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Judaism

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Judaism is the religious way of life of the nation that has been known variously as Israel, the Hebrews, or the Jews. Though their homeland is in the Middle East, Jews are found throughout the world, and Judaism has taken diverse forms in its long history and geographic dispersion. Nevertheless, it has remained throughout a monotheistic faith, devoted to the unique all-powerful God who rules over nature and history. Jews see themselves as the descendants of the patriarch Abraham, who lived four thousand years ago and who entered into a covenant with God. Central to the covenant was adherence to a divinely revealed set of commandments and laws.

This chapter will describe the sacred scriptures of the Jews, as well as other texts and traditions that they hold as authoritative.

HILLEL AND THE TWO TORAHS

The following legend is told about the Jewish sage Hillel the Elder (first century B.C.E.). The ostensible subject of the interchange is the Torah, which (as we shall see in greater detail below) is the holiest section of the Jewish scriptures.

A man once approached Hillel, and said to him: "Master, how many Torahs have been given?"
[Hillel] replied to him: "Two: a written Torah and an oral Torah."
[The man] said to him: "I trust you with regard to the written one, but not with regard to the oral one."
[Hillel] said to him: "Sit down, my son." He then wrote him the *aleph bet* [the letters of the Hebrew alphabet].
[Hillel] asked him: "What is this letter?"
[The man] replied "*Aleph*."
He said: "It is not an *aleph* but a *bet*."
[Hillel] asked him: "What is this letter?"
He said: "*Bet*."
[Hillel] said: "It is not a *bet* but a *gimel*."
[Hillel] said to him: "From where do you know that this is an *aleph* and this is a *bet* and this is a *gimel*? Indeed, thus has it been handed down from our ancestors that this is an *aleph* and this is a *bet* and this is a *gimel*. Just as you have accepted that on faith, so must you now accept this on faith."

This anecdote illustrates succinctly how, from early times, Jewish sages have been aware that the written text of the Torah cannot speak to us unless it is mediated through a living tradition. Ultimately, it is the unwritten tradition that chooses which books are to be accepted as authoritative, and assigns meaning and grammar to the graphic signs that make up the written language.

A TALE OF TWO FESTIVALS

The interplay between the written and oral facets of the religious tradition can be aptly illustrated in the following descriptions of two holidays in the Jewish annual calendar.

Holiday #1

The first holiday is bound closely to the agricultural cycles of the Land of Israel and its observance appears to be restricted to

that geographical setting. On an unspecified date (evidently a Sunday) at the beginning of the grain harvest, a sheaf of the first produce (apparently barley) is given to a priest to be brought to the sanctuary. The priest waves the sheaf, then burns a lamb on the altar of the central sanctuary. This cultic ritual, an acknowledgment of the divine source of the agricultural bounty, must be performed before the new grain crop is permitted to be used for general consumption.

From that day seven weeks are counted, totalling forty-nine days. On the fiftieth day, on whichever date that turns out (evidently also a Sunday), two leavened loaves are offered by the priests in the sanctuary, accompanied by elaborate animal offerings of lambs, bullocks, rams, and assorted libations. This day is treated as a festival in that no servile work is to be performed. In most other respects its direct impact seems to be limited to the precincts of the Temple and to the hereditary priesthood who officiate therein. Therefore, one can raise some grave questions about the relevance of the holy day to Jews who dwell outside their homeland, or at a time when there is no Temple standing in Jerusalem. The purpose of the ceremony is not explicitly defined in scripture, though it would appear to be another expression of gratitude for the grain harvest.

Holiday #2

Our second holiday has a precisely defined date, on the sixth day of the Hebrew month of Sivan, though it can occur on any day of the week. This date marks the anniversary of a central event in Israel's sacred history, arguably the most important milestone in that long and eventful saga: the day on which the almighty God, Creator of the heaven and earth, appeared publicly to the assembled people of Israel at a mountain in the Sinai wilderness to reveal to them his sacred message. This revelation was initially a spoken one, uttered in the Hebrew language, though it was written down with meticulous precision by Moses, the greatest of God's prophets. According to traditional Jewish belief, the document that resulted from this revelation was the *Torah* ("teaching," "instruction") comprising the first five volumes of the Hebrew Bible. Every word and letter, copied faithfully over the generations, is sacred.

