

when services are read in the synagogue. Upon returning home the kiddush prayer is recited over a cup of wine. It is customary to follow kiddush by partaking of an assortment of fruits and vegetables which represent various blessings, such as prosperity, fertility and security. This is then followed by the ritual washing of the hands and the blessing of the challah bread. In many homes it is the custom to replace the oblong-shaped braided challahs, used throughout the year, with circular ones. This symbolizes the circle of life and the passage of a new year. It is also customary to dip the challah in honey as a symbol for a sweet year. A festive meal follows in which various types of rich and sweet food are served, again symbolizing our hopes for a good sweet year. Synagogue services the next morning start earlier than usual as the prayers of Rosh Hashanah are amongst the lengthiest of the year. It is not uncommon for them to begin at 8 a.m. and to conclude not much before 2 p.m. As on Shabbat, the services consist of *Shaharit*, the morning prayer and *musaph*, the additional prayer, with the reading of the Torah in between. The highlight of the Rosh Hashanah service is the sounding of the shofar, an unadorned ram's horn, after the reading of the Torah. While the Torah simply states that a shofar be sounded, the Talmudic rabbis interpreted this to mean a series of blasts of differing lengths. The minimum number of blasts required, or *kolot* in Hebrew, is thirty, but traditionally at least a hundred are sounded and in some congregations even more. The shofar blasts have come to represent many themes. My favourite is that it represents crying. Indeed, the crude sounds produced by blowing on a ram's horn are remarkably similar to the sounds of human wailing or sobbing. This crying represents the soul's yearning for God, a theme that plays itself out in much of the liturgy of the day. Yet while the liturgy is beautiful and poetic it lacks the raw expression of the sounds emitted by the shofar. The sobbing of the shofar expresses an honesty and urgency that words cannot, and it is in transcending words that the shofar comes to express the deepest longing of the soul.

Chapter 11

THE JEWISH YEAR CYCLE

September–October

Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year)

The Jewish year begins on the first of the Hebrew month of Tishrei, which in most years will fall some time in September. The festival of the New Year is called Rosh Hashanah, which translates literally as the Head of the Year. The term *head*, according to Hasidic tradition, reflects not just the start of the year, but, more importantly, its direction. As the head (brain) governs the body and determines its movements similarly Rosh Hashanah contains the spiritual energy that determines the type of year about to unfold.

Although Rosh Hashanah is technically a festival, its celebration is somewhat muted. This is because it is primarily a day of judgement in which the Almighty weighs up our deeds of the previous year. It is a festival of reflection and introspection in which we resolve to improve ourselves and pray to God for a healthy and prosperous year to come.

The festival begins at sunset on the eve of Rosh Hashanah,

One of the greatest honours is to be asked to sound the shofar for the congregation. This is also an awesome responsibility: not only must one have the technical skill to produce the requisite sounds, but ideally one must also be a man of heightened spiritual stature. To this day when I hear the shofar a scene plays out in my mind in which I am a nineteen-year-old yeshiva student in Brooklyn New York at the court of late Hasidic master Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneersohn (who died in 1992). I recall thousands of Hasidim packed into the synagogue all eager to hear, and if lucky, to catch a glimpse of this holy man sounding the shofar. The Rebbe was almost ninety years old. He stood robed in white on the elevated reader's desk, at either side of him stood two men with Torah scrolls. On the desk itself were eight or nine bulging sacks of post, each one full of letters sent to the Rebbe in the weeks leading up to Rosh Hashanah from Jews all over the world. Each letter, known as a *kvittel* in Yiddish, was essentially a petition to the Rebbe to pray to God on the sender's behalf for a good and sweet year. I watched as, moments before sounding the shofar, the Rebbe threw his prayer shawl over the desk, covering himself and the petitions. He remained there for many long minutes. Not a sound could be heard in the vast synagogue except for the muffled sobbing of the Rebbe as he poured out his heart to God. Then suddenly, without warning, he threw back his prayer shawl revealing a face burning with intensity. He recited the blessings with deep feeling, put a small ram's horn to his trembling lips and produced the most haunting and moving sounds I have ever heard. They were soft, barely above a whisper, but so full of longing it was as if I heard the soul itself calling out to God. This was without doubt one of the great religious experiences of my life and one I return to in my mind each year as I hear the shofar.

