

sadness, there is hope for the future and, in the seven weeks following Tishah B'Av, each Shabbat service includes messages of consolation and promise, beginning with Isaiah 40.

Non-Orthodox Jews do not think it right to emphasize the Temple and to pray for its restoration. They observe Tishah B'Av in recognition of the Jewish suffering involved in the two Temple destructions and other black events in Jewish history, but they do not observe the other fasts lamenting the loss of the Temple. Orthodox Jews, however, believe that the Temple was such a vital sign of God's presence with his people that it must remain a focus of Judaism. Psalm 137:5-6 expresses this:

*If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy.*

They, therefore, observe the additional fasts of 10 Tevet, which marks the beginning of the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem, and 17 Tammuz which is the date when the Romans breached the walls of Jerusalem in 70 CE leading to the destruction of the Temple and the related fast of 3 Tishrei, known as the Fast of Gedaliah. After they had destroyed the Temple and deported many Jews in 586 BCE, the Babylonians appointed Gedaliah as governor over the people remaining in Judah. Rivals murdered him, shattering hopes of any continuing Jewish community. For Orthodox Jews, the three weeks following 17 Tammuz are the saddest time of the Jewish year, with mourning customs (for example, not listening to music) intensified as Tishah B'Av approaches. In many communities, there is no eating of meat and no drinking of wine from the 1-9 Av inclusive.

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the pilgrim festivals

In this chapter you will learn:

- about the origins of the three major festivals of Passover, Weeks, and Tabernacles
- about the importance of reliving the experiences of gaining freedom, receiving the Torah, and depending on God
- about the rich symbolism and ceremonies of these festivals.

Passover – the festival of unleavened bread

Preparations for Passover entail great time and effort. The home is thoroughly spring-cleaned and the essence of this process is the removal of every trace of leaven. This is in response to Exodus 12:7–19 which (in verse 17) calls Passover 'the festival of unleavened bread', *Hag Ha-Matzot*. *Matzah* ('unleavened bread', plural *matzot*) is bread made from flour kept specially dry. It must be baked within 18 minutes of coming into contact with water, ensuring that it does not rise. Bread made of any of the five grains (wheat, rye, oats, spelt, or barley) which has been in contact with water for 18 minutes before baking is *hametz* ('leavened'). *Matzah* is the only grain product that Jews can eat at Passover. The strict view is that the whole process of making *matzah* must be constantly supervised from cutting, milling, sifting, transporting, kneading, and baking. All foods prepared with the guarantee that they have no *hametz* content are labelled 'Kasher for Pesah'.

Removing all *hametz* from Jewish premises involves varied procedures. Many families have special kitchen utensils, crockery, and cutlery for the festival – used only at Pesah and stored away for the rest of the year. Biblically and in rabbinic tradition, a Jew is commanded not to eat or to possess *hametz*, so an Orthodox Jew gets rid of it. For someone whose livelihood involves large supplies of *hametz*, an attempt is made to accommodate the law by selling the *hametz* to a non-Jew (who is not under the obligation to keep Pesah). He is likely to help by not closing on the purchase and, therefore, returning the *hametz* after the required period. Alternatively, an Orthodox Jew might lock the *hametz* away and give the purchaser the key. Reform practice prefers sealing such products in a box and storing it away from domestic use, for example in a garage, cellar, attic, or shed. They stress the point that *hametz* must not be eaten, whilst the Orthodox follow the injunction of Exodus 12:19 believing that since *hametz* is not non-kosher during the rest of the year a Jew could easily forget that it is Pesah and eat it. They also regard simply sealing it as still having possession of it. The Orthodox and non-Orthodox practices here illustrate well one of the differences of approach.

A common ritual is for pieces of *hametz* to be deliberately hidden. On the 14 Nisan a ceremonial search is made, often involving the whole family. Any remaining leaven is then put

aside and burned (as a symbol of destroying all that *hametz* stands for) on the following morning, before Pesah begins in the evening (15 Nisan). The purpose of all this avoidance of leaven is to recreate for the Jew of whatever time and place the physical conditions of the exodus from Egypt. According to Exodus 12:34, unleavened bread was eaten by the Children of Israel just before they escaped from slavery in Egypt, there being no time to wait for the bread to rise. Following the command of Exodus 12:18 to eat unleavened bread, Jews specifically eat *matzah* during this period, at least on the first day (for Orthodox Jews outside Israel on the first two days) of the festival. It is a way of entering physically into the experience of their ancestors of being enslaved and then free.