The celebration of this holiday is not focused in the Temple but in the home and in the synagogue; the latter institution, whose name derives from a Greek word meaning "house of assembly" (equivalent to the Hebrew *beit k'neset*), is a gathering point for all segments of the populace, not merely the priests. In the synagogue, communal prayers are recited, some of which are common to the daily liturgical structures and some of which are unique to the themes of this holy day, "the season of the giving of our Torah," as it is designated in many of the prayers. As an expression of the festival joy, passages from the biblical book of Psalms[1] are intoned by the congregation. The dramatic passage from the Torah that describes the Theophany at Mount Sinai is chanted from a Torah scroll, followed by a reading from the prophet Ezekiel's mystical vision of God enthroned upon an angelic chariot, a passage that is regarded as thematically similar in its portrayal of intimate contact between the celestial and mortal realms. The biblical book of Ruth, a pastoral romance that tells of the ancestry of the Israelite royal family, is also read. A scholar well-versed in the tradition, known as a Rabbi, gets up to speak before the congregation, expounding on the scriptural readings, explaining them in the light of the interpretations of traditional commentators, and concluding the sermon with a spirited exhortation to the assembled worshipers to intensify their devotion to the study and observance of the Torah.

The festive atmosphere extends to the home as well. As is the case on most Jewish holy days, the sanctity of the occasion is expressed primarily by means of the restrictions that are placed on workaday activities, though these are not as severe as on the weekly sabbath. For example, cooking is permitted on a festival,[2] as is the carrying of burdens in a public thoroughfare, though neither of these activities would be allowed on a Saturday. The family gathers for ceremonial meals. The evening meal is inaugurated with the recitation of the *Kiddush* blessing, in which the day is sanctified over a cup of wine. References to the holiday's theme are inserted into the grace after every meal. Many communities have special culinary traditions associated with the holiday, such as eating dairy dishes or fashioning the bread into symbolic shapes.[3]

What is arguably the most extraordinary fact about our description of the two festivals is that they are, in reality, the very same festival, the day known in Hebrew as *Shavu'ot*, the Feast of Weeks.

In the first version we restricted ourselves to the information contained in the written text of the Torah (Lv 23:9-21), whereas the second account described the elaborate and meaningful religious observances that developed in the Jewish oral tradition.

At first blush it is impossible to believe that the two descriptions could possibly be of the same holiday. The second is not an elaboration of the first but seems to contradict it on several crucial points! Does the holiday have a fixed date or does it not? Can it fall only on Sundays, or on other days as well? Was it ordained to give thanks for the grain harvest or to commemorate the revelation at Sinai? The two descriptions seem utterly incompatible with one another.

So extreme is the contrast that a study of the development of the Jewish Feast of Weeks provides an excellent example of both the interaction between written and oral traditions and the impact they have on the living community.

PHARISEES, SADDUCEES, AND ANCESTRAL TRADITIONS

The earliest sources that make conscious mention of a Jewish oral tradition are connected to sectarian debates that arose in the last centuries before the common era. Documents from that time note that the affirmation of an extra-scriptural tradition was originally the ideology of one faction among the several that fragmented the Judaism of the time: the movement known as Pharisaism.

Long before this stage of history, the authority of the Hebrew Bible had taken solid root among all segments of the community. No one disputed the divine origin of the Torah or the authority of its laws. There was also a consensus that the kind of divine communication that is embodied in the ancient Hebrew scriptures had long since come to an end and that God's

message to humans now could be discovered only through a reading of the inspired teachings of the prophets of old.

Where disagreement did exist was on the question of authority *outside* the text of the Bible. The party known as the Sadducees, which represented the values and interests of the established high priesthood, argued that the received scripture, whose administration had been assigned to the priestly dynasties, was the exclusive repository of sacred teachings. Any tradition for which a source could not be found in the written Torah must be regarded as a human invention that could not lay claim to religious sanction. This excluded from the compass of Judaism many cherished practices and beliefs that had taken firm hold among the common people, largely composed of rural peasantry. It also implied that extensive realms of human experience are religiously irrelevant because they are not mentioned explicitly in the Torah.

