

## 7. THE JEWISH CALENDAR AND THE CYCLE OF HOLIDAYS

The Hebrew dimension of time oscillates between linearity and circularity, between return and perspective, between memory and hope. This profound and simultaneous duality is well expressed in the words with which the Hebrew language designates two basic “timepieces”: the month and the year, those units of measurement with which man constructs the progression of time. *Shanah* (year) and *Hodesh* (month) express the repetition of the circular - indeed, the root *sh-n-h* means to repeat, to duplicate - and the unpredictable succession - the root *h-d- sh* means to renew.

Of the laws given to the Hebrew people, the first, revealed by the Lord to Moses in the land of Egypt, concerns the reckoning of time: “The Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron in the land of Egypt, saying, this month shall be to you the head of the months; to you it shall be the first of the months of the year.” (Ex 12:1-2). The disposition and attitude to control and manage time is the first sign of freedom: a slave cannot control his own time, there is always someone else who controls it for him. Moreover, the importance of this commandment seems to point to the possibility of achieving, through the unity of the calendar, the unity of the people, wherever they may be.

Two principles can be deduced from this verse: the first is that the month of Nisan is the first month of the year, and the second is that the task of establishing the calendar rests with the people of Israel by celebrating the *Rosh Hodesh* (Head of the Month) at the beginning of each month, which is a minor holiday mainly because of the variations contained in the daily prayers.

Three aspects of the division of time determine the holidays and recurrences in the Hebrew calendar: the relationship to the seasons, the weekly occurrence of the Sabbath, and the beginning of the holiday at sunset rather than sunrise. In the Jewish (lunisolar) calendar, days are calculated from sunset to sunset, months from the moon, and years from the sun.

### Years and months

Since the lunar year consists of about 354 days and the solar year of about 365 days, the lunar cycle must be adjusted annually to the solar calendar so that holidays, such as Pesach, do not lose their reference to the seasons to which they are assigned. Without this adjustment, these holidays would fall eleven days earlier each year. The adjustment is made by introducing an embolismic year seven times in a cycle of nineteen years (3rd, 6th, 8th, 11th, 14th, 17th and 19th years) by adding an extra month to the calendar, called Adar II (*Adar Sheni*).

In the *Torah*, the months have no names and are simply called “First month” (as in Ex 12:2 for Nisan), “Second month”, “Third month”. The actual names of the months are

of Babylonian origin and first appear in biblical sources dating from the Babylonian exile and post-exile. Today, the counting of the years begins with Rosh Ha-Shanah (New Year's Eve, see below), which falls in the month of Tishrei.

The months are as follows: Tishrei (September-October), Heshvan (October-November), Kislev (November-December), Tevet (December-January), Shevat (January-February), Adar (February-March), Nisan (March-April), Iyyar (April-May), Sivan (May-June), Tammuz (June-July), Av (July-August), Elul (August-September). In the past, the sighting of the new moon in the land of Israel was used to determine the beginning of the month (*Rosh Hodesh*). And from there the announcement of the new moon was transmitted to the Diaspora. From this practice derives the custom, still in force today, according to which the holidays in the Diaspora (and therefore also in Italy) last one day longer than in the Land of Israel: by adding another day as a holiday, one was protected from the risk of an imperfect transmission of the date.

Jewish years are calculated by referring to the biblical chronology on the date of creation, which rabbinic tradition places at 3760 BC. Thus, to obtain the Jewish year, 3760 is added to the year. For example, 2022/2023 corresponds to the year 5783 in the Jewish calendar.

The holidays in the Jewish calendar can be divided into two main categories, each of which can be further subdivided: (1) those commanded by the Torah, and (2) those that have come later.

The festivals prescribed by the Torah are: (a) *Sabbath*, (b) the three pilgrimage festivals, namely Passover (*Pesach*), Pentecost (*Shavu'ot*) and the Feast of Tabernacles (*Sukkot*)<sup>22</sup>, (c) New Year's Day (*Rosh ha-Shanah*) and the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*), (d) the first day of the lunar month (*Rosh Hodesh*).

The three pilgrimage festivals during which people flocked to Jerusalem have an underlying agricultural reference: spring (*Pesach*), the first harvest (*Shavu'ot*) and the grape harvest (*Sukkot*). To these are added other historical and religious meanings; *Pesach* is in fact the day commemorating the Jews' departure from Egyptian slavery, *Shavu'ot* is the day of the giving of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, and *Sukkot* is the commemoration of the divine protection of the Jews in the desert on their way from Egypt to the Promised Land, when they lived in tents.

Other recurrences, which are sometimes mentioned in the biblical text, are of rabbinic origin. The main ones are: *Purim*, *Hanukkah*, *Lag ba-Omer*, *Tishah Be-Av*, *Tu bi-Shvat*.

The complete list of the recurrences according to the calendar is as follows:

*Rosh ha-Shanah* (1st of *Tishrei*), *Ghedaliah* fast (3rd of *Tishrei*), *Yom Kippur* (10th of *Tishrei*), *Sukkot* (15th of *Tishrei*), *Shemini 'Atzeret* (22nd of *Tishrei*), *Simhat Torah* (23rd of *Tishrei*), *Hanukkah* (25th of *Kislev*), *Asarah be-Tevet* (10th of *Tevet*), *Tu bi-Shvat* (15th of *Shevat*), *Esther* fast (13th of *Adar*), *Purim* (14th of *Adar*), *Pesach* (15th of *Nisan*), *Lag ba-Omer* (18th of *Iyyar*), *Shavu'ot* (6th of *Sivan*), *17th of Tammuz* fast and *Tishah be-Av* (9th of *Av*).

22 Linked to *Sukkot* are the holidays of *Shemini 'Atzeret* and *Simhat Torah*.

Finally, some holidays have been added in modern times to celebrate historical events of special significance to the Jewish people throughout the world, both in Israel and in the Diaspora:

The day dedicated to the uprising and persecution in the ghettos was later shortened to *Yom ha Shoah weha-ghevurà* ‘The Day of the Shoah and Heroism’ (27 of *Nisan*), Memorial Day for the Fallen Soldiers and Victims of Terrorism (*Yom ha-zikka- ron*, 4 of *Iyyar*), Israel Independence Day (*Yom ha-atzma’ut*, 5 of *Iyyar*), Jerusalem Day (*Yom Yerushalayim*, 28 of *Iyyar*).

The solemn holidays, called *mo’adim* or ‘appointed times’, are special days that differ from the others in several ways: (1) rejoicing, expressed mainly in the prohibition of work and ceremonial meals (with the exception of the Day of Atonement and other fasts); (2) prayer in the synagogue and in the family; and (3) special commandments and traditions associated with individual festivals, such as eating *maṣṣot* on *Pesach* (biblical commandment), lighting *Chanukah* candles (Talmudic precept), and planting trees on *Tu bi-Shvat* (custom/*minhag*).

### **Saturday (*Sabbath*)**

The Sabbath (*Sabbath*), the seventh day of the week, is the weekly rest prescribed by the *Torah*, marked by the cessation of various kinds of activity. The term *Sabbath* is derived from the verb *sh-b-t* “to cease”, used in Genesis 2:2-3: “God [...] ceased (*vayyishbot*) on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because on it he had ceased (*sabbath*) from all the work he had done in creating”.

Sabbath begins just before sundown on Friday night and ends on Saturday night with the appearance of the third star in the sky.

#### Saturday in the Bible and in rabbinic literature

Scripture gives two different reasons for the Sabbath commandment in the Decalogue: “For [in] six days the Lord made the heaven and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and sanctified it” (Ex. 20:11) and “You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and that the Lord your God took you out from there with a strong hand and with an outstretched arm; therefore, the Lord, your God, commanded you to observe the Sabbath day” (Deut. 5:15). Two fundamental principles follow from this: the recognition of God as Creator and therefore the acceptance of His authority, and the remembrance of slavery in Egypt, from which derives a moral responsibility towards all social groups, including the weakest: “you shall perform no labour, neither you, your son, your daughter, your manservant, your maidservant, your ox, your donkey, any of your livestock, nor the stranger who is within your cities, in order that your manservant and your maidservant may rest like you” (Deut. 5:14 cf. Ex 20:10). On this day, everyone is entitled to rest, no one is excluded.