The services are followed by a festive lunch. Later in the afternoon, just before or after the mincha service, it is customary to recite a special prayer at a body of water, often a brook or stream, and to recite verses from chapter 7 of the Book of

The concept of the kvittel and intercession in prayer

While Judaism believes that great spiritual people are able to intercede before God and request His blessing for others, it does not absolve individuals from praying on their own behalf. No one can pray *instead* of you, they can pray *with* you. The aim of the *kvittel* is not that the Rebbe prays *instead* of the supplicant but rather *with* him. This idea is beautifully illustrated by a story concerning the Hasidic master Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev.

It once happened on the eve of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, that Rabbi Levi Yitzchak announced to his community that this year he would not accept their *kvittel* without payment of the princely sum of a silver rouble each. Of course there was a lot of grumbling, for who could easily afford to part with such a sum? On the other hand, who could even conceive of not presenting the Rebbe with a *kvittel*? In the end, all the townspeople somehow managed to scrape together the extortionate fee. Towards the very end of the afternoon, just as the Rebbe was about to leave for synagogue, a young widow came rushing into his house with a *kvittel*, begging the Rebbe to pray for her sick child. The Rebbe motioned to the large pile of gleaming coins on his desk indicating where she should place her rouble, but, alas, the wretched woman had nothing to give. She broke down and pleaded with the Rebbe, explaining that she spent the entire day scrounging around for the money but to no avail. The Rebbe was resolute. He would not agree to pray for the child unless his mother could pay his fee. Exasperated, the poor woman stormed out of his house but not before shouting over her shoulder, 'You think I need you, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, to pray for my child? I don't need you at all. I will myself pray to our Father in Heaven. He will no doubt be merciful to me.' Upon hearing this, the Rebbe's face broke into a wide

smile. 'Come back!' he called after her. 'I am not at all interested in the silver roubles, I was waiting for someone to challenge me and realize that a prayer cannot be bought. Come now with me, let us go to synagogue and there we will pray together for your child.'

Micah. Included is verse 19: 'He will take us back in love; He will cover up our iniquities, You will hurl all our sins into the depths of the sea.' This practice, called *tashlikh*, meaning 'casting away', symbolizes our hope that as we cast our sins away (metaphorically into the sea) God will overlook them and allow us to start the new year afresh.

Rosh Hashanah is a two-day festival and all the rituals and services with the exception of *tashlikh* are repeated on the following day.

Rosh Hashanah ushers in what is known as the ten days of repentance. These include the two days of Rosh Hashanah, the Day of Atonement; Yom Kippur, and the seven days in between, which are seen as a period of repentance leading to the ultimate day of repentance and atonement; Yom Kippur. During this period additional prayers are recited early each morning before the Shaharit service and certain additions are made to all three of the daily services themselves.

One of the important aspects of the days of repentance is apologizing to people we may have hurt or insulted in the past year. Judaism divides sins into two distinct categories: sins between man and God and sins between fellow men. The former involve laxity in observing religious rituals, whereas the latter involves any type of crime that we may have committed against our fellow man. Judaism teaches that while God has the power to forgive sins committed against Him, He does not have the power to forgive sins committed against one's fellow. That is to say, there is no point in praying to God for forgiveness for the sin of insulting or defrauding one's neighbour. One must seek forgiveness from the victim, since only this can

lead to God's forgiveness and atonement.

It is inevitable that one of these seven days of repentance will be a Saturday. This is known as Shabbat Shuvah, the Shabbat of return or repentance. It is given this name because of the opening lines of the prophetic reading in synagogue that morning: 'Return (shuvah), O Israel, to the Lord your God, for you have fallen because of your sin' (Hosea 14:2).

Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement)

Yom Kippur is the holiest day of the year in the Jewish calendar. It is the culmination of the ten days of repentance and, as such, it is a Day of Atonement and forgiveness. It is the one day a year in which Jews are required to try to transcend the material and to strive, if only for a short while, to emulate the spiritual quality of angels. This is achieved through self-denial in five areas: food, drink, anointing the body with oils or perfumes, the wearing of leather shoes and sexual intimacy. These denials, known as *innuyim*, literally, afflictions, begin at sundown on Yom Kippur eve and remain in place until nightfall the next day, some twenty-five hours later. Yet, somewhat paradoxically, Yom Kippur is preceded by a festive meal eaten late in the afternoon and concluding shortly before the fast begins. This is partly in order to give strength to those who are fasting and partly to honour the day of Yom Kippur itself, which is technically a festival. Thus the feasting is brought forward a day as it is not possible to eat on Yom Kippur itself.