A very different outlook was taught by the Pharisees. They were reluctant to acknowledge that the all-knowing author of the Torah had excluded anything from the scope of its guidance. Many traditions, though not written in the Bible, could be observed in the living experience of the covenant community. The ancient historian Josephus Flavius speaks of the Pharisees as being renowned for their expertise in the Law (that is, the Torah) and in the "ancestral traditions."[4] Insofar as we are able to reconstruct the content of these ancestral traditions during the second Jewish Commonwealth, it appears that they consisted largely of customs that had been adopted by the populace, sometimes from Babylonian or Persian influences, but which had no explicit source in the Law of Moses.[5] When the Second Jerusalem Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E., the flexible Pharisaic ideology, with its belief in a religion that permeated every area of human endeavor, was the only stream to survive. It now evolved into what is customarily designated Rabbinic Judaism (after the title Rabbi, which was used to address their religious leaders). More significantly, through painstaking scholarship into the deepest levels of textual interpretation they were able to uncover scriptural teachings that were not apparent at a cursory reading. Thus, the Rabbis cultivated a model of spiritual

authority that was vested not in priestly pedigree or in withdrawal from the mainstream society, but in scholarship, devotion, and community involvement.

The ancient Rabbis bequeathed to us a rich literary record of their studies of the written and oral traditions. These were classified under the general categories of *Halakhah* (law) and *aggadah* (homiletics, exegesis, moral maxims, etc.). The most authoritative of these works was the legal compendium known as the *Mishnah*, completed in Palestine in the early third century; encyclopedic collections of discussions based on the Mishnah, known as Talmuds, were composed over the following centuries.[6] Throughout ancient times, a strict prohibition was maintained against putting those traditions into writing. Commentaries and law codes continue to be composed to this day.

There are several features about the evolution of the Feast of Weeks that can serve as instructive illustrations of the methods and objectives of the oral tradition in its interactions with the written scripture.

LUNAR AND SOLAR CALENDARS

Let us begin with that irreconcilable mystery of a festival that at once has an identifiable date on the calendar—and yet has none. This contradiction is rooted in the Hebrew wording of Leviticus (23:11), where the counting of the seven weeks is said to begin after the *shabbat*, the day of rest that is usually presumed to be Saturday. In this unique instance the sages of the oral Torah insisted that a different day was being identified, the first day of Passover (which was mentioned in the previous passage), when, as on all biblical festival days, work was prohibited. To the outsider, that interpretation appears utterly inconsistent with the standard usage.

From the Dead Sea Scrolls we now know that at issue was more than the interpretation of a single biblical passage or the celebration of a particular festival. The rival Jewish movements of the Second Commonwealth were stubbornly promoting radically different calendars. This was not a question of life rhythms

or astronomical calculation but involved grave questions of sacred law. According to the Torah, the violation of festival prohibitions—working on a day of rest, eating on the Day of Atonement, or consuming leavened bread on Passover—incurred severe penalties, whether they were executed by human or supernatural agencies. A situation in which one segment of the community treated as profane what for others was holy made it impossible for those segments to dwell together.

Although the Bible dates events in months and years, we do not know exactly what it means by those concepts. Some postbiblical movements adhered to a sophisticated solar year totalling 364 days, a number that had the advantage of being evenly divisible by seven. This meant that holidays could also be counted on to recur on the same day of the week in every subsequent year. Therefore, for adherents of this calendar, such as the authors of many of the Dead Sea Scrolls, it was crucial that the Feast of Weeks be identified by its place in the week rather than the month.[7]

The accepted Jewish calendar, championed by the common people and their Pharisaic representatives, is composed of months that are measured according to the actual phases of the moon, that is, months of twenty-nine or thirty days. Since twelve such months add up to only 354 days, an additional thirteenth month is appended to certain years in order to restore synchronization with the solar cycles that determine the agricultural seasons, and hence are crucial to the themes of many of the Jewish festivals.

The historian might be inclined to view the Jewish adoption of this reckoning as a simple borrowing from the Babylonian or Metonic systems. However, there is much more at stake. Built into the foundations of this lunar-solar calendar, as it was implemented by Rabbinic Judaism, is the need for the community itself to decide when every month begins and when to insert the extra months. The sages of the oral tradition saw it as a profound act of partnership between the divine and mortal realms. In a bold Rabbinic homily we hear of God consenting to postpone the judgment of humanity, which normally takes place on the Hebrew New Year, until his human children have officially announced the determination of the beginning of the month.