An important interpretation of the Sabbath commandment is found immediately after the instructions for building the tabernacle: “Only keep My Sabbaths! For it is a sign

between Me and you for your generations, to know that I, the Lord, make you holy. Therefore, keep the Sabbath, for it is a sacred thing for you” (Ex. 31:13-14). Here, the Sabbath is referred to as a visible sign of the covenant between God and Israel from which the sanctification of Israel and the Sabbath flows. There are many passages of Scripture in which the Sabbath precept is taken up, both in the *Torah*, the Prophets, and the Writings.

In the legislation concerning the offerings and sacrifices of the sanctuary, an additional sacrifice is prescribed for the Sabbath<sup>23</sup>: “And on the Sabbath day, two unblemished lambs in the first year, and two tenths of an ephah of fine flour as a meal offering, mixed with oil, and its libation. [This is] the burnt offering of each Sabbath on its Sabbath, in addition to the continual burnt offering and its libation” (Numbers 28:9-10).

There are numerous traditions on *Sabbath* observance in rabbinic literature, most notably in the *Sabbath* treatise of the *Mishnah* (and its *Ghemarah*), which is devoted entirely to the *Sabbath* commandment. The Oral *Torah* is fundamental to understanding the complex legislation of *Sabbath*.

The great importance attached to the commandment of Sabbath rest by the entire tradition of the sages can be summed up in a saying from *Midrash Exodus Rabbah* (25:12): “If all Israel were to observe the Sabbath properly even for one day, the son of David would come. Why? Because it (the Sabbath) is equivalent to the totality of the commandments”.

A well-known Babylonian Talmud *Baraita* (Sabbath 119b) says: “on the eve of *Sabbath* two service angels accompany the person from the synagogue to his home. If, when he arrives home, he finds the lamp lit, the table set, and his bed well made, the good angel declares: ‘May it be [God’s] will that it be so for another Sabbath. And the evil angel, against his will, replies: ‘Amen’”. Inspired by this tradition in the 16th century, the Kabbalists of Safed composed a song called *Shalom alekhem* “Peace be with you”, which many Jews recite before sitting down to eat on Friday evening.

In Ex 20:10 and Deut 5:14, the constitutive dimension of abstaining from work on the Sabbath emerges. The Hebrew term used here is *melakhah*, which is not exactly the same as the word ‘work’. Instead, it would be better to identify *melakhah* with any form of ‘creative activity’. Therefore, it is not the amount of physical labour that is relevant in determining whether an activity is forbidden or not, but it must be something that alters the normal balance of nature. Thus, for example, it is forbidden to light a fire (and in today’s world, to use a machine), which would disrupt the natural course of nature.

The observance of the Sabbath, with its abstention from creative activity, seeks to limit man’s power over nature in order to exalt God as the source of all power. Every Sabbath, Jews return the world to God, proclaiming that man enjoys only the authority granted to him by the Creator.

The only types of *melakhah* explicitly forbidden in the written *Torah* are “baking and

<sup>23</sup> In the post-Templar synagogue liturgy, this additional sacrifice prescribed for the Sabbath and holidays is replaced by the so-called *musaf*, which is actually an additional prayer to the normal weekday services.

boiling” (Ex. 16:23), “lighting fire” (Ex. 35:3), and “gathering wood” (Num. 15:32-36), while the Oral *Torah* provides the precise interpretation of the commandment, identifying the categories of work that fall under the “creative activities” forbidden on the Sabbath<sup>24</sup>. The *Mishnah* (Sabbath 7:1) gives the list of the thirty-nine main categories of work forbidden on the Sabbath. These activities are called in Hebrew *avot melakhot* - ‘prototypical creative activities’ - to which are added *toladot* ‘derivative creative activities’, which are those activities that are similar to the prototypical ones and thus fall into the same category of prohibition. For example, the act of milking a cow (or any other animal) is forbidden because it is considered a corollary of threshing, which is one of the thirty-nine prototypes. Both activities are acts of separation: threshing separates the grain from the chaff, milking separates the milk from the cow.

In order to maintain and improve the observance of Sabbath rest, and to protect the individual from possible transgressions, which were considered very serious in the tradition, the Sages introduced other prohibitions that act as “hedges around the Torah” (*ghezerot*), extending the boundaries of the individual commandments<sup>25</sup>. These include *mukzeh*, the prohibition against handling objects useful for creative activities on the Sabbath, lest this inadvertently lead to the performance of a *melakhah*: it is forbidden, for example, to handle pens and pencils, or to handle money or objects normally used in business.

In the contemporary world, with the invention of new tools and the introduction of new human activities, the rabbis evaluate activities incompatible with Sabbatical rest according to the criterion of analogy. Many everyday gestures characteristic of the modern world are thus included in the main categories of prohibited creative activities, thus excluding, for example, the use of electronic devices and means of transport. *Sabbath* observance includes not only prohibitions but also positive commandments, including the *Kiddush* ‘sanctification’ over the wine cup<sup>26</sup>, the three prescribed meals and *Torah* study. Indeed, it is customary to gather in the synagogue on Friday evening before dinner and again on Saturday afternoon to hear sermons and lectures on the *Torah* and the central texts of Judaism.

The life of an observant Jew revolves around the Sabbath, the preparations for which begin on Thursday evening and take all day on Friday. Some make no commitments after noon on Friday, except those related to *Sabbath* preparation. They also do not

24 In a saying quoted in the *Mekhilta* of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (35:1), a halakhic *midrash* of the Tannaitic period, and later in the treatise *Sabbath* (49b) of the Babylonian Talmud, it is stated that on the Sabbath all kinds of work required for the construction of the Tabernacle are forbidden, since in Ex. 31: 13-14 recalls the observance and importance of the Sabbath in connection with the instructions for building the Tabernacle. Therefore, according to the Sages, the building of the tabernacle serves as a paradigm for creative activity.

25 These rabbinic prohibitions are also known as *shevut* - ‘rest’ (*Beṣah* 5:2).

26 Text of the *Kiddush*: “ (...) Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of all, Creator of the fruit of the vine. Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of all, who finding favor with us, sanctified us with mitzvot. In love and favor, You made the holy Sabbath our heritage as a reminder of the work of Creation. As first among our sacred days, it recalls the Exodus from Egypt. You chose us and set us apart from the peoples. In love and favor You have given us Your holy Sabbath as an inheritance. Blessed are You, Adonai, who sanctifies Sabbath”.



travel unless they are sure they have the right accommodation for the *Sabbath*. *Sabbath* is honoured with special clothing, different from that of the weekdays (see *bShabbat* 114a). The preparation for *Sabbath* is very meticulous: the house is well lit, worldly worries and anxieties are put aside, the bath is taken, all the food for the meal is prepared, especially the wine and the two Sabbath breads, the candles are arranged, and the house is thoroughly cleaned. The table is set with the finest tableware.

### The Sabbath liturgy

On Friday evening before the Sabbath, the mistress of the house lights at least two candles, according to the double Sabbath commandment: “Remember (*zakhor*) the Sabbath day to sanctify it” (Ex 20:8) and “Observe (*shamor*) the Sabbath day to keep it holy” (Deut. 5:12), the first being the commandment concerning the ritual obligations proper to the day and the other the prohibition of work.

At two of the three ritual meals prescribed for *Sabbath*, dinner and lunch, two loaves of bread, called *hallot*, covered with a napkin, are placed on the table. They are a reminder of the double portion of manna gathered on the sixth day of the week in preparation for the Sabbatical rest: “When the sixth day came, they gathered a double portion of bread (*lehem mishneh*), two ‘omer each” (Ex 16:22).

Synagogue prayer begins on Friday evening with a service known as *Qabbalat Sabbath* “Sabbath Reception”, which consists of various rites to six psalms (Ps 95-99; 29), corresponding to the six days of the week, followed by the song *Lekhah Dodi* “Come, my beloved”, a liturgical poem composed in the 16th century by Rav Shlomo Alkabetz, a Kabbalist from Safed<sup>27</sup>. It is followed by a seventh psalm (Ps 92), entitled “Psalm. Hymn. For the Sabbath” (v. 1).

The service continues with the Evening Prayer (*‘arvit*), which undergoes some changes on the Sabbath, and the cantillation of Genesis 2:1-3, which recalls God’s rest on the seventh day of creation. Immediately after an additional blessing, called *Me’en Sheva* (a summary of the seven blessings of the *Amidah*<sup>28</sup>), greetings are offered with the typical *Sabbath Shalom* expression ‘Saturday of Peace’.