The spiritual significance attached to leaven is also obvious. Because it makes bread rise, it has come to symbolize the tendency in human beings to become proud and self-reliant. Not eating *hametz* and eating *matzah* is a reminder of the Jew's dependence on God. With the physical spring-cleaning should go a cleaning out of what is unacceptable in their lives. The significance of these rituals usually features in the rabbi's sermon on the Shabbat before Pesah.

Freedom – then and now

The meaning of 'Passover'

Some maintain that the festival of unleavened bread and the festival of Passover were originally two distinct occasions. Unleavened bread was an agricultural festival (revolving round the need of farmers in the ancient Near East to get rid of old bread and leaven from the previous year's crop), whilst Passover was essentially pastoral. They link the name 'Pesah' with the Hebrew verb meaning 'to skip' which might have been used of new-born lambs. Certainly, in the early spring (in Hebrew *Aviv*, which before the Babylonian name was adopted for the month also denoted Nisan) the crop-farmers of ancient Israel would celebrate the barley harvest and the shepherds the lambing season. What is important for the Jewish faith, however, is that these celebrations were, at some point, combined with historical celebrations. The essential springtime occurrence commemorated at Pesah is the exodus from Egypt.

Exodus 12:3-6 tells how on the eventful night every Israelite family was commanded to offer and eat a lamb. The Torah later commanded the Israelites to sacrifice a lamb every year to recall this (Deuteronomy 16:2, 6-7). This was called the 'Paschal' (of the Passover) lamb. (Deuteronomy 16:3 refers to unleavened bread as 'the bread of affliction' remembering the Egyptian oppression.) Whilst God's control of nature is deliberately recalled in this springtime festival, it is the historical event of the first 'Passover' that Pesah celebrates most of all. The focus is on God's control of history, in particular his liberating the Israelites from slavery.

The book of Exodus narrates the story of a series of plagues sent by God on the Egyptians, each intended to persuade the Pharaoh to let the Israelites go. The final deadly plague was the killing of the Egyptian first-born. We read in Exodus 12 of how the Israelites were to mark the doorposts of their houses with blood from the lamb, so that God would know that they were not Egyptians. He would 'pass over' them and not kill their first-born. The story tells that this plague did eventually persuade the Pharaoh to release the Israelites, but that before they had got very far he changed his mind, perhaps regretting the loss of his slave-labour. Exodus 14 gives a dramatic account of how the Israelites got across the Red Sea. (This is the traditional rendering of the Hebrew expression *yam suph* in Exodus 13:18. *Yam suph* refers to the Red Sea in 1 Kings 9:26 and in Exodus 10:19. Some, however, think it connotes the 'sea of reeds' and consequently envisage the Israelites crossing expanses of reed beds somewhere along the line of the modern Suez Canal.) The pursuing Egyptians drowned. The name of the festival as 'Pesah' is then taken to mean 'pass over' and derives from God's passing over the homes of the Israelites.

Thus Pesah is the celebration of freedom. Without the events commemorated by this festival, there would be no Jewish people. In the kiddush on Shabbat and on other festivals, Jews remember the exodus from Egypt. The Ten Commandments open with the statement: 'I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery' (Exodus 20:2). But it is Pesah which more than anything celebrates the beginnings of the nation.