> If, for any reason, the court decides to put off the beginning of the year by one day, the Holy One tells the ministering angels: "Remove the dais, dismiss the advocates, dismiss the clerks, since the court on earth has decreed that the New Year will not begin till tomorrow."[8]

MIDRASH: THE ORAL TRADITION INTERPRETS THE WRITTEN

As always, the evolution of the oral tradition was tied to the meticulous examination of the written text. The Hebrew term for this activity is *Midrash* ("seeking out"). Historians have suggested that many of the distinctive midrashic tropes were borrowed from the modes of Greek and Latin rhetoric and legal discourse;[9] however, the genre is quintessentially Jewish, founded upon the belief in the divine authorship of the scriptures. Because every letter and calligraphic ornamentation in the Bible is believed to be of infinite significance, it is therefore a religious duty to uncover as much as possible of its many layers of meaning.[10] Toward that end they cultivated sophisticated methods of eliciting from the text far more than is visible to the casual reader.

In our present instance, we can appreciate how carefully the Rabbis traced the Torah's time line of the Israelites' sojourn in the wilderness from their departure from Egypt on Passover until their encampment beneath Mount Sinai.[11] They noted that only by assuming the validity of the traditional lunar-solar calendar could they arrive at the correspondence between the dates of the scriptural Feast of Weeks and of the most important anniversary in Jewish sacred history, the revelation of the Torah itself. Without this, Judaism would be left without any ritual day of commemoration for this occasion.

SCRIPTURE IN THE SYNAGOGUE

Another conspicuous feature in the living celebration of the Feast of Weeks was its celebration in the synagogue. This is another institution whose origins are unclear to the historians, but

which has exercised a decisive influence on Jewish spirituality from the beginnings of the common era. Some trace it to the Babylonian captivity, where it served as a center of communal religious expression for generations who had been deprived of their holy Temple. Others see its beginnings in the attempts of Egyptian Jews in the third century B.C.E. to overcome their geographic separation from Jerusalem. At any rate, the synagogue came to coexist with the Jerusalem sanctuary, allowing expression to religious needs that could not be accommodated by the priestly sacrificial service.[12]

Although the synagogue later came to be identified with the recitation of formal communal prayer, a form of devotional worship that was not prescribed in the scriptural tradition, the earliest records associate it with the reading and teaching of the Torah.

The five volumes of the Torah constitute the core of the Jewish sacred scriptures. They are believed to be entirely of divine origin, with no significant human component. However, Jews recognize a larger body of ancient literature as being *prophetic*, that is, issuing from divine revelation or inspiration. The Jewish Bible contains the same works that are found in the standard Christian "Old Testament" (twenty-four books according to the traditional division).[13]

The prevailing Jewish classification divides the Hebrew Bible into three sections:

Torah: Relating the history of Israel from the creation until the death of the prophet Moses. Central to the Torah is the large body of laws and precepts revealed through Moses at Mount Sinai.

Prophets: Historical narratives tracing the history of the nation until the beginnings of the Second Commonwealth; as well as the teachings of "prophets," spiritual figures who arose to proclaim God's word to the people.

Sacred Writings (often designated in the Greek form, "Hagiographa"): a heterogeneous assortment of texts, mostly from the later years of the biblical era.[14]

Although the traditional Jewish belief is that the full text of the Torah was revealed directly to Moses, historical scholarship sees it as a composite work that evolved over many generations

out of diverse documents and oral traditions, reaching its definitive form during the era of the Babylonian captivity (ca. 587-30 B.C.E.). biblical tradition itself (Neh 8) relates how the Torah of Moses was publicly read in Jerusalem before the full assembly of the returned exiles, who took it upon themselves to conduct their private and communal lives in accordance with its precepts. Because Jewish tradition has always insisted that members of the community be intimately familiar with the sacred laws contained in holy scripture, religious study and education have always been supreme values.

The Hebrew term that is employed in ancient Jewish texts to designate the full Jewish Bible is *Miqra'*, which means "recitation from a written text." This reflects its standing in the liturgical rhythm of the community. Public assemblies are convened on regular occasions during which the texts from the Bible are read aloud to the people, as the Torah had been read by Ezra. In large measure the structures that were set in place for this purpose in ancient times are still operative today.

The main lectionary cycle is for the sequential reading of the Torah on Saturdays, the biblical Sabbath. Consecutive sections are read each week until the five books have been completed. In the ancient Palestinian rite the readings were distributed so that they could be completed in about three and a half years. Currently, almost all Jewish communities follow the Babylonian practice of completing the reading of the Torah over a single year.