There are five prayer services throughout Yom Kippur. According to kabbalistic tradition these represent the five levels of the soul, each level deeper than the previous one. The fifth level is the quintessence of the soul, its very heart and core. Accordingly, the services of Yom Kippur take the worshipper on an inward spiritual journey of self-discovery leading to a connection with one's very essence. The climax of this intense spiritual journey is the closing service at the very end of Yom Kippur. By then the worshipper has connected with his spiritual core and emerges spiritually cleansed and revitalized.

As there is no festive meal to go home to and the purpose of the day is to pour out one's heart to God in prayer, the services last all day. Many people arrive at synagogue early in the morning and do not return home until after dark.

At the heart of each service is the confessional prayer, consisting of a general listing of common sins. The list is illustrative and not exhaustive, and so each individual is required to add confessions for their own particular sins. The confessions are made to God alone and any confession to particular sins, as opposed to the general list in the prayer-book, is recited silently so that others may not hear it. The confessional prayer is recited whilst standing, bent slightly forward, and as each sin is enumerated one lightly strikes one's chest with one's fist.

At certain points in the Yom Kippur service the worshippers will prostrate themselves. Prostration was common practice during the ancient Temple rites. Whenever God's name was proclaimed aloud by the priests the congregation of onlookers would bow to the ground in reverence. It is not Jewish practice to bow to the ground in prayer today, with the exception of Yom Kippur, when the bowing takes place during the part of the service that recounts the Temple rites.

Of all the innuym on Yom Kippur the most difficult is fasting. The rule is that any healthy person above the age of twelve for a girl and thirteen for a boy must fast for the duration of Yom Kippur. Fasting here means that nothing is allowed to pass one's lips, neither food nor drink for twenty-five hours. Exceptions are made for women who have just come out of childbirth and for pregnant women who are exceedingly weak. However, there is no blanket dispensation for pregnant women per se. While there are dispensations for the seriously ill, the laws governing such dispensations are complex and generally a rabbi ought to be consulted. Although girls under the age of twelve and boys under the age thirteen are exempt, most children from the age of nine or ten will try to fast for at least part of the day.

The conclusion of Yom Kippur is signalled by a single long

blast on the shofar. At that point the weekday *ma'ariv* service is read and everyone goes home to celebrate with yet another festive meal. This festive atmosphere reflects our firm belief that God has heard our prayers, accepted our sincere repentance and will bless us with a good year.

Sukkot—the Festival of Booths

Sukkot, the Festival of Booths, comes four days after Yom Kippur. Falling in the autumn each year, Sukkot is essentially a harvest festival in which we thank God for His bounty. It is therefore a festival of great joy, particularly coming so soon after the spiritual cleansing of Yom Kippur.

There are two main features of Sukkot, the *sukkah* and the lulav. The *sukkah*, after which the festival gets its name, means a booth. This is based on the verses in Leviticus (23:42–3): 'You shall live in booths seven days; all citizens in Israel shall live in booths, in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I am the Lord your God.' The definition of a *sukkah* is any shelter with a minimum of three walls and a roof covered by organic material leaving enough open space to see the stars peaking through. Sukkahs today come in all sizes and materials and there are thriving pre-fab *sukkah* businesses in most large Jewish communities that do a brisk trade in the weeks leading up to this festival. In warm climates people will sleep in their *sukkah* for the entire week. In colder climates they will at least take all their meals there. The nature of the organic material covering the roof, the *sekhakh* in Hebrew, also varies from country to country. As a child growing up in Montreal we always covered our *sukkah* with pine branches and to this day I associate the sweet smell of pine with the *sukkah* festival. As a teenager I spent a couple of years in South America, where they use palm branches.

The idea behind sitting in this rather exposed booth is, on a very basic level, to recall the journey our ancestors made through the desert to the Promised Land during which they

dwelt in makeshift huts or booths. On a deeper level the sukkah's exposure to the elements symbolizes man's vulnerability. This is a particularly important idea to bear in mind at a harvest festival when one reaps the benefits of a year's work. The sukkah's exposure to the elements reminds us that we are not the masters of our own destiny and that all our success is due to God's blessing. The lulav is a palm branch on which are bound myrtle and willow twigs. This is then held together with an etrog; a citron fruit and a blessing is recited. Following the blessing the palm branch and citron are then waived in every direction. It symbolizes our joy and thanksgiving to the Almighty, whose presence is everywhere, blessing us with abundance.