The Seder

The most colourful feature of the festival is the celebratory meal which takes place in the home on the first night. Orthodox Jews outside Israel have another such meal on the second night. To this are invited relatives and other guests, especially people who would otherwise be on their own. (Reform communities, and increasing numbers of Orthodox and Liberal, hold a communal celebration in the synagogue.) Sometimes this celebration is like a family 'get together' with accompanying rituals playing only a small part. Many Jews, however, are committed to recreating the exodus experience for everyone present. To help them do this the meal follows a set 'order', in Hebrew *seder*. The order is the *seder Haggadah* ('order of telling'). What is told is the Exodus story of slavery and freedom, as enjoined by Exodus 13:8: 'You shall tell your child on that day, "It is because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt." ' The celebration has thus come to be known as the *seder* and it proceeds according to a unique liturgical and educational text known as the *Haggadah*. The *Haggadah* (plural) usually have the Hebrew text accompanied by a translation in the language of those celebrating the *seder*. They are often beautifully illustrated. They may include stories of more recent Jewish experience, but their basis is the biblical account of the exodus with phrase-by-phrase midrashic commentary. At the heart of this is the account from Deuteronomy 26:5-8 which begins: 'A wandering Aramean was my ancestor . . . Everyone present is given a copy of the *Haggadah* and may take it in turn to read from it. The aim is that they celebrate their existence as part of the Jewish people. As the *Haggadah* puts it: 'In every generation the individual should regard himself as if he personally had come out of Egypt.'

The atmosphere and the effort that goes into the preparation of the *seder* raise the obvious question: 'Why is this night different from all other nights?' In the course of the evening, this question is asked and answered in typical Jewish educational fashion - not only with words but also with things to see and taste. One such symbol is a cushion placed beside the person leading the *seder*. This symbolizes the comfort of being free to eat in a relaxed position, as in ancient times free people would recline to eat.

With the children lies the future of the Jewish people and it is appropriate that it is the youngest child present who asks why this night is special. The general question leads into four specific questions about the evening's rituals:

Why on this night do we eat unleavened bread?
Why on this night do we eat bitter herbs?
Why on this night do we dip our herbs?
Why on this night do we recline?

The leader of the celebration, usually the father, gives the answers to these questions as he points to the various symbols. On the seder table will be three matzot (pieces of unleavened bread). Tradition has read different connotations into this, but one matzah is broken to symbolize 'the bread of affliction' (since this is how a poor man eats his bread). Part of this is put away – often hidden for the children to find later. The fun of this may help them to stay awake on what is a very long night. This matzah is called the *Afikomen*, which is probably a Greek word meaning 'dessert', the last taste of the meal. It is fitting that this should be matzah, as unleavened bread is the central symbol of Pesah.

Further symbols are designed to recreate the experience. The most usual green herb is parsley or long lettuce, whose bitter-sweet taste recalls both slavery and freedom together. Horseradish is often one of the bitter herbs, its particularly bitter taste providing a powerful reminder of the misery of slavery. The green herbs are dipped in salt water, a symbol of both the tears of the slaves before they were freed and the sea they crossed to freedom. Another symbol combining both slavery and freedom is the *haroset*. This mixture of fruit, nuts, spices, and wine is seen to resemble the mortar with which the slaves had to make bricks. When eaten, haroset gives the sweet taste of freedom. The bitter herbs are dipped in it.

These items of food are usually placed on a special seder dish. With them are two more symbolic items but they are not eaten. One is an egg, hard-boiled then roasted. This is a reminder of the sacrifices offered in the Temple. Another reminder of sacrifice is a lamb bone. This stands for the Paschal lamb, the lamb slaughtered at Pesah. (Step 10 of the 15 steps of the seder is to eat a sandwich made of two pieces of matzah filled with bitter herbs. This is a reminder of Rabbi Hillel, who is said to have eaten matzah and bitter herbs at the same time. Some include haroset in the sandwich.)

The symbolism extends into the four cups of red wine which everyone has to drink during the course of the meal. The red wine perhaps symbolizes the lamb's blood used to mark the Israelites' houses at the first Passover or perhaps simply the value

of freedom. The Talmud says that the four cups stand for the four promises of Exodus 6:6–7. Here four different verbs are used as God promises Moses that he will rescue his people. He will 'bring out, deliver, redeem, take'. All the emphasis in the Haggadah is on God's activity. Moses is mentioned only once and that in passing. A fifth promise is given in Exodus 6:8 and this is symbolized by another cup. In talmudic times, people disagreed about whether a fifth cup of wine should be drunk. A compromise was reached by pouring out a fifth cup but not drinking it. When the Rabbis had a question that could not be resolved, they would leave it to be answered by the Prophet Elijah when he returned. Elijah is expected to herald the Messianic Age when all disputes will be resolved and true freedom and peace will reign. So this cup, standing on the table in Elijah's name, came to be Elijah's cup. There also arose the custom of opening the door to encourage Elijah's arrival.