At home, a special prayer called *Kiddush* (sanctification) is recited over a goblet of wine, and children are blessed according to various rituals. All three Sabbath meals are then celebrated with songs (*zemirot*) that express the joyful nature of the celebration. It is customary to invite guests to the Sabbath meals, especially the poor and the lonely people.

27 The chorus of this poem goes like this: “Come, my Beloved, to meet the Bride; let us welcome the Sabbath”. It is God speaking to Israel, inviting them to go out to meet the Bride, who is the *Sabbath*. The mystics of Safed, even before this song was composed, used to go out into the fields on the *Sabbath* to greet the coming bride. They based this custom on an account in the Talmud of Rav Hanina who, late on Friday afternoon, wrapped himself in his tallit and proclaimed: “Let us go out and meet the *Sabbath Queen*” (*bShabbat* 119a). In the liturgy of *Qabbalat Sabbath*, the worshippers still turn towards the entrance of the synagogue when the last verse of *Lekha Dodi* is sung: “Come in peace, O crown of her Husband, both with songs and gladness; among the faithful, the beloved people, come, O Bride, come, O Bride”.

28 The *Amidah* is the fundamental part of the prayer. Today it consists of nineteen blessings on weekdays and seven blessings on Saturdays and festivals. The first and last three blessings are the same in different circumstances.

On Saturday morning, at the end of the morning prayer (*Shacharit*), enriched with additional psalms, the weekly portion of the Torah (*parashah*) is read after the *Sefer Torah* (Torah Scroll), adorned with precious embroidery and other ornaments, is taken from the holy ark and brought in procession to the synagogue. Before the reading, the scroll is shown to the audience while the congregation sings in Hebrew praising the great gift of *Torah* received from God by the children of Israel through Moses. This is followed by the prophetic reading (*haftarah*), which is thematically related to the *Torah* portion just read. The morning service concludes with the additional prayer for the *Sabbath* and other festivals, called *Musaf*.

In the afternoon prayer (*minhah*), specific parts are added for the *Sabbath*, and the first part of the following week's *parashah* is read. In the Saturday evening prayer (*'arvit*), a paragraph is added about the distinction between the sanctity of the *Sabbath* and the secularity of the weekdays. This prayer paves the way for what is known as the 'Exit of the *Sabbath*' (*Moṣaè Sabbath*), when the three stars appear in the sky: a rite called *Havdalah* 'distinction' is then performed, recited over a goblet of wine and a lighted candle. In this rite, God is blessed for distinguishing the sacred from the profane, the light from the dark, and the *Sabbath* from the other six days. Aromas are also smelled to symbolise the fragrance of the *Sabbath* and to comfort the soul saddened by separation from the holy day.

## Fasting

"So said the Lord of Hosts: The fast of the fourth [month], the fast of the fifth [month], the fast of the seventh [month], and the fast of the tenth [month] shall be for the house of Judah for joy and happiness and for happy holidays (...)" (Zech. 8:19). The fasts commemorating the tragic events that led to the destruction of the Sanctuary are as follows:

*Tishah be-Av* - '9 of Av' (July/August)

It is a day of fasting and mourning. On this date, which has come to symbolise tragic moments in the history of the Jewish people, we remember the destruction of the first and second Temple in Jerusalem and the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. Fasting begins the evening before and the penitential acts of the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*) are prescribed. The synagogues are decorated in mourning, people sit on the floor and only passages on sad subjects and the Book of *Ekhah* (Lamentations), which collects five poems expressing the lament of those who escaped the catastrophe and describing the devastation and ruin of Jerusalem and the kingdom of Judah, are studied.

10 of *Tevet* (December/January)

It commemorates the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, but it is also the day that the rabbinate has dedicated to the recitation of the *Kaddish* ('sanctification') in memory of the deportees murdered in the Nazi death camps whose date of death is unknown. The rabbis wanted to link these tragedies, since the siege of Jerusalem was the first tragedy and the Shoah will hopefully be the last. The fast is observed from dawn to dusk.

### 17 of Tammuz (June/July)

It commemorates the entry of the Babylonians (9 Tammuz 586 BC) and the Romans (17 Tammuz 70 AD) into Jerusalem. Other tragedies are associated with this date, such as the sin of the Golden Calf, the final destruction of the First Temple by Nebuchadnezzar and the suspension of sacrifices in the Sanctuary during the Roman siege. The fast is observed from dawn to dusk.

Other fasts:

*Taanit Esther* - “*Fasting of Esther*”, on the 13th of Adar, the day before *Purim* (see below), the Festival of Rites. This fast commemorates the fast that Queen Esther and the people made to obtain God’s help against the decree that Haman wanted.

*Fasting of Gadaliah* on the 3rd of Tishri: commemorates the assassination of the governor of Jerusalem, Godolia, whose death marked the end of the autonomy left to the Jews after the destruction of the First Temple by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon.

*Fasting of the Firstborn* on the 14th of Nisan (March/April): commemorates the death of the firstborn of Egypt - the last of the ten plagues. The fast of the first-born commemorates the miracle of the rescue of the Hebrew first-born from the tenth plague that struck the Egyptians. However, the joy of salvation must also take into account the suffering of others; hence this fast, reserved for the first-born, was instituted.

## THE CYCLE OF HOLIDAYS

### Feast of the Dedication (Hanukkah)

*Hanukkah*<sup>29</sup>, also known as the ‘Feast of the Dedication’, falls on the 25th of Kislev (November/December) and lasts eight days. It is one of the post-Biblical holidays: it celebrates the victory of the Maccabees over Antiochus IV Epiphanes (164 BC), in a war to defend the religious independence of Judaism against the forced imposition of Hellenism, which led to the establishment of a Jewish monarchy of priestly lineage. Another reason for the festival is to commemorate the rededication of the Temple, which had been desecrated by the Hellenistic invaders, who had erected an altar dedicated to the Olympian Zeus. The events are recorded in the two books of Maccabees<sup>30</sup>. 2Mac 10:5-8 says that on the 25th of Kislev the altar was rededicated and a feast was held for eight days, since it had not been possible to celebrate *Sukkot*<sup>31</sup> during the war. 1Mac 4:56, on the other hand, refers to the perpetual institution of the feast: “Moreover Judas and his brethren with the whole congregation of Israel ordained, that the days of the dedication of the altar should be kept in their season from year to year by the space of eight days, from the five and twentieth day of the month Casleu, with mirth and gladness”.

29 From the root *hanakh* ‘to consecrate’, ‘to dedicate’ a temple.

30 The books of Maccabees, deuterocanonical for the Catholic canon, are not part of the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures. Jewish tradition therefore considers them ‘external’ (*hışonim*).

31 The Temple of Solomon was dedicated during the festival of *Sukkot* (1 Kings 8:2, 65-66). It is probably for this reason that *Hanukkah* at the time of the Temple retained some liturgical affinities with *Sukkot*.



*Hanukkah* is also known as the ‘Festival of Lights’, as recorded by Flavius Josephus<sup>32</sup>. The reference to the symbol of light, which later became the main symbol of the festival, is also found in an account in the Babylonian Talmud (*Sabbath* 21b), according to which the Maccabees, when they rededicated the Temple and rekindled the candelabrum (*menorah*), found only a small jar of oil still bearing the seal of the High Priest. It should have lasted only one night, but miraculously it lasted eight days. This is why the rabbinical law states that the lights should be lit for all eight days of the festival.

The main commandment is to light candles each night of the festival in honour of the miracle recounted in the Talmud<sup>33</sup>. One candle is lit on the first night, and another is added on each of the following days, until all eight are lit on the last night. This gradual lighting corresponds, according to the school of Hillel, to a movement of spiritual ascent: “One ascends to a higher level in matters of holiness and there is no retreat. Therefore, if the aim is to adapt the number of lights to the number of days, there is no alternative but to increase the number with each passing day”<sup>34</sup>.

The special candelabrum of the festival, called the *hanukkiah*, must be placed at the entrance or on the windowsill of the house or synagogue, so that the lamps can be seen from outside and the miracle they perform can be witnessed. There are nine lamps in all, as there is an additional lamp, called the *shamash* (‘servant’), which is used to light the eight festival lamps and is not allowed to be used for profane purposes, including lighting the other lamps.

After the lighting of the lamps, many communities sing the hymn *Maoz Tzur* - ‘Rocky Fortress’ - which celebrates in verse the mighty intervention of God in delivering His people from four of their historic enemies: Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, Haman and Antiochus.

It is customary to abstain from all forms of work during the time the lamps are lit.

