet this person, expecting to encounter an

individual immersed in study and prayer. Instead he found a simple ignorant Jew who indulged in working and eating. In fact the only distinguishing notable characteristic about this man was that he ate voraciously.

After observing him from afar, and not understanding why he was considered to be so holy, the perplexed rabbi approached and asked that he tell him about his background.

The man told the pious rabbi that he was a lumberjack who cut trees for a living, and that he knew little other than the traditional prayers, and was not very well versed in Judaism.

Even more incredulous than previously, he asked, "I could not help but notice that you have the appetite of ten men."

The lumberjack said, "I will explain. When I was little boy, the feudal lord of our village insisted that all the people must convert. My father refused and was severely beaten as a result. Since he was a very thin, weak man, he died from the beating. Right then and there I decided to be sure that this would never happen to me. I may not be that pious or wise a man. But I eat a great deal to make my body strong so that if anyone should ever try to make me deny my God or to abandon my faith and leave Judaism, I will be able to resist and not succumb."

The Baal Shem Tov realized that this man was truly holy, for the consumption of every morsel of food was not just an act of eating but an actual Kiddush haShem, something he was doing for the sanctification of God's name, an act of loyalty to God.

Rabbi Shraga Mendlovitz, head of a Yeshivah in New York summed up the essence of what I am trying to state this morning. "The function of the festivals is to train and educate the individual to be a Jew, through the correspondence between the historical experience and consciousness of God that finds expression in the days of mo'ed. These holidays clarify to us God's role in the history of the nation, the connection between the individual and his Maker and the place of Divine Providence in the ecological life of the soil."

By observing the days of mo'ed, the Jewish festivals, each individual is offered a gift. I hope you accept it. As is true of any gift, the best way to show it is appreciated is to use it.

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