The following story about Sukkot highlights the theme that Judaism is about reaching God through the physical.

One year in Berdichev it was impossible to obtain a lulav and etrog (see p. 168). As the festival drew nearer, the townspeople began to grow concerned. How would they fulfil the mitzvah this year? The day before Sukkot Rabbi Levi Yitzchak took decisive action. He appointed several townspeople to take up positions on the main road with instructions to intercept any passer-by who might have a lulav and etrog. It was not long before they found a Jew who was passing through Berdichev on his way home to another town and, behold, he had a lulav and etrog. They begged him to spend the festival in Berdichev so as to enable them to fulfil the mitzvah with his lulav and etrog. However, the traveller was adamant; he had been away from home for several months now and nothing was going to part him from either his family or his precious lulav and etrog. Eventually Rabbi Levi Yitzchak offered the man a deal he could not refuse. In exchange for spending the festival in Berdichev the rabbi would promise him a guaranteed place in paradise. This was too good an offer to refuse. One could spend one's entire life doing good deeds in the hope of a place in paradise and here, just like that, he was being offered a guarantee. It was surely worth the small sacrifice of spending the festival away

from home. Besides, his wife would certainly understand once he told her what he had received in return.

The traveller went happily on to a small inn to bathe and prepare himself for the festival. In the meantime, unbeknownst to him, the rabbi secretly sent word to all the townsfolk that under no circumstances were they to permit this traveller to enter their sukkahs to enjoy the festive meal. Strange as the order seemed, the townspeople were used to their rabbi and his unconventional ways and so they obeyed without question. After the evening prayer the traveller, now quite hungry, made his way to the nearest sukkah, hoping to join the family for the evening meal. To his surprise the door to the sukkah was locked. He knocked and waited, but there was no response. After several minutes he thought he would try his luck elsewhere and went to the next sukkah; but the same thing happened. In fact he could hear the family inside reciting the kiddush prayer, yet they could not or would not acknowledge his presence on the other side of the locked door. On to the next sukkah and again the same thing happened. After trying several sukkahs it began to dawn on him that the rabbi might have something to do with his inability to gain entry to even a single sukkah. Off he went to the rabbi's sukkah and was not surprised when there too he was confronted by a locked door. 'Rabbi,' he called out 'is this any way to treat a guest? Do not I deserve to eat in a sukkah like every other Jew? This will be the first time in my living memory that I will have missed out on the mitzvah of eating in the sukkah.'

The rabbi's voice could be heard from the other side of the door. 'So, tell me, you want to eat in a sukkah? That can easily be arranged. In fact you can join me right here, on one condition.'

'Anything you ask,' said the desperate traveller.

'You must first agree to release me from the deal I made with you earlier today. Release me from my promise to secure for you a place in paradise and I will open up the door of my sukkah to you.'

'Release you from the deal? But that was the only reason I agreed to spend the festival here in the first place!'

'So be it,' said the rabbi. 'I am afraid you will have to miss out on eating in the sukkah.'

'Why, this is sheer blackmail!' shouted the astonished man.

'Call it what you will, but that is the deal I am now offering. Decide what you want to do.'

'Well,' said the man, 'let it be on the record that I protest at the way in which you have manipulated and blackmailed me. Yet, having said that, there is really only one option open to a Jew on the first night of Sukkot and that is to eat in a sukkah.' Having said this, the traveller released the rabbi from his promise and the rabbi, for his part, graciously welcomed him into his sukkah to enjoy the festive meal. The rest of the festival passed unremarkably.

At the end of the festival, as the man was preparing to leave, the rabbi sent for him. He entered the rabbi's study and the rabbi said: 'I know how sore you are about the way you have been treated so before you leave I'd like to explain my actions to you. You see it is not really in the gift of any man to promise his fellow a place in paradise. Paradise must be earned in this world through toil and sacrifice. You were a fool to believe otherwise. However, when you were prepared to trade what you believed was a place in paradise for the possibility of fulfilling a mitzvah in this world, namely, the mitzvah of eating in a sukkah, at that moment you earned yourself a true place in paradise. Now go home to your family and rest assured that your time here was well spent. You have indeed gained for yourself a place in paradise.'

Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah (the Rejoicing with the Torah)

Immediately following the seven-day festival of Sukkot is another festival, called Shemini Atzeret. On this festival special prayers for rain are recited and in Israel the year-long cycle of reading the Torah is completed and restarted. In the Diaspora

the Torah is not completed until the next day, which is celebrated as the festival of Simchat Torah (rejoicing with the Torah.)

While Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah are excessively joyful festivals I always found them to be rather bittersweet. They are the last moments of an entire month of celebration and one is conscious of the routine of the daily grind just around the corner. As a child I felt this particularly keenly as the autumn school term would really begin in earnest the day after Simchat Torah.

The main feature of the Simchat Torah celebration is the singing and dancing with the Torah scrolls, which are normally kept in a special closet called the Ark. They are only removed for the purpose of reading from them. The one exception is Simchat Torah, where the scrolls are removed primarily to dance with. The dancing with a closed scroll symbolizes that each Jew, regardless of their scholastic ability, is able to connect with the Torah on the most basic level.

Of all the major festivals, Simchat Torah is the rowdiest. This is in large measure due to the rather unstructured prayer service of that day, combined with all the dancing and singing. Another contributing factor is that many of the adults enjoy a stiff drink or two.

December

Hanukkah (Festival of Re-dedication)

Hanukkah has always been my favourite festival. It commemorates the Macabean uprising against the Seleucid Greeks in the second century BCE.

The uprising began when King Antiochus Epiphanes forbade the observance of the Jewish religion in Judaea. In response to this, a priestly family known as the Hasmoneans led a successful revolt and managed against overwhelming odds to defeat Antiochus' armies and to gain control of Jerusalem and the holy Temple, which the Greeks had defiled. Hanukkah is both a celebration of the Hasmoneans' military victories as

well as a festival marking the re-dedication of the defiled Temple. It was during this period of re-dedication that the 'miracle of the oil' occurred. One of the daily rituals in the Temple was the kindling of the menorah, a giant seven-branched candelabrum. This was faithfully carried out each afternoon just before evening by the high priest. The flames would burn in the giant menorah all through the night, symbolizing the radiance of God's glory.

When the victorious Maccabees entered the Temple after defeating the armies of Antiochus they found to their dismay that the Greeks had sacked the Temple and defiled all the olive oil, rendering it unfit for use for the menorah ritual. They dispatched messengers to Galilee with instructions to obtain freshly pressed olive oil, realizing that it would be at least eight days until they returned. Then someone found a small cruse of pure olive oil lying in the Temple compound with the holy seal of the high priest. It was enough to fuel the menorah for only one night. They poured it into the giant menorah, which miraculously burned for eight days until the messengers returned from Galilee with a supply of fresh oil. This miracle is celebrated in Jewish homes by kindling an eight-branched menorah, otherwise known as a hanukiah, on each night of Hanukkah. We begin by kindling a single light on the first night and add one more flame on each subsequent night so that by the last night of the festival all eight flames are kindled. Menorahs or hanukiahs come in all shapes and sizes, from magnificent silver to the bottle cap and Popsicle stick concoctions children bring back from school. While it is acceptable to use candles it is preferable to use olive oil, which is more reminiscent of the miracle.

Candle-lighting ceremonies differ slightly from family to family but essentially they all involve family and friends gathering around for the lighting followed by the singing of traditional Hanukkah hymns. It is also traditional to enjoy foods fried in oil to commemorate the miracle of the oil. Doughnuts are an all-time favourite, as well as a special savoury potato

pancake known as a *latke*. It is also customary to give monetary gifts, known in Yiddish as *Hanukkah gelt* (or Hanukkah money) to the children. The appeal of a joyous festival in the midst of an otherwise bleak winter is evident in the popularity of Hanukkah amongst Jews of all levels of religious commitment and observance.

February

Tu Bi-Shevat (New Year of the Trees)

The fifteenth of the Hebrew month of Shevat is celebrated as the New Year of the Trees. This is significant in that it relates to the Jewish laws of tithing produce. In ancient Israel a certain tithe was taken from each year's produce and given to the Kohanim (the priests). It was important that the tithe given was actually from that particular year's produce and not from the following year. The rabbis determined that the year in this respect begins and ends on the fifteenth of Shevat, for that is when, at least in Israel, the sap in the trees begins to run. While it would seem that this festival would not have the same mass appeal as, say, Hanukkah or Purim, in recent years it has become quite popular. This is especially so amongst those who care deeply about ecological matters. There is no prescribed method of celebrating Tu Bi-Shevat other than sampling a new fruit (that one has not eaten for at least a season) or a fruit from the Land of Israel. As this festival becomes more popular many are turning to a sixteenth-century mystical practice of hosting a Tu-Bishvat Seder, which consists of drinking four cups of wine of different shades, representing the four seasons and the sampling of various fruits and nuts, representing different mystical ideas. This is accompanied by scriptural recitations and singing.