In the past, the lighting of candles was essentially a domestic and synagogue affair; more recently, the ancient custom of lighting candles in public has been revived, and large candelabras are placed in public spaces for this purpose.

During the festival, a number of other prayers are added to the ordinary rite, including the prayer *Al ha-Nissim* - “We give thanks for miracles” - and the *Hallel* (Psalm 113-118), after the morning *Amidah*. There is a public *Torah* reading from Numbers 7:1-89, which tells of the gifts offered by the princes of Israel for the dedication of the tabernacle in the desert, and Numbers 8:1-7, which prescribes the lighting of the *menorah*. The prophetic reading (*haftarah*) for the *Hanukkah Sabbath* is Zech 2:14

32 “Nay they were so very glad at the revival of their customs, when, after a long time of intermission, they unexpectedly had regained the freedom of their worship, that they made it a law for their posterity, that they should keep a festival on account of the restoration of their temple worship for eight days. And from that time to this we celebrate this festival, and call it Lights. I suppose the reason was, because this liberty beyond our hopes appeared to us; and that thence was the name given to that festival”. Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* XII, 7:7

33 A *baraita* recorded in the Babylonian Talmud (*Sabbath* 21b) says: “The commandment (*mitzvah*) of kindling the *Hanukkah* lights is from sunset until traffic in the marketplace ceases.”

34 Hillel’s is a response to the school of Shammai, which began by lighting all eight lamps on the first night and then lit one less on each following night. Cf. *Sabbath* 21b.

- 4:7, which contains a vision of the Temple *menorah*.

It is also customary today to give gifts to children who play on the days of *Hanukkah* with a special spinning top - called a *sevivon* in Hebrew and a *dreidel* in Yiddish - with the four initials of the phrase 'A great miracle happened here' inscribed on its face.

To commemorate the miracle of the oil cruet, many people eat fried foods (e.g. *sufganiòt*, doughnut-like sweets) or oil-based foods.

### **The Feast of the Dedication in the Gospel of John**

In the Gospel of John there is the only mention of the Festival of the Dedication in the entire New Testament: "Then came the Festival of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was in the temple courts walking in Solomon's Colonnade" (John 10: 22-23). It is in this context that Jesus delivers the famous discourse on the relationship between shepherd and flock, calling himself the "good shepherd" (John 10: 11-18).

### **Lag Ba-Omer**

The festival of *Lag Ba-Omer* coincides with the thirty-third day of the 'Counting of the Omer'<sup>35</sup>, as indicated by the numerical equivalent of the Hebrew letters *lamed* (30) and *ghimel* (3), hence the word '*lag*'. The holiday falls on the 18th of the month of *Iyyar* (April/May) and was established in the post-Talmudic period as a semi-holiday to commemorate the cessation of the plague which, according to Talmudic and Midrashic sources<sup>36</sup>, killed 24,000 disciples of Rabbi Aqiva during the Bar Kokhba revolt (132-135 AD).

During *Lag ba-Omer*, the abstentions that characterise the first part of the seven-week period of the 'counting of the Omer' are suspended: hair cutting<sup>37</sup> and shaving, wedding celebrations and other forms of entertainment such as music and dancing are permitted.

The liturgy of this day offers nothing special compared to the regular weekday service, except for the omission of the part of the morning and afternoon prayers called *Tahanun* ('supplication').

According to the Kabbalists, *Lag ba-Omer* also coincides with the anniversary of the death of Shimon Bar Yochai, the author of the *Zohar*, the Book of Splendour, the most important mystical text in Jewish tradition. It is therefore customary in Israel to light bonfires in front of his tomb and that of his son Eliezer in Meron, as well as at the tomb of Shimon ha-Šaddiq (Simeon the Just) in Jerusalem, on the occasion of the holiday. Thousands of people gather at these sites to sing and dance.

35 The counting begins on the second day of Easter and ends on Pentecost. The *Omer* was a sacrifice of barley offered in the sanctuary. After the sacrifice, it is permitted to eat the produce of the new harvest.

36 A Babylonian Talmudic *baraita* concerning the 24,000 disciples of Aqiba states: 'It is taught that they died in the period from Passover to Pentecost'. *Yevamot* 62b. Cf. *Genesis Rabbah* 61:3; *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 11:6.

37 In some communities, three-year-olds are given their first haircut, while their parents distribute wine and sweets.

A hymn in honour of Shimon Bar Yochai, consisting of ten verses recalling the ten *sefirot* of the *Kabbalah*, is the typical song of the holiday. Italian Jews also sing it on various other festive occasions.

In Israel, as well as in the Diaspora, bonfires are lit in open spaces and children play with bows and arrows. In Israel, the day is celebrated as ‘Student Day’ on the campuses of various universities.

The dozens of weddings held at *Lag ba-Omer* add a special festive character to this occasion.

### **Pesach (Passover)**

“In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month, at twilight, there shall be a passover offering to the Lord, and on the fifteenth day of that month the Lord’s Feast of Unleavened Bread. You shall eat unleavened bread for seven days” (Lev 23: 5-6). *Pesach* falls in the Jewish month of Nisan (March/April), the first full moon of spring. It commemorates the liberation from slavery in Egypt and is the first of the three agricultural festivals. In fact, it is also called *Hag ha-Aviv*, ‘Spring Festival’, because this is the time when the first grain ripens in the Land of Israel, which was brought as an offering during the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The festival lasts seven days in Israel and eight days in the Diaspora, with the first and last two days being solemn festivals and the others being half festivals.

The word *Pesach* comes from the verb *pasah* (to pass over) and recalls the biblical episode in which the angel of the Lord, sent to smite the firstborn of the Egyptians in the final plague, ‘passed over’ the houses of the Hebrews, marked with the blood of a sacrificed lamb to be eaten before leaving.

In the *Haggadah*, the text that tells the story of slavery and the Exodus, it is written: “In every generation everyone will remember that he himself came out of Egypt, as it is said on that day, you shall say to your son, ‘This is what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt’”, thus celebrating the joyful event that took place, but also the personal and present freedom of each Jew. The Exodus narrative also teaches that there is no room for full political and social freedom in the community if basic human rights are not respected within it.

From a ritual point of view, during *Pesach* it is absolutely forbidden to eat or even possess leavened food. For this reason it is also known as *Hag ha-Masṣot*, the feast of unleavened bread. Preparation for Passover requires thorough cleaning of rooms to eliminate even the slightest presence of leavened foods or traces of them. The teachers of the Mishnah stipulate that *ḥametz* (leaven) is to be understood as any mixture of water and flour from five specific grains (wheat, barley, oats, spelt and rye) that has been handled for more than eighteen minutes. If *maṣṣah* is a symbol of freedom, and *ḥametz* represents the Egyptian negativity from which the Jews must free themselves, then this minimal difference - represented by the eighteen minutes of inactivity of the dough that allows it to pass from *maṣṣah* to *ḥametz* - is the infinitesimal gap that separates one from the other.

On the first night of *Pesach*, the *Seder* (order) is celebrated, a dinner during which a precise sequence of ritual gestures and food consumption, as set out in the *Hagga-*

*dah*, is followed in order to recall, discuss and elaborate on the different stages of the Exodus. The children also take part in the meal by asking four questions at the beginning to understand “what makes this evening different from all the others”. Before the meal itself, they eat unleavened bread, symbolising the hasty flight, and bitter herbs, to remember the suffering of slavery in Egypt. Today, in the absence of the Temple, the sacrifice of the Paschal lamb is no longer performed, but its institution is commemorated at the *Seder*.

### **Purim (Feast of Lots)**

Purim, a minor holiday of rabbinic origin<sup>38</sup>, falls on the 14th of Adar<sup>39</sup> and celebrates the liberation of the Jewish people from the extermination planned by Haman, a minister of the Persian king Ahasuerus. The story is told in the Book of Esther, known in Hebrew as Meghillat Esther, ‘Scroll of Esther’.

The word Purim, which means ‘lot’, refers to the lot drawn by Haman to determine the date on which the massacre would begin. The lot fell on the 13th of Adar, but another royal decree, issued through the intercession of Queen Esther, cancelled the order and instead allowed the Jews to annihilate their enemies in the Persian Empire on the same day (13th of Adar). On the 14th they rested and celebrated their victory, which had come about thanks to the “reversal of fortune”<sup>40</sup>.