The Torah is also read publicly on festivals and other special calendar events. For those occasions a passage is selected that relates to the theme of the day. According to a longstanding practice, readings are also ordained for Saturday afternoon, as well as Monday and Thursday mornings. In this way no Jew would have to go more than three days without exposure to the words of Torah.[15] The weekday readings are very brief, consisting of the first few verses of the larger section that will be read on the following Saturday morning.

The ritual reading must be done from a handwritten scroll inscribed on parchment according to precise regulations. Each copy must be letter-perfect; if an error or erasure should be

discovered, then the scroll must be removed from use until it is corrected. In this way the precise text of the Bible has been preserved with remarkable accuracy for thousands of years.

The Hebrew alphabet in which biblical texts are written does not have visual signs for most vowels. Furthermore, there is a traditional system of cantillation that incorporates both syntactic and musical elements for chanting the biblical texts in the synagogue. Initially, all these features could be transmitted only through memorization, a demanding process that occupied the main portion of the elementary school curriculum.[16] Even though a system of written notation for the vowels and musical chanting was introduced in the early medieval era, these signs may not be written into the scrolls that are read in the synagogue, so that the ability to read the Bible in the synagogue requires extensive skill and effort.

In the liturgical reading of the Torah the passages are apportioned among several individuals,[17] in proportion to the sanctity of the day, ranging from three on a weekday to seven on the Sabbath. Though originally these participants performed the actual reading, it is now normal, since so few individuals are competent to read from an unvocalized text, to have a trained functionary do the reading, while the participants recite blessings at the opening and conclusion of the designated portions.[18]

An ancient liturgical practice that has fallen into disuse is that of providing a translation (Targum) after each verse in Aramaic, the language spoken by most Jews in Israel and Babylonia. With the decline of Aramaic, the spoken Targum has been abandoned by almost all Jewish communities, though the ancient Aramaic versions are still studied.[19]

The sacred scrolls of the Torah are the focal point of a synagogue. They are clothed in decorative casings or mantles, which are often based on regal imagery, and housed in a special "ark" in the front of the sanctuary. Their removal for reading or their return to the ark is done in solemn procession as worshipers symbolically kiss them in adoration. At the conclusion of a public reading they are raised aloft and the congregation recites "and this is the law that Moses placed before the Children of Israel" (Dt 4:44). Out of respect, the congregation remains standing at

any time the Torah is not at rest in the closed ark or on its reading table.

On Sabbaths and festivals the reading from the Torah is concluded with a passage from the Prophets. The passage is usually selected based on a thematic affinity to the reading in the Torah, though the connection is sometimes related to other calendric considerations. Most of the Hagiographa books are not read formally in the synagogue, the exceptions being five scrolls that are associated with certain annual holy days.

Analogous to the phenomenon of *translating* the Bible for the community was the very ancient practice of *expounding* it, that is, of creatively interpreting the biblical text in order to make it relevant to the needs and concerns of the living congregation. The synagogue sermon, usually delivered on Sabbaths and festivals, developed into a very sophisticated rhetorical form, incorporating scholarship, spiritual sensitivity, and literary virtuosity.[20]

TORAH IN DAILY LIFE

For all the import of the synagogue in Jewish religious life, it remains only one setting among many for the expression of Jewish spirituality.[21] The comprehensive scope of Torah law embraces aspects of life that liberal society would not regard as religious, including the food one eats, sexual conduct, the garments one wears, laws of torts and contract, and much more.

Though many of its laws ostensibly deal with the same issues that we would now expect to find in the civil and criminal codes of secular states, the belief that they were commanded by a divine legislator transforms them into religious categories. Among contemporary Jewish thinkers, Rabbi J. D. Soleveitchik stated most cogently how the all-encompassing categories of the Jewish Law (Halakhah) impose a metaphysical structure upon physical existence:

> Halakhah has a fixed a priori relationship to the whole of reality in all of its fine and detailed particulars. Halakhic

> man orients himself to the entire cosmos and tries to understand it by utilizing an ideal world which he bears in his halakhic consciousness. All halakhic concepts are a priori, and it is through them that halakhic man looks at the world.[22]

In our description of the *Shavu'ot* meal we noted how it is embedded in a framework of prayers and blessings. The evolution of these liturgical practices provides additional models of the interweaving of the written and oral traditions.