March

Purim (Festival of Lots)

The festival of Purim celebrates the redemption of the Jewish community of Persia in the fourth century BCE. The story

behind this festival is recounted in great detail in the scroll of Esther, which is part of the Jewish Bible. The story in its most basic outline is this: a weak and insecure king Ahasuerus kills his wife Vashti in a drunken rage. He sobers up and, feeling very lonely and sorry for himself, holds a beauty pageant to select the most beautiful woman in his empire as his new queen. Esther, a Jewish orphan, gets swept up in the pageant and rather reluctantly ends up as Persia's new queen. Esther's uncle (others say cousin) Mordechai advises her to keep her faith a secret. In the meantime, Haman, one of the king's advisors and a rabid Jew-hater, convinces the king to annihilate all Jews in the Persian Empire. The king agrees and Haman goes about making the technical arrangements for this wholesale slaughter. Amongst these preparations was the casting of lots to determine the date of the massacre. Esther comes to the rescue by revealing to the king her true faith and, but for the fact that she is queen, Haman would have her slaughtered as well. The king, who is prone to temper tantrums, has Haman executed and replaced with Mordechai the Jew. The story ends on a high note, with the original date earmarked for destruction being converted to a day of redemption.

Jews celebrate this redemption on Purim in several ways:

1. By reading the scroll of Esther in synagogue both on Purim eve as well as on Purim day. The scroll is not short: it takes a seasoned reader almost an hour to read through the whole story. One of the reasons for this is that at every mention of Haman's name (fifty-four in total) the reader pauses and the congregation erupts with booing, hissing and the loud banging of special noisemakers called *gragers*.
2. Monetary gifts to the poor are encouraged. The minimum is a coin each to two needy people. However, generosity is encouraged on this special day, and people are exceedingly generous. In London one finds queues of people collecting charity outside certain well-known and prosperous Jewish

homes waiting for their turn to get inside. No one is turned away empty handed.

3. In addition to the monetary gifts to the poor, gifts of food are given to friends and family.
4. In the afternoon a special Purim feast is enjoyed. One of the features of Purim is that it is acceptable, indeed one is practically encouraged, to get inebriated. This ensures that the Purim feast is always a lively affair, often lasting way into the night.
5. It is also customary to wear masks and fancy dress. This is said to highlight the notion that things are not always as they appear – a theme that runs throughout the Purim story.

The drinking, costumes and gifts all contribute to a carnival atmosphere. Purim is a welcome break from the long dull winter and signals the approach of spring.

April

Passover (Festival of Redemption)

One of the best known Jewish festivals is Passover, or Pesach, commemorating the Jewish people's exodus from slavery in Egypt in the fourteenth century BCE.

As it is forbidden to eat or possess any leaven during the festival, Jewish families spend much time cleaning their homes in preparation. It is not uncommon for pre-Pesach cleaning to begin a month beforehand, usually immediately after Purim.

In a faith that is generally child-oriented, Passover stands out as particularly so. The central ritual meal of Passover; the Passover seder, begins with the children asking a series of four questions relating to the theme of Passover. In addition to the formalized recital of these fixed questions (dating back some 2,000 years) children are encouraged to ask about the exodus and the meaning of Passover. The Passover seder begins after nightfall and routinely lasts several hours. Our seder is rarely over before one in the morning and I know of others that carry on right until daybreak.

The main features of the seder are the eating of matzah, an unleavened bread, and, interspersed throughout the evening, the drinking of four cups of wine. It is also customary at certain points in the seder to recline, symbolizing the freedom that is celebrated on Passover. Towards the end of the seder a cup of wine is filled in honour of the prophet Elijah, who is believed to visit every Jewish home on the seder night. This is followed by opening one's front door symbolically to welcome the prophet in.