Since the Jews of the city of Susa (*Shushan*), the capital of Persia, were granted an extra day to destroy their enemies (Est 9:12-15), they rested on the 15th of Adar (Est 9:18b). In commemoration of this event, the sages decreed that *Purim* should be celebrated on the 14th of Adar in the other cities, and on the 15th of Adar in Susa and all those cities that, like Susa, were surrounded by walls. And out of respect for Jerusalem and other cities in the Land of Israel, all of which were without walls at the time of the events, it was decreed that Purim of Susa (Hebrew *Purim Shushan*) should be celebrated only in those Israeli cities that were surrounded by walls at the time of Joshua’s conquest. Today, *Purim Shushan* is only celebrated in Jerusalem, but there are a number of other ancient cities in Israel, such as Jaffa, where it is celebrated on both the 14th and 15th of Adar, as it is doubtful that they were walled in at the time of the conquest.

In the Hasmonean period (2nd-1st century BC), the festival was called ‘Mordecai’s Day’ (2 Mac 15:36), in honour of Mordecai, Esther’s relative and close adviser to the king, who played a key role in turning the tide in favour of his people.

38 Although it has its roots in the biblical book of Esther, it is considered a minor holiday.

39 In embolismic years, the main feast is celebrated in Adar II, while Adar I is called *Purim Qatan* (little *Purim*), which has none of the ritual or liturgical characteristics of *Purim*.

40 Esther 9:20-22,26: “Now Mordechai recorded these events and sent letters to all the Jews living throughout the provinces of King Achashverosh, near and far 21 [instructing them] to obligate themselves to celebrate annually the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar, 22 like the days upon which the Jews were relieved of their enemies, and the month which had been transformed for them from one of sorrow to joy, from mourning to festivity to make them days of feasting, rejoicing, sending food portions one to another and giving gifts to the poor. (...) For this did they call these days ‘*Purim*,’ after the *pur*, because of all of the events of this epistle, [which explains] what happened to them and why they saw fit to [establish the holiday]”.

Work is permitted on *Purim*, and every Jewish community celebrates this holiday with great joy, in honour and remembrance of God's protection of his people.

An entire treatise of the *Mishnah* is devoted to the details of its observance, particularly the rules for reading the Scroll of Esther. This is why it is called the *Megillah*.

The commandments to be observed on *Purim* are essentially four:

1) The reading of *Megillat Esther* "Scroll of Esther" from a handwritten text on parchment is required, to be performed with special chanting, twice during the festival: on the evening of the eve and during the morning synagogue service. The four verses describing the glory of Mordechai (Esther 2:5; 8:15-16; 10:3) are read louder than the other verses, while whenever the reader mentions the name of Haman, it is customary for the children and all those present to make a noise, even using very loud instruments called frogs. The motive is to hide the name of the evil persecutor.

2) Everyone is obliged to send a gift of at least two kinds of food to a friend or neighbour<sup>41</sup>.

3) It is obligatory to give at least one alms to two poor people, equivalent to the minimum price of one meal<sup>42</sup>.

4) It is obligatory to have a sumptuous feast<sup>43</sup> during which one eats and drinks wine in abundance.

There is also the custom of dressing up and performing plays in which one dresses up as the characters mentioned in the *Megillah* of Esther. Masked processions are also held in Israel.

### ***Rosh ha-Shanah* (Jewish New Year)**

*Rosh ha-Shanah* is the holiday that marks the beginning of the New Year. It falls on the first day of the Hebrew month of Tishrei (September-October), when, according to rabbinic tradition, man was created.

Since Temple times, Rosh Hashanah has been celebrated for two days, both in the Diaspora and in the Land of Israel, as it falls on the first day of the month and it is therefore uncertain whether the witnesses saw the new moon. Consequently, the second day has never been considered the "second day of Diaspora Jews", and both days are considered one long day.

The biblical name for *Rosh ha-Shanah* is *Yom Teru'ah*, the Feast of [Acclamation with] Trumpets, since this holiday is characterised by the blowing of trumpets: "In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe a sacred occasion: you shall not work at your occupations. You shall observe it as a day when the horn is sounded. (Yom Teruah)" (Numbers 29:1). Rabbinic interpretation has identified this sound with the sound of the horn (*shofar*)<sup>44</sup>, which is primarily an invitation to spiritual rebirth. That is why it is sounded several times on this feast day, except

41 Cf Esther 9:22; *bMeghillah* 7b.

42 Cf *Ibidem*.

43 Traditional Purim pastries include the so-called "Haman's ears", called *hamantashen* ("Haman's pockets") in Yiddish.

44 It is a ram's horn, which reminds us of the ram that Abraham offered as a sacrifice in place of his son Isaac. (Gen 22).



when the feast falls on the Sabbath.

*Rosh ha-Shanah* is also known as the Day of Judgement (*Yom ha-Din*), for, according to the *Talmud*<sup>45</sup>, on this day man is judged by God for all of his actions<sup>46</sup>. According to tradition, three books are opened on *Rosh HaShana*: one for completely wicked people, one for completely righteous people, and one for those in the middle. The completely righteous people are inscribed and sealed for life; the completely wicked people are inscribed and sealed for death. Those in the middle have their judgment suspended until *Yom Kippur*. Since no one can consider themselves as completely righteous nor as wicked because this would lead to renouncing salvation, it is necessary to consider oneself as being a ‘person in the middle’ and to behave accordingly, repenting for wrongdoing and aiming to be a person with merits in the future. The decision is made on *Rosh Hashanah*, but the judgement is sealed ten days later, i.e. at the end of the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*, see below). That is why days between *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* are *Aseret Yemei Teshuva*, the “Ten Days of Penance” also referred to as the “Days of Awe” (*yamim noraim*). During these days, each person has the opportunity to alter God’s decree. The actions that change the decree are repentance, prayer, and *tzedakah* (lit. “righteousness”), i.e., the precept to provide for the needs of the poor with money, food, clothing, and whatever else is needed for subsistence. In the Jewish view, it is not considered charity, but an act of justice.

A common custom is to dip a slice of apple in honey during the first evening meal and eat it while reciting the following words: “May it be Your will, Lord our God and God of our fathers, to grant us a good and sweet year.” Traditions vary as to the symbolic foods to be eaten during the *Rosh Hashanah* meals and the prayers for a good year. The Torah reading for the morning of the first day of *Rosh Hashanah* is Genesis 21, which tells the story of the birth of Isaac. Genesis 22 is read on the second day, about the story of the “binding of Isaac.”

A special custom known as *Tashlikh* consists of symbolically casting one’s sins into a body of water - a river or the sea - while reciting Bible verses and prayers (hence the name *Tashlikh*, derived from the verb *sh-l-kh* - ‘to cast away’). This tradition derives from the biblical passage (Micah 7:18-20) recited at the ceremony, in which the prophet, addressing God, says: “You will cast (*tashlikh*) all our sins into the depths of the sea.”

### ***Shavuot (Pentecost)***

The Feast of Pentecost, in Hebrew *Hag Shavuot* (“Festival of the Weeks”, Ex 34:22; Deut. 16:10), is the second of the so-called Pilgrimage Festivals (*regalim*). It falls on the 6th (and, in the Diaspora, also on the 7th) of the month of *Sivan* (May/June).

*Shavuot* is celebrated as a “Harvest Festival” (*Hag ha-Qaṣir*: Ex 23:16) and as “The

<sup>45</sup> The *Rosh Hashanah* tractate in the *Mishnah* deals with the sanctification of the new moon (*Kiddush Ha-Chodesh*), the messengers sent to announce the sanctification of the new moon and the instructions for the blowing of the *shofar* on *Rosh Hashanah*. The tractate has four chapters which are elaborated in the *Ghemarah* in both the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmud.

<sup>46</sup> According to Talmudic teachings, on that day, all of humanity – not only Jews – stands in judgment before God.

Day of First Fruits (*Yom ha-Bikkurim*: Nm 28:26). In rabbinic literature (*Hagigah* 2:4) the Festival of Shavuot is called ‘*Atzeret*’, which literally means “gathering” or “congregating”. This seems to indicate that the rabbis understood Pentecost as an addition to Passover, just as there is an additional day of the Feast of Tabernacles<sup>47</sup>. First century AD Greek-speaking Jews named it ‘Pentecost’ (*Pentekosté*)<sup>48</sup>, as recorded in Tobit 2:1 and 2Mac 12:32, in Philo of Alexandria, in the New Testament and in the writings of Josephus Flavius.