Thus, the written Torah commands that "You shall eat and be full, and you shall bless the Lord your God" (Dt 8:10). The oral tradition formulated the specific blessings to be uttered upon the consumption of particular foodstuffs (designating separate blessings for bread, fruits of the tree, fruits of the earth, etc.), in order to express gratitude for every God-given benefit and pleasure.[23]

The Torah contains repeated injunctions to observe a weekly day of rest, as well as to refrain from labor on festival days; however, only a few specific activities fall under the heading of "forbidden work." The oral tradition (as recorded in the Mishnah) carefully enumerated thirty-nine principal categories of forbidden labor, from which are derived many particular actions. The Rabbis have also added preventative prohibitions in order to further prevent transgressions of the Torah's commands. Through history the nature of the Sabbath has changed in response to the changing conditions of life. Thus, for most observant Jews in the contemporary world the keeping of the Sabbath is often most immediately felt in their refraining from the use of electricity or telephones, activities that were not explicitly discussed in any of the ancient texts.[24]

Similarly, a vague biblical injunction to "remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy" (Ex 20:9) was transformed by the sages of the oral tradition into the ceremony of *Kiddush*, a special blessing that is pronounced over a cup of wine on the onset of a holy day. A parallel ritual, the *Havdalah* is recited at the conclusion of a Sabbath or festival to mark the separation between the holy and the profane.[25]

The preparation and consumption of the food are also transformed into a religious act, irrespective of the festival context. The Torah's fragmentary regulations defining permitted and prohibited species, bans against creatures that died of disease or "seething a kid in its mother's milk," and the need to designate portions of produce for the upkeep of the priests, poor and others, were expanded in the oral tradition into an intricate dietary regimen. Observant Jews must therefore be ever conscious of the ingredients that enter their bodies, whether there is any admixture of dairy and meat items, how meat was slaughtered, and much more.[26]

INTERPRETING THE COMMANDMENTS

These laws serve many purposes in the lives of committed Jews. In addition to being expressions of their readiness to obey God's commands, they also accustom Jews to a pattern of disciplined self-restraint. Because the rules of kosher food preparation extend to the utensils and the ovens, it is virtually impossible for Jews who observe these rules to eat in restaurants or in the homes of non-Jews, a fact that was recognized by the ancient sages as reinforcing Jewish distinctiveness and the integrity of the family.

A straightforward reading of the Torah quickly demonstrates that God's unique revelation was not intended to convey a systematic theology or a guide to mystical experience of the Divine; nor does it provide clear visions of the afterlife or of the climax of history. First and foremost, the Torah is a book of laws, or, to capture its religious significance, it is a collection of *commandments*. Central to the religion of the Bible is the conviction that, in their observance of the commandments of the Torah, the people of Israel are fulfilling their obligations in a national religious covenant with God that defines their spiritual vocation.

Jewish thinkers over the ages would grapple with the question of the reasons for the commandments. Some would insist that the quest for their rationale implies an unacceptable rejection of their absolute authority as the word of God, while promoting

the arrogant human delusion that we are capable of comprehending the divine mind.[27] Others took the opposite position, that to refrain from understanding the reasons for the commandments would foster the image of a God who is arbitrary or irrational, whose Torah is out of tune with the human situation.[28] Most would take intermediary positions, acknowledging that some biblical precepts have manifestly ethical and utilitarian reasons, whereas others (especially those related to areas like purity and sacrificial worship) are plainly beyond our comprehension; and many are susceptible to multiple interpretations.

Thus Maimonides observed that the counting of days between Passover and *Shavu'ot* teaches in easily understandable terms how the political liberty achieved by the Egyptian Exodus was only a means toward the ultimate spiritual perfection that is embodied in the Sinai revelation.[29] On the other hand, the mystical classic the *Zohar* depicts it as a purification from metaphysical evil and analogous to the eager anticipation of an ecstatic union between husband and wife following a prolonged separation.[30]

ETERNALLY NEW

Later scholars would pose questions: Why did the Torah insist on being so cryptic in disguising the date of "the season of the giving of our Torah"? Why did it not treat the Feast of Weeks like Passover, for instance, whose date on the fifteenth day of the first month is plainly linked to the time of Israel's Exodus from Egyptian slavery?

An incisive answer was offered by the famous Polish Jewish preacher Rabbi Solomon Ephraim Luntshitz (d. 1619) in his *K'li Yaqar* commentary to Leviticus 23:26. In a statement that summarizes exquisitely the value of oral tradition in maintaining the Torah's dynamic vitality for the people of Israel, he wrote:

> This is so because the Torah must remain as new for each person every day as it was on that day when it was received from Mount Sinai. For the Lord chose not to define a specific date, since *on each and every day* of the year it should appear to us as if on that day we received it from Mount Sinai.