The wine is also used to make a further point during the seder. When each of the ten plagues is mentioned, each person spills a drop of wine to express sorrow at the suffering of the Egyptians. The celebration is of the Israelites' deliverance, not other people's suffering. Remembering that there are countries where Jews still experience oppression, the seder ends with the words:

The redemption is not yet complete ...
Peace, shalom ...
Next year in Jerusalem,
Next year may all be free.

The whole event blends seriousness with jollity, as seen particularly in the lively songs which round off the evening. These include the very popular *Had Gadya* ('One Little Goat') which allegorizes Jewish history in terms both of recurrent persecution and God's final purposes.

Counting the days

The omer

On the second day of Pesah, Jews begin counting the days to the next festival, Shavuot. Whilst Pesah gave them their physical freedom, it was at Shavuot that they gained their spiritual freedom by being given God's Law, the Torah. This counting from Pesah to Shavuot is called 'counting the Omer', though it is actually counting *from* the Omer. An *omer* was a measurement

of barley. The Torah commands that 'from the day after the sabbath' (taken by the Pharisees to mean the second day of Pesah) when a sheaf of barley is brought to the Temple in Jerusalem 50 days be counted and then the first fruits of the wheat harvest are offered (Leviticus 23:15-16). The wheat harvest thus begins seven weeks after the barley harvest and thus takes the name 'Shavuot' (Weeks). Whilst counting the weeks gives the festival one name, counting the days gives another, 'Pentecost', the Greek word for '50'. Nowadays Shavuot falls on a fixed date, 6 Sivan and, outside Israel, also 7 Sivan, but the days of the Omer period are still counted to capture the sense of looking forward to receiving the Torah.

Since this period is one of anticipation, it may seem odd that the first 32 days of it are regarded as a sad period by Orthodox Jews. This includes some features linked with mourning the dead, such as not cutting the hair or celebrating weddings. The origins of this mourning are obscure, but one explanation is that many of the disciples of Rabbi Akiva, in the second century CE, died from a plague during the Omer period. On the thirty-third day, apparently, the epidemic ended. Also on this date there was a victory in the Bar Kokhba Revolt. The fast, which had marked the sadness of the plague and the Bar Kokhba Revolt, was lifted. This date, *Lag B'Omer* ('the thirty-third of the Omer') has, therefore, become a minor festival. Mourning turns then to celebration and there is often a surge of hair-cuts and weddings on this day. For mystics, the date is significant as the anniversary of the death of the great mystic, Shimon bar Yohai, a disciple of Akiva and alleged author of the medieval mystical work, the Zohar. The celebration is, therefore, one of his soul's being united with its mystic source on high. The sombreness of the Omer or *sefirah* ('counting') season is also interrupted in modern times by Israel's Independence Day festival (5 Iyar), and Jerusalem Day (28 Iyar). Non-Orthodox Jews generally do not believe in following the mourning restrictions of the period.

Combining the wheat harvest with the giving of the Torah

The Bible does not say when Moses was given the Torah on Sinai. On the basis of Exodus 19, however, it has been calculated to have been the third month, that is, Sivan. Since the sixth day of Sivan is Shavuot, the two events, the beginning of the wheat festival and the revelation on Sinai, became one festival. The

historical explanation seems to have been added to the natural ones derived from the land and its life. Even now, when its chief significance for Jews is theological, Shavuot (like Pesah) still includes echoes of a harvest festival. There are no special rituals (like eating unleavened bread at Pesah) but customs which developed over the centuries. One of them is to decorate the synagogue with flowers and plants, representing the flowering of Mount Sinai when the Torah was given.