In the Book of Leviticus, guidance is given for the so-called ‘Counting of the Sheaf’ (*Sefirat HaOmer*): “And you shall count for yourselves, from the morrow of the day of rest, from the day you bring the *omer* as a wave offering, seven weeks; they shall be complete. You shall count until the day after the seventh week, [namely] the fiftieth day, [on which] you shall bring a new meal offering to the Lord” (Lev 23:15-16). The *Torah* prescribes a period of seven weeks between the first sheaf, offered in the Temple on the day following Passover, and the second, offered on Pentecost, which is the fiftieth day. The interpretation of the term “*Sabbath*” in Lev 23:15 was the subject of controversy at the time of the Second Temple, particularly between the Sadducees and the Pharisees. The Sadducees (and later the Karaites) held that the term “*Sabbath*” referred to the *Sabbath* after Passover; therefore, in their calendar, Pentecost always fell on the first day of the week (Sunday). The Pharisees, on the other hand, relying on the oral *Torah*, claimed that the text referred to the first day of Passover, and understood the word “*Sabbath*” in its broader sense of a day of rest. The Pharisaic interpretation is the accepted one, and thus the “counting of the sheaf” coincides with the evening of the second day of Passover.

Leviticus 23:17 specifically says that two loaves of bread were to be offered at Pentecost as an “elevation offering”, along with the “first fruits” of the earth (*bikkurim*): “The best of the first fruits of your ground you shall bring into the house of the Lord your God” (Ex 23:19)<sup>49</sup>.

#### Pentecost in post-Biblical times

Whereas the other two pilgrimage festivals (Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles) in the Old Testament were associated with Exodus events, in the case of Pentecost

47 The eighth day of the Feast of Tabernacles, i.e. the additional day of the feast, is *Shemini Atzeret* - (Hebrew: “Eighth Day of the Solemn Assembly”)

48 The term *pentekosté* means “fiftieth” and implies the word *hēméra*, “day.” Therefore, it is the “fiftieth day.”

49 In the *Bikkurim* tractate of the *Mishnah*, the third chapter provides a detailed description of the ceremonial followed by the people when they brought the first fruits to the Temple on the Feast of Pentecost: “Those who lived near [Jerusalem] brought fresh figs and grapes, but those from a distance brought dried figs and raisins [...] The flute would play before them until they would draw close to Jerusalem. When they drew close to Jerusalem they would send messengers in advance, and they would adorn their *bikkurim*. [...] The governors and chiefs and treasurers [of the Temple] would go out to greet them [...] All the skilled artisans of Jerusalem would stand up before them and greet them saying, ‘Our brothers, men of such and such a place, we welcome you in peace.’ The flute would play before them, until they reached the Temple Mount. When they reached the Temple Mount, [...] the Levites would sing the song: ‘I will extol You, O Lord, for You have raised me up, and You have not let my enemies rejoice over me’ (Psalms 30:2).” *Bikkurim* 3:3-4

this connection was made in Rabbinic Judaism, when the festival celebrated the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, as well as the grain harvest. The key text for this new interpretation is found in Exodus 19:1: “In the third month after the children of Israel were gone forth out of the land of Egypt, the same day came they into the wilderness of Sinai.” Rabbinical exegesis understood the “third month” to be the month of Sivan, assuming that the theophany at Sinai took place on the day of Pentecost. Thus, the Sages established a further link between Passover and Pentecost. In fact, while exodus from Egypt (Passover) is the first step of the Betrothal, the gift of the *Torah* at Sinai marks the Betrothal between God and His people. Thus, the process of deliverance that began with Exodus is fulfilled with the gift of *Torah*, celebrated at Pentecost.

The first explicit reference to the new meaning of the feast is found in the Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Pesahim*: “Rabbi Elazar said: ‘Everyone agrees regarding Atzeret [the feast of *Shavuot*], meaning that it is a *mitzvah* to eat, drink and rejoice on that day. What is the reason? It is the day on which the *Torah* was given, and one must celebrate the fact that the *Torah* was given to the Jewish people.’” (*Pesahim* 68b).

Unlike Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles, the Feast of Pentecost has very few ritual aspects. And those few appear at a later stage. The aspects related to harvest, the agricultural aspect of the feast, lost their significance with the destruction of the Temple, and neither are there any rituals related to the worship of the sanctuary in connection with the gift of the *Torah*, since, as already noted, this aspect appears in post-biblical times.

The evening prayer on the eve of Pentecost begins after sundown to ensure that the feast begins immediately after the seven full weeks required by the biblical precept (cf. Lev 23:15-16). The *Hallel* (Ps 113-118) is recited during the morning prayers. The Book [scroll] of Ruth (*Megillat Ruth*) is read during the feast, since the events it recounts take place at the time of the “barley and wheat harvests” (Ruth 2:23). Moreover, the account of Ruth’s conversion to the Israelite faith is in keeping with the feast celebrating the gift of the *Torah*. Finally, Ruth’s faithfulness exemplifies the faithfulness Israel is expected to exercise towards the *Torah*.

The portion of the *Torah* read in synagogue on the first day is the account of the Sinai theophany (Ex 19-20), which includes the Decalogue.

The prophetic reading (*haftarah*) for the first day is the vision of Ezekiel (chapters 1-2), which ideally refers to the theophany on Mount Sinai. On the second day of the feast, which is exclusive to Diaspora Jews, the prophetic passage is read from the Book of Habakkuk (chap. 3), which again describes a theophany.

A 16th century kabbalistic custom emanating from the mystics in Safed is to stay up the whole night of Shavuot studying *Torah*<sup>50</sup>. The meaning of this vigil is simple. Indeed, on the feast dedicated to the gift of the *Torah*, every Jew is nourished by the totality of tradition, which includes the written and oral *Torah*.

50 The kabbalistic Jews drew up a veritable lectionary called *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* (“Reparation on the Night of Pentecost”). The reading is divided into 13 parts. It brings together in an anthological form excerpts from all the biblical books and the 63 tractates of the *Mishnah*, the first chapter of the *Sefer Yetzirah* (“Book of Formation”), the 613 precepts and portions of the *Sefer ha-Zohar* (“Book

It is also customary to decorate the synagogue with plants and flowers because, according to tradition, Mount Sinai was lush and green. This too evokes the ancient rural setting of the festival.

A very ancient custom is to eat milk-based dishes (and dairy products) and honey on the day of Pentecost. “The orders of the Lord are upright, causing the heart to rejoice [...]” - we read in Psalm 19 - “[...] sweeter than honey and the dripping of honey-combs” (Ps 19:9, 11). Tradition also compares the *Torah* to the milk and honey that sweeten the bride’s mouth in the Song of Songs: “Your lips drip flowing honey, O bride; Honey and milk are under your tongue” (Song of Songs 4:11a). Moreover, milk is the symbol of the “spiritual nourishment” that the *Torah* offers to the human soul, just as mother’s milk nourishes and sustains the infant. Finally, the numerical value of the Hebrew word for milk (*halav*) is forty. This is the number of days that Moses spent on Mount Sinai receiving instructions on all the *Torah*.

### Biblical Pentecost in the New Testament

According to Luke, the descent of the Holy Spirit on the apostles took place on the Jewish feast of Pentecost: “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.” (Acts 2:1). One could speculate that in placing the event in the context of Pentecost, Luke was influenced by the new meaning of the feast, which was emerging as a celebration of the giving of the *Torah*. Just as the crossing of the Red Sea is followed by the giving of the covenant at Sinai and the giving of the *Torah*, so “the passing of Christ from death to life is followed by the gift of the Spirit, the gift of the new covenant.”<sup>51</sup> While the children of Israel become a people through the gift of the *Torah*, the disciples of Jesus become Church through the gift of the Spirit.

There are two other mentions of Pentecost in the New Testament: Acts 20:16; 1 Cor. 16:8, both in connection with the ministry of the apostle Paul. In Acts 20:16 it is stated that he “had determined to sail past Ephesus, that he might not have to spend time in Asia; for he was hastening, if it were possible for him, to be at Jerusalem the day of Pentecost.” This confirms that Paul continued to celebrate Pentecost and all the other Jewish festivals regularly, as did all Christians of Jewish descent.