One year, the great Hasidic master Rabbi Menachem Mendel Morgenstern (1787–1859), otherwise known as the Kotzker Rebbe, after the Polish town Kotzk in which he resided, asked the students around his table if they would like to see the prophet Elijah. They responded in the affirmative, and he promised them that at the particular point in the seder when Elijah enters they would indeed behold the prophet with their own eyes. Needless to say the remainder of the seder was a blur. The students, eagerly anticipating Elijah, could not wait to get through the seder quickly enough. Their master, however, seemed oblivious to their yearnings as he took his time, pausing at each point in the seder to explain some deeper meaning and to teach words of wisdom. Finally the long-awaited hour arrived. The students filled Elijah's cup of wine and rushed to the door, tearing it open in breathless anticipation. And they saw what they had become accustomed to see each year, namely, nothing. They rubbed their eyes in disbelief. Had not their master promised them that this year would be different? That they would for once, have the great privilege of actually seeing the prophet? Dejected, they returned to their seats. So disappointed were they that they barely managed to muster the energy to finish the seder. Yet the Kotzker seemed in another world. His eyes tightly closed his face aflame he sang the concluding hymns and prayers with intense devotion and joy. When he finally concluded and opened his eyes he was met by sad dejected faces all around. 'What is the matter?' he asked. 'Did you not see the prophet Elijah?'

'No,' they responded sadly. 'We saw nothing, nothing at all.'

'Well, where did you look for him?' he asked. 'Why, in the doorway of course!' they answered.

'Fools!' thundered the Kotzker. 'What makes you think Elijah enters through the doorway? Elijah does not enter through a doorway, Elijah enters through the heart.'

May

Lag ba-Omer

In Hebrew, letters and numbers are written with the same characters. This means that every letter or word has a numeric value and that two or more numbers spell words. Lag ba-Omer is an example of the latter. The number 33 makes up the word lag, thus lag ba-Omer means the thirty-third day of the Omer period. The Omer period consists of the seven weeks between Passover and Shavu'ot, representing the journey the ancient Israelites made from the depths of slavery to the spiritual heights of receiving the Torah. Each night after nightfall Jews recite a special blessing and count the passage of one more day leading to the climax, Shavu'ot. The thirty-third day of this period is the anniversary of the death of the great second-century rabbi and mystic Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai. In his honour the day is marked by celebrations, outings and bonfires. Another reason for the celebration of Lag ba-Omer is that during the second century many of the disciples of the famous Rabbi Akiva died as the result of a plague. This tragedy was seen as divine retribution for the lack of respect these scholars had for each other. On the thirty-third day of the Omer the plague miraculously stopped and so this day was set aside as a day of celebration.

Yom ha-Atzma'ut (Israel Independence Day)

After nearly 2,000 years of exile the modern Jewish state came into existence on 14 May 1948. This is celebrated each year on its corresponding Jewish date of the fifth of the Hebrew month of Iyyar.

Unlike other Jewish festivals, the nature of Yom ha-Atzma'ut celebrations is not uniform. Secular Jews see it as a purely secular holiday, no different from, say, the way Americans see the fourth of July. This is manifested in parades, barbecues, family outings and fireworks. Amongst religious Jews there are those who see Yom ha-Atzma'ut as a genuine religious festival. They will of course join in the same parades and outings as secular Jews but they will also attend special prayers in honour of the festival. There are others in the religious Jewish community for whom Yom ha-Atzma'ut has no real religious significance. They do not see the establishment of a secular state as anything to celebrate and certainly not on a par with any of the traditional festivals.

June

Shavu'ot (Pentecost or the Festival of Weeks)

Seven weeks after Passover Jews celebrate the giving of the Torah on the sixth of the Hebrew month of Sivan. There is a tradition that when God gave the Torah on Mount Sinai the mountain, otherwise desert, burst into bloom. To commemorate this it is customary to decorate the home as well as the synagogue with flowers and greenery. It is also customary to eat milky food on this festival, and so cheesecake features prominently on the lunch menu. So strong is the association between Shavu'ot and cheesecake that when my brother was five years old the teacher asked the class what God had given the Jewish people on Shavu'ot. Expecting to hear one of the brighter pupils to respond 'the Torah', she was taken aback when my little brother responded, 'On Shavu'ot God gave us cheesecake.'

Numerous explanations are offered for dairy consumption on Shavu'ot. One of the more popular reasons is that upon receiving the Torah, with all its dietary laws and complex rules regarding the preparation of kosher meat, the Israelites opted for something easy and simple – a dairy lunch. Jews have been enjoying cheesecake ever since!