Another custom is to eat dairy dishes, especially cheesecake. Various explanations have been offered for this. One is that, until the laws about meat were given, Jews could be confident only of milk dishes. Another is that eating milk products is a reminder that God brought them out of Egypt into 'a land flowing with milk and honey' (Deuteronomy 26:9). Deuteronomy 26 stresses gratitude for the land and its produce. The Israelites are to remember their humble and harsh beginnings (verse 5) and offer God the first fruits (that is, the best) of the harvest (verses 1-3, 10). 'The festival of First Fruits' is, in fact, another name for Shavuot. The thought remains that, though there is no longer a Temple in which to offer first fruits, the harvest should not be taken for granted.

Freedom to obey – Shavuot

The Rabbis refer to Shavuot as 'the concluding festival' to Pesah. This expresses the thought that the deliverance from slavery remembered at Pesah was not an end in itself. God says to Moses when assuring him that he is sending him to deliver his people: '... when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain' (Exodus 3:12). What the people are being given is not freedom to do nothing, but freedom to serve God. According to Maimonides, liberty without law is a doubtful blessing. This link between freedom from slavery and freedom for service is expressed at many points during Shavuot. First, many people stay up throughout the night, studying the Torah. (Many Reform synagogues now follow this tradition and organize study groups culminating in breakfast and a dawn morning service.) They may study one particular topic or read from an anthology of written and oral law specially compiled for 'the night of Shavuot'. On the second night, the book of Psalms is often read.

Secondly, the readings in the synagogue focus particularly on God's revelation. Central to the service on the first day of Shavuot is the solemn reading of the Ten Commandments from Exodus 20:1–17. On the second day, the Torah passage is Deuteronomy 15:19–16:16 which commands all three Pilgrim festivals. The passages from the Prophets and the Writings also express the need for obedience to God's commands, notably the book of Ruth. This Moabite woman is taken as the paradigm of a whole-hearted convert to Judaism as she joins the covenant people by accepting God and the Torah (Ruth 1:16). Confirmation ceremonies often take place in Reform and Conservative synagogues at Shavuot as an appropriate time for those who have been studying in a post-bar/bat mitzvah class to demonstrate a commitment to Judaism. This helps reinforce the significance of this festival which, perhaps because it lacks ritual and a home-base, does not have the popularity of the other two Pilgrim festivals.

Where true security lies – Sukkot

The last of the Pilgrim festivals is a deliberate reminder of the Jewish people's dependence on God. 'Sukkot' means 'huts', 'booths', or 'tabernacles' and the festival takes its name from the period when the ancient Israelites had no permanent homes but only temporary shelters. This was during their long journey through the desert after the exodus from Egypt to the land of Canaan. Like Pesah, this festival attempts to recreate the conditions of the past in order for the events to become present experience. In Leviticus 23:42, Jews are commanded to 'live in booths for seven days' and so the festival of Sukkot is observed as a re-enactment of this original dependence on God. The psalmist speaks of God hiding him 'in his *sukkah* in the day of trouble, . . . under the cover of his tent' (Psalm 27:5). Thus the *sukkah* becomes a symbol of reliance on God for protection and strength when all other security is gone. So the central feature of this festival is the building of a *sukkah*.

A *sukkah* must have certain characteristics. It must have at least three walls – the fourth side may be left open – made of material that can withstand the wind. Often the wall of the house or garage forms one wall and the others are of a temporary nature. It must have a particular kind of roof with features deliberately designed to encourage Jews to reflect on God as creator in contrast to the solidity of a permanent house in which people are more naturally inclined to put their trust. The roof must be made

of plants which cannot be used for food. These plants must be in their natural state (boards of wood cannot be used) and detached from the ground (the branches of a growing tree cannot be used). It must be possible to see the sky through it and it must not be so dense that a heavy rain cannot come through. It must not have an additional covering, for example, an overhanging balcony.

Synagogues often have a room with a sliding roof which can be drawn back. In place of the roof is positioned a covering, made according to the requirements for the roof of a *sukkah*. This room then becomes a *sukkah*. The Rabbis speak of adorning the mitzvot. So the *sukkah*, whether in a private garden or synagogue, is made as attractive as possible especially with hanging fruit.