### ***Sukkot* (Feast of the Tabernacles)**

*Sukkot*, the Feast of Tabernacles, is one of the three festivals referred to in the Bible as ‘pilgrimage festivals’ (*regalim*)<sup>52</sup>. It begins on the 15th of *Tishri* (5 days after *Yom Kippur*) and lasts seven days. The name recalls the Israelites’ dwellings in the desert<sup>53</sup>. But it is also known as ‘the Festival of Harvest’ (Ex 23:16; 34:22), because it falls in the autumn season, when all the harvests have been completed and the grape

of Splendour”).

51 G. Rossé, *Atti degli Apostoli. Commento esegetico e teologico*, Città Nuova, Roma 1998, 129.

52 “Three times a year all your men must appear before the Lord your God at the place he will choose: at the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the Festival of Weeks and the Festival of Tabernacles.” (Deut 16:16).

53 “Live in temporary shelters for seven days: All native-born Israelites are to live in such shelters so your descendants will know that I had the Israelites live in temporary shelters when I brought them out of Egypt. I am the Lord your God.” (Lev. 23:42-43)

harvest is over; hence it is the most joyous of all the festivals.<sup>54</sup> Another name given to it in Scripture is “The Festival of the Lord” (Lev 23:39; Judges 21:19) and finally also simply “The Feast” - *he-Hag* (1 Kings 8:2; Ez 45:25; etc.)<sup>55</sup>, i.e. the festival par excellence. It is probably for this reason that the prophet Zechariah, in a Messianic oracle, extends the joy of Sukkot to all nations and states: “Then the survivors from all the nations that have attacked Jerusalem will go up year after year to worship the King, the Lord Almighty, and to celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles.” (Zech. 14:16). In the Book of Leviticus (23:39-43), among the details of the festival, two special observances are mentioned: the people are to dwell in booths (*sukkot*) for seven days and, on the first day, “take the fruit of goodly trees, the branches of palm trees, and the boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook”, and “rejoice before the Lord [...] for seven days.” The oral tradition recorded in the tractate *Sukkah*<sup>56</sup> of the *Mishnah* determines with greater precision the species of plants mentioned in Lev 23:40, identifying the “fruits of goodly trees” with the *etrog* and the “boughs of thick trees” with the myrtle. The so-called “four species” (*arbaah minîm*) of Sukkot are thus: cedar (*etrog*), palm (*lulav*), myrtle (*ḥadasim*), willow (*aravot*)<sup>57</sup>. The four species are held in the hands (the *etrog* is held in the left hand and the other three species, bound together, are held in the right hand) and shaken in the direction of the four cardinal points, above and below, to drive out evil and acknowledge God as the ruler of the whole world. The shaking of the four species is performed in the synagogue service during the singing of the *Hallel* (Ps 113-118). At the end of the congregational prayer, a Torah scroll is taken from the Holy Ark and a procession is made around the *bimah*<sup>58</sup> in remembrance of the processions that once took place on *Sukkot* around the altar of the Temple. The prayer called *Hoshanah* (“Save us, please!”) is chanted during the procession<sup>59</sup> and a good harvest for the following year. On the seventh day of *Sukkot*, known as *Hoshana Rabbah* – “The Great Hosanna”, the *bimah* is circled seven times and the willow branches are beaten on the floor. It is customary to remain awake and spend the entire night of *Hoshana Rabbah* reading and studying, especially the Book of Deuteronomy.

Each household and congregation constructs its own temporary hut (*sukkah*)<sup>60</sup>. It must have at least three walls (of any material), with leaves or straw as the roof covering, not too thick to prevent heavy rain from penetrating. The commandment re-

54 Deut. 16:14-15: “You shall rejoice in your festival [...] in the place which the Lord has chosen, the Lord your God will bless all your crops and all your undertakings, and you shall have nothing but joy.” In the liturgy it became known as the “season of our joy” (*zeman simḥatenu*)

55 Even John the Evangelist, when mentioning the Feast of Tabernacles in his Gospel, refers to it several times simply as “the Feast”. (John 7,8.10.11.14.37).

56 Of the tractate, whose five chapters detail the feast, there is also the *ghemarà* in the Jerusalem Talmud and the Babylonian Talmud and a reiteration in the *Toseftà*.

57 *Lulav* is also the name of the three species bound together.

58 The raised platform from which the Bible readings are proclaimed and common prayers are said.

59 This is the same invocation found in the Sanctus in the Christian Eucharistic prayer, which is translated as “Hosanna!”.

60 It is customary to build a *sukkah* in a space adjacent to the synagogue for all those who do not have their own *sukkah*



quires that the *sukkah* be built under the open sky, not under a tree or inside a house. During the seven days of the festival, meals are eaten in the *sukkah* and, except in the case of adverse weather conditions, one must also spend time in the *sukkah*. This serves as a reminder of the transitory nature of material possessions and the need to place one's unconditional trust in God.

According to a tradition originating in the 16th century Kabbalistic school of Luria, the mystical seven "guests" - Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Joseph and David - visit the *sukkah* on each of the seven days. It is therefore a common tradition to recite a welcoming formula to these "guests" (in Aramaic, *Ushpizin*) as if they were actually visiting the *Sukkah*.

The *Mishnah* (*Sukkah* 4:9) mentions a special "water libation" ritual that was performed before the destruction of the Temple during the seven days of *Sukkot*: water was drawn from the Pool of Siloe and carried in a procession to the altar of the Temple. The ritual was accompanied by the sound of the trumpet. On that occasion, four huge golden candelabra were raised in the "Women's Courtyard." The light emanating from the four candelabras was so bright that "there was no courtyard in Jerusalem that was not lit up with the light of the *Beit Hashoevah*<sup>61</sup>" (*Sukkah* 5:3). The joyousness of the festival was reflected also in the dance and singing that accompanied the ritual: "Men of piety and good deeds used to dance [...] with lighted torches in their hands, and they would sing songs and praises. And Levites with innumerable harps, lyres, cymbals and trumpets and other musical instruments stood upon the fifteen steps leading down from the Court of the Israelites to the Court of the Women, corresponding to the fifteen songs of ascents in the Psalms,<sup>62</sup>" (*Sukkah* 5:4). The joy was such, we read in *Mishnah*, that "One who has not witnessed the celebration of the *Bet ha-sho'evah*<sup>63</sup> has never seen real joy." (*Sukkah* 5:1). Today, although the ritual of water libation is no longer practised, the event is commemorated in gatherings called *Simḥat Bet ha-Shoevah*, with music, dancing and sumptuous meals eaten in the *sukkah*. The joyful atmosphere of the festival is thereby maintained.

### ***Shemini Atzeret* (Eighth [day of] Assembly) and *Simḥat Torah* (The Joy of Torah)**

After the seven days of the festival of *Sukkot*, the 22nd day of the Hebrew month of Tishrei marks the celebration of *Shemini Atzeret* – "The Eighth (Day of) Assembly", which Talmudic literature regards as a separate festival, is a day of rest and holy assembly, as commanded in Numbers 29:35:

"On the eighth day you shall hold a solemn gathering; you shall not work at your occupations." On this day, a special prayer for rain (*Tefillat ha-gheshem*) is offered to God, along with other prayers. If there has not been a Sabbath day in the middle of the festival, the Book of Qohelet is read on this eighth day. In the Land of Israel, the day of *Shemini Atzeret* coincides with the festival of *Simḥat Torah*

61 "House of drawing (water)"

62 The Psalms 120-134.

63 "The Rejoicing of the House of the Drawing (water)".

– “The joy of Torah”<sup>64</sup>, which is celebrated in the Diaspora on the second day of *Shemini Atzeret*, the 23rd of the Hebrew month of Tishrei. This festival marks the end of the annual cycle of Torah readings in the synagogue and the beginning of a new cycle. The person who has the honour of being called to read the last portion of the Torah is known as the “Bridegroom of the Torah” (*Hatan Torah*), while the reader of the first portion of the new cycle is called the “Bridegroom of Genesis” (*Hatan Bereshit*). During this festival, the Torah scrolls are taken from the Ark and carried in procession around the synagogue while hymns of praise are sung. In many communities it is customary to dance with the scrolls.

#### The Feast of Tabernacles in the Gospel of John

As noted earlier, the reference to the Festival is found in the Fourth Gospel. The exegeses believe that John adopted two of the symbols of the Festival, water and light, and interpreted them from a Christological angle.

In the image of the water with which the altar was sprinkled, there is an obvious reference to the Messianic vision of Ezekiel 47:1-12, where water flows out of the temple to fertilise the desert and the entire land as it flows through it.<sup>65</sup> Jesus revives the image of life-giving water: “On the last and greatest day of the festival [...] he stood and said with a loud voice, ‘Let all who are thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.’” (John 7: 37-38a). Soon after, the evangelist identifies this living water with the Spirit: “Now he was referring here to the Spirit whom those who believed in him were to receive” (v. 38b).