Suggested Reading

Aminoah, Noah, and Yosef Nitzan. n.d. *Torah: The Oral Tradition*. Translated by Haim Schachter and Larry Moscovitz. [Jerusalem]: World Zionist Organization Department for Torah Education and Culture in the Diaspora.

Heschel, Abraham Joshua. 1966. *The Earth Is the Lord's, and the Sabbath*. Harper Torchbooks ed. New York: Harper & Row.

Jacobs, Louis. 1984. *A Tree of Life: Diversity, Flexibility, and Creativity in Jewish Law*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Steinsaltz, Adin. 1976. *The Essential Talmud*. New York: Basic Books.

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Notes

[1] Psalms 113-18, recited on festive occasions as the *Hallel* ("Praise").

[2] The tradition evolved its detailed regulations based on Exodus 12:16.

[3] Isaac Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice*, Moreshet series, vol. 6 (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America/dist. by Klav Pub. House, 1979), 147-52.

[4] Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 13:10:6 (297-98). Cf. Mk 7:3ff.; Mt 15:2ff.; Acts 22:3; Gal 1:14.

[5] Shaye J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, 1st ed,, Library of Early Christianity, vol. 7 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), esp. 146-64.

[6] An excellent guide to this literature is Hermann Leberecht Strack, Günter Stemberger, and Markus N. A. Bockmuehl, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991).

[7] Shemaryahu Talmon, *The World of Qumran from Within: Collected Studies* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1989).

[8] See *Pesikta de-Rab Kahana: R. Kahana's Compilation of Discourses for Sabbaths and Festal Days*, trans. William G. Braude, and Israel J. Kapstein (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1976), 115 (5:13).

[9] Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine: Studies in the Literary Transmission, Beliefs and Manners of Palestine in the 1st Century B.C.E.–4th Century C.E.* (New York: The Jewish Theological Semi-

nary of America, 1962), 65-67; David Daube, "Rabbinic Methods of Interpretation and Hellenistic Rhetoric," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 22 (1949): 239–65.

[10] Eliezer Segal, "Midrash and Literature: Some Medieval Views," *Prooftexts* 11 (1991): 57-65.

[11] The calculations are set out in the Babylonian Talmud *Shabbat* 86b-88a.

[12] Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, 111-15.

[13] The apparent divergence from the number of books in standard English Bibles is the result of different conventions of grouping them.

[14] See Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah,* 182-95. The differentiation between the Prophets and Hagiographa does not seem to be a qualitative one so much as a chronological sequence, in that a recognized corpus of "prophetic writings" was already in existence before it was supplemented by the works in the third section.

[15] See Babylonian Talmud *Baba Qamma* 82a.

[16] S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Genizah* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), 2:174-75. This is the original significance of the rabbinic proverb, "The world exists solely through the breath of the schoolchildren," that is, through their memorizing the correct reading of the Bible.

[17] According to traditionalist practice, these must be adult male Jews.

[18] Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice,* 27-33.

[19] Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah,* 210-11.

[20] Joseph Heinemann and Jakob Josef Petuchowski, *Literature of the Synagogue*, Library of Jewish Studies (New York: Behrman House, 1975).

[21] Non-Jews often treat *synagogue* as the Jewish equivalent of *church*, but this is misleading. The word "synagogue" refers only to a building with a defined function; it is never equated with the entirety of Judaism in the way that "the church" is identified with the manifestations of Christianity in the world.

[22] Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 1st Eng. ed. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1983), 23.

[23] Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice,* 41-49.

[24] Ibid., 78-94.

[25] Ibid., 61-62, 73-75.

[26] Ibid., 302-78. In our contemporary world, where much of our food comes to us from the supermarket shelves, this alertness frequently takes the form of careful reading of certifications on the package.

[27] Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: The Concepts and Beliefs*, trans. I. Abrams (Jerusalem: Magues Press, 1979), 1:365-99.

[28] Thus according to the foremost medieval Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides, in his *Guide of the Perplexed,* trans. with intro. and notes by Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 3:31 (523-24).

[29] Ibid., 3:34.

[30] See Eliezer Segal, "The Exegetical Craft of the *Zohar*: Towards an Appreciation," *AJS Review* 17, no. 1 (1992): 31-49, 40-47.