Since Sukkot, like the other two Pilgrim festivals, is also a harvest festival (Leviticus 23:39 refers to the gathering in of 'the produce of the land' at this time), the *sukkot* could well represent the shelters of the farmers bringing in the harvest, who lived on the job. Certainly God's provision of the harvest is still recalled at Sukkot. It is the final harvest of the year and takes place from 15–22 Tishrei, in the autumn. Like Pesah, the first and the last days of the festival are holy days, on which all work except the preparation of food is prohibited. (Conservative and Reform operate the same guidelines as to what should and should not be done at the festivals as those suggested for Shabbat.) There is some variation in practice as to how much time needs to be spent in the *sukkah* to fulfil the precepts of the Torah. In Israel, many Jews sleep in the *sukkah* for the seven days. However, in countries like Britain and America where the climate in late September or early October can be quite cold, most Jews simply eat in it. Even this mitzvah does not apply to someone who is ill or if it is raining. The Talmud is critical of someone who tries to prove his piety by staying in the *sukkah* at times not required by the Torah. Nonetheless, some effort has to be made. This is why the festival is celebrated not in the spring, when the exodus occurred, but in the autumn, when sitting in a *sukkah* is more likely to entail some discomfort through cold. Hospitality is an essential aspect of the *sukkah* and people often visit friends to share refreshments.

The four plants

The second most distinctive ritual of Sukkot is holding in the hand four plants. The mitzvah for this, as for the *sukkah*, comes in Leviticus 23. In verse 40, we read:

On the first day you shall take the fruit of majestic trees, branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God for seven days.

Since this festival concludes the harvest in Israel, these plants are symbols of God's provision. The meaning of the Hebrew rendered 'fruit of majestic trees' is uncertain but it is taken to connote the *etrog*, a citrus fruit which looks rather like a lemon but tastes and smells quite different. The 'branches of palm trees' are called the *lulav* and the 'boughs of leafy trees' are represented by myrtle. These, together with willows, constitute the 'four species', the *arba minim*. Why these four particular plants were originally chosen is not altogether clear, but they are understood by the Rabbis to be the biblical requirement.

Many Jews think that there is symbolism attached to the *arba minim*, though, as often with such matters, they are not agreed on what it is. One midrash links each species with a different part of the body, taking the *etrog* as the heart, the *lulav* as the backbone, the myrtle as the eye, and the willow as the mouth. Another interprets the four plants as indicating different types of character, taking taste as standing for the Torah and scent as standing for good works. On this interpretation, the *etrog*, having both taste and scent, represents someone who knows the Torah and practises it; the fruit of the *lulav*, having taste but no scent, represents someone learned in the Torah but who does not do good deeds; the myrtle, having scent but no taste, represents someone who does good deeds but does not know the Torah; and the willow, having neither scent nor taste, represents someone who is both ignorant and selfish. This, the most popular of the many interpretations, suggests that no one must be left out of the Jewish community. Each person, with his or her strengths and weaknesses, combines with others to constitute God's people. In terms of humanity at large, this reflects a generous yet realistic view of human nature. The *arba minim* symbolize that it takes all sorts to make a world. On each day of the festival, the four plants feature during morning prayers in the synagogue (except on Shabbat in Orthodox communities owing to the restriction on carrying in a public domain). The *etrog* is held in the left hand, whilst in the other are three myrtle twigs and two willows tied to the *lulav*. A blessing is recited for the command to take the *lulav* (as the largest, representing the whole group). Many communities not only hold but also wave the *lulav* as they recite the Hallel (festive psalms). This waving is done in all directions, probably symbolizing that God is everywhere.