Another tradition is to stay up all night on the eve of Shavu'ot studying the Torah in preparation for the reading of the Ten Commandments in synagogue the next morning. This practice originated amongst the mystics of the sixteenth century and until fairly recently was confined to a small element within the Orthodox community. Lately this practice, known as *tikkun*, has become extremely popular and is now observed by a wide range of Jews of varying levels of religious commitment. Many synagogues will host a *tikkun* by providing a full programme of lectures and workshops lasting all through the night, fuelled by lashings of black coffee and refreshments. This is often preceded by a communal dinner.

One of the most memorable Shavu'ot experiences I have is from my sabbatical in Jerusalem several years ago. The neighbourhood we were staying in was buzzing with activity all night as people were coming and going to various lectures and study sessions. Shortly before dawn we woke up our young children and proceeded to the Western Wall in the old city. Along the way we were joined by others and by the time we reached Damascus Gate one could see throngs of Jews making their way to the old city from all over Jerusalem. At the crack of dawn we began to pray and we concluded just as the sun began to rise. Looking out over the Western Wall plaza, now gleaming in the early morning sunlight, and seeing thousands of fellow Jews united in prayer after a night of intensive Torah study was an experience that will remain with me for ever. Utterly exhausted though spiritually elated we made our way back home to enjoy a well-earned rest.

July–August

The Fast of Tammuz

The seventeenth of the Hebrew month of Tammuz is a fast day. This is because a number of calamities befell the Jewish people on this date. Perhaps the best known calamity was the breaching of the walls of Jerusalem by the Romans in the first century. This was the beginning of the destruction of Jerusalem

and the subsequent exile of the Jewish people. As with all fast days, food and drink are forbidden and special prayers are read in the synagogue.

Bein ha-metzarim (Between the Straits)

Between the Straits is the name given to the three-week period between the Fast of Tammuz and the Fast of Av, which commemorates the destruction of the Temples. These three weeks are considered a mourning period, and so celebrations such as weddings are not held during this time.

The last nine days of this three-week period are treated even more stringently and so travel, music, swimming, the eating of meat or consuming of wine are all prohibited as a sign of mourning over the destruction of the Temple.

Tisha b'Av (The Fast of the ninth of Av)

The ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av is the date on which both Temples were destroyed, the first by the Babylonians in 423 BCE and the second by the Romans in 70 CE. It is the saddest day in the Jewish calendar, marked by fasting and prayer. Prayers begin in the evening with a public reading of the Book of Lamentations, at which participants sit on the floor or on low stools as a sign of mourning.

Paradoxically, while Tisha b'Av is a day of mourning it is also a day of hope as there is a tradition that the messiah (the redeemer of the Jewish people) will be born on this day. In a sense, it means that within the destruction there exists the seed of redemption. This paradox is reflected in the practice of omitting the daily supplication prayers. These prayers are otherwise only omitted on festivals or happy occasions.

One of my abiding Tisha b'Av memories goes back to when I was a child in Montreal. In our synagogue there was a certain individual who had a heart of gold and went out of his way to help people; but he could also be a real nuisance as he frequently disrupted synagogue services for one reason or another.

One year he got it into his head that the messiah was going to arrive at the end of Tisha b'Av. To mark this momentous occasion he prepared a sumptuous feast in the synagogue. Throughout the day as the community prayed and fasted this fellow, with lots of help from my friends and I, laid out tables with a tantalizing assortment of delicacies. This drew sharp critical glances from many of the worshippers, for not only was the laying out of a feast a violation of the spirit of this sad and tragic day, it was also a source of torment to those fasting who were doing their best not to think about food. Critical glances aside, no one was able to summon up the courage to denounce the activity, which was just as well as it would have been futile. As the day progressed our friend grew increasingly excited. Finally the moment he had been waiting for arrived. Night had fallen, the fast had terminated and the messiah would grace his feast any moment now. Needless to say, the messiah did not grace his feast that year. Two hundred fellow congregants did, however, and after their fasting all day the food disappeared within minutes. The feeding frenzy over, people quickly wished their host well, thanked him for his generosity and hurried to get back home to their families. In my mind's eye I can still see the image of him sitting forlorn at the head of an empty table strewn with empty plates, casting his gaze at the heavens and swearing never again to put himself out for the messiah.

August–September

The month of Ellul

The last month of the Hebrew calendar is the month of Ellul. As this immediately precedes the month of Tishrei and the high holy days, it is essentially a month of repentance and a time of spiritual preparation for the New Year. It is also a time in which God's presence is more keenly felt and when prayers are more readily heard. It is customary to sound several short blasts on the shofar each morning after prayers to draw attention to the forthcoming New Year.