The obligation to rejoice

Sukkot is called 'the season of our rejoicing' in response to the command in Leviticus 23:40. The emphasis on rejoicing is seen in Judaism at many points, for instance, in rites of passage and on Shabbat. It is particularly strong at Sukkot and on the days which conclude the festive season begun, three weeks before, with the New Year. In ancient times there was, during Sukkot, a festive procession to and from the spring which supplied the water for the Temple. Water was poured on the altar as a great offering of thanks for the rainy season about to begin. In celebration of water vital for any future harvest, there would be dancing to flutes, harps, and cymbals. The exuberance of the water-offering is reflected in the Mishnah's comment: 'He who has not witnessed the joy of the water-drawing has never in his life experienced real joy' (Sukkah 5:1). There is still today a meal in the evening celebrating the water-drawing. On the seventh day of Sukkot, there is a procession with the Torah scrolls and the *lulav* and *etrog* round the bimah in the synagogue seven times. Prayers are recited with the refrain *Hoshanah* ('Save us'). This day now has the name *Hoshanah Rabbah* ('the Great Hosannah'). After the final circuit, the willows are beaten against the floor or chairs until the leaves fall off, suggesting the shedding of sins. The penitential mood of the High Holy Days thus resurfaces, as seen in a number of features such as the wearing of the white kittel (shroud). The plea is thus for God's saving.

Simhat Torah

The same sense pervades the eighth day of the festival commanded in Leviticus 23:39 and Numbers 29:35 as a day of complete rest. This is, in effect, a separate festival and so, like all festivals, it begins with the kiddush and ends with the concluding Havdalah. It is called *Shemini Atzeret* ('the eighth day of assembly'). A central feature of the *musaf* (additional service) on *Shemini Atzeret* is the prayer for rain. Orthodox Jews outside Israel observe *Shemini Atzeret* for two days. The second of these two days came, sometime after the eleventh century CE, to be known as *Simhat Torah* ('the Rejoicing of the Law'). In Israel, *Shemini Atzeret* and *Simhat Torah* are celebrated on the same day. Reform Jews, also keeping *Shemini Atzeret* for only one day, celebrate *Simhat Torah* on the same day. This is the only occasion when Reform celebrates a festival on a different day from that kept in Orthodox synagogues in the Diaspora.

Simhat Torah can only be described as an explosion of joy. Whilst the festival of Shavuot commemorates the giving of the Torah and the whole festival of Sukkot is characterized by rejoicing, it is this day which above all expresses the joy of the Jewish religion. The synagogue becomes a place of great exuberance. All the Torah scrolls are taken out of the ark and carried round the bimah seven times (taken out to represent the march round Jericho described in Joshua 6), with everyone singing, dancing (sometimes out into the streets), and clapping as they process. Many people are called up to read from the Torah. The greatest honour goes to the one who reads the final portion of Deuteronomy and to the one who then reads the first portion of Genesis. They are called 'bridegrooms' and they represent the community joined to the Torah as a bridegroom to a bride. There is sometimes a tallit (prayer shawl) over the heads of the readers like the hupah at a wedding.

The description of the scene which is best known to non-Jews comes from the seventeenth-century diarist, Samuel Pepys. Following his visit to a Sefardi synagogue in London 1663, he writes:

But Lord, to see the disorder, laughing, sporting, and no attention, but confusion in all their service, more like brutes than people knowing the true God, would make a man forswear ever seeing them more; and indeed, I never did see so much, or could have imagined there had been any religion in the whole world so absurdly performed as this.

There may well have been services at Simhat Torah where riotous behaviour has been granted too much licence, but Pepys' description assumes a western, aesthetic point of view. We have a different viewpoint in Chaim Potok's account of Simhat Torah, in his novel, *In the Beginning*. A vivid paragraph concludes:

The noise inside the synagogue poured out into the night, an undulating, swelling and receding and thinning and growing sound. The joy of dancing with the Torah, holding it close to you, the words of God to Moses at Sinai. I wondered if gentiles ever danced with their Bible.

Simhat Torah is a post-talmudic festival. It is based on a story about King Solomon celebrating when he finished reading the Torah. So the final portion of the Torah, Deuteronomy 33:1-34:12

is read and, so that the cycle is not broken, the first portion of the Torah, Genesis 1:1-2:3, follows. The festival is an expression not of logic but of jubilation at God's having given the Jewish people his Torah by which to live. Whether the festivities are fitting depends, as a rabbi once said in his Simhat Torah sermon, not just on whether we 'rejoice with the Torah' but on whether we 'conduct ourselves so that the Torah rejoices with us'.