Jesus declared the following day: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12). By proclaiming himself the “light of the world”, Jesus identifies himself with the promised light for Israel on the day of the coming of the Messiah, symbolised by the light of the great *Sukkot* lamps and the procession with the torches.<sup>66</sup>

#### ***Tu Bi-Shvat (Fifteenth of Shevat)***

The festival of *Tu Bi-Shvat* takes its name from the date on which it occurs. In fact, “Tu” stands for the Hebrew letters *Tet* and *Vav*, which together have the numerical value of 9 and 6, adding up to 15. Thus, *Tu Bi-Shvat* means the 15th day of the Hebrew month of Shevat (January/February). It is a minor Jewish holiday, established in rabbinical writings to celebrate the “New Year of the Trees”, in Hebrew, *Rosh ha-Shanah lailanot*<sup>67</sup>. This date was chosen because the majority of the annual rain-

64 This festival originated in the post-Talmudic period.

65 “It implies the common notion that Jerusalem, with its holy mount, is the centre (navel) of the world and the source of blessing for all peoples”. R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John*. New York, 1952.

66 Cf Xavier Leon-Dufour, *Lecture de l’Evangile selon Jean*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1996.

67 Tractate *Mishnah Rosh ha-Shanah* 1:1 reads: “The four new years are: On the first of Nisan, the new year for the kings and for the festivals; On the first of Elul, the new year for the tithing of animals [...]. On the first of Tishrei, the new year for years, for the Sabbatical years and for the Jubi-

fall in the Land of Israel has already fallen by this date and, thereafter, the fruit of a tree is considered, for tithing, to belong to a new year (Deut. 14:22-29) and to the so-called “uncircumcised” trees (*‘orlah*): “When you enter the land and plant any kind of fruit tree, regard its fruit as forbidden. For three years you are to consider it forbidden (*‘arelim*); it must not be eaten. In the fourth year all its fruit shall be set aside for jubilation before the Lord. and only in the fifth year may you use its fruit—that its yield to you may be increased: I am the Lord, your God” (Lev. 19:23-25). Consequently, a date is needed to mark the beginning of the New Year of Trees in order to define their age and thus apply the established rules.

In the Diaspora, *Tu bi-Shvat* has lost its halakhic and agricultural significance, yet it is still regarded as a festive day during which no penitential prayers are recited.

It is customary to eat 15 kinds of fruit on this holiday, with a preference for the so-called “seven kinds” with which the land of Israel was blessed: wheat, barley, grapes, figs and pomegranates, olives and dates (Deut 8:8).

The influence of the 16th-century Safed kabbalists expanded the liturgy and the various Sephardic customs for this feast: special sung poems (*piyyutim*) were composed and a *seder*, inspired by the *Pesach* seder (see above), was introduced, involving the eating of fruit and the drinking of four glasses of wine.

With the founding of the first agricultural settlements in the Land of Israel in the last decades of the 19th century, the “New Year of the Trees” regained its original agricultural significance. Nowadays, on *Tu bi-Shvat*, school children in Israel celebrate this festival with songs and hold ceremonies that include the planting of trees. The act of planting is so highly regarded that, according to a rabbinical saying, if you hold a sapling in your hand and see the Messiah coming, you should first finish planting the tree and then go to greet the Messiah.

### ***Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement)**

*Yom Kippur* – “Day of Atonement” - is the holiest day of the Jewish year and concludes the period of repentance that began on *Rosh Hashanah* (‘New Year’). At the conclusion of *Yom Kippur*, God’s judgement pronounced on Rosh Hashanah is sealed. It is prescribed in the Torah for the 10th of *Tishrei*<sup>68</sup>: “The tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement. [...] It shall be a Sabbath of complete rest for you<sup>69</sup> and you shall practice self-denial; on the ninth day of the month at evening, from evening to evening, you shall observe this your Sabbath.” (Lev 23:27.32). Therefore, on the Sabbath one abstains from all prohibited activities. Special rites of atonement and purification, described in Leviticus 16 and in the Yoma tractate of the *Mishnah*, were performed during the First and Second Temple periods. The High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies in the Temple, where no other person could

lee years and for the planting and for the vegetables. On the first of Shevat, the new year for the trees, these are the words of the House of Shammai; The House of Hillel says, on the fifteenth thereof.” Again, the halakhah has adopted Hillel’s position.

68 The Day of Atonement is the only one of the appointed seasons which has no second day in the Diaspora. This is because of the extreme difficulty of fasting for two consecutive days.

69 The expression translated “Sabbath of complete rest” is in Hebrew *Sabbath shabbaton*, expressing the superlative which could be translated “Sabbath of the Sabbath.”

enter on pain of death, to perform the rite of atonement for the sins of Israel.

The meaning and reasons for this solemn day are explained in Leviticus 16:30: “For on that day shall be made an atonement for you, to cleanse you from all your sins; and you shall be clean before the Lord.”

With the Temple’s destruction in 70 A.D., the aspect of Yom Kippur focused on Atonement, came to predominate.

The *Mishnah*, whose *Tractate Yoma* is entirely devoted to *Yom Kippur*, lays out a series of prohibitions prescribed for this holy day. It is prohibited to engage in eating and drinking, in washing oneself, in anointing [one’s body with oil], wearing leather shoes, and in marital relations.<sup>70</sup>

Therefore, fasting is observed by total abstention from food and drink from sunset of the ninth day of Tishrei until the evening of the tenth day of Tishrei. This is in accordance with the commandment of Lev 16:29, which, however, is a general reference to humiliation/affliction of the soul: “In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall practice self-denial (lit. ‘you shall humble your soul’).” From this command, the oral tradition derives that eating and drinking are forbidden on *Yom Kippur*, in addition to the above-mentioned prohibitions.<sup>71</sup>

Unlike all other fasts, *Yom Kippur* is the only day when fasting is permitted on Sabbath. According to Talmudic teaching, *Yom Kippur* provides atonement only for ‘sins committed against God’, while sins against other people do not bring atonement unless the offender has been forgiven. For this reason, it is customary to seek each other’s forgiveness on the day before fasting.

The distinctive colour of *Yom Kippur* is white, the colour of purity and mercy. It can be seen in the covers of the Torah scrolls and the Holy Ark, (ornate cabinet that enshrines the Torah) as well as in the clothing worn by men in certain congregations.

The prayers for the Day of Atonement begin in the evening with the *Kol Nidre*<sup>72</sup> (“all vows”), a prayer in which worshipers proclaim that all personal vows, oaths, etc., that they made unwittingly, rashly, or unknowingly during the year should be considered null and void<sup>73</sup>.

The defining feature of this day is the *viddui*, which means “confession of sins”, recited ten times during the holiday and on the afternoon of the eve of *Yom Kippur*. On this solemn day, the additional service (*musaf*) recounts in detail the *Yom Kippur* Temple service which was once performed in the Temple in Jerusalem. At the moment when it is recounted that the High Priest uttered the ineffable name of God (Y-H-W-H) on this holiday, the members of the congregation kneel and bow.<sup>74</sup>

Liturgical poems (*piyyutim*) composed over the centuries, as well as penitential prayers (*selihot*), are recited throughout the day.

70 Cf. *Yoma* 8,1.

71 Other passages of Scripture explicitly mention the affliction of the soul through fasting. For example, in Ps 35:13: “But as for me [...], my clothing was sackcloth: *I humbled my soul with fasting*; and my prayer returned into mine own bosom.”

72 In the Italian ritual *Kol nedarim*.

73 This proclamation was introduced to discourage taking such vows and to avoid betraying a promise made to God.

74 It is the only time Jews kneel down in synagogue.

Chapter 16 of Leviticus, which deals with the Day of Atonement, and Chapter 29 of the Book of Numbers, which deals with the additional sacrifices on the Day of Atonement, are read in the morning service. Is 57:15 - 58:14 is the *haftarah* for *Yom Kippur*, wherein the Isaiah describes the ideal fast.

During the afternoon service, three men are called to read Leviticus 18, which deals with the prohibitions of incest (a continuation of the morning Torah portion according to an ancient custom that still exists in Italy). The *haftarah* comprises the Book of Jonah and Micah 7:18-20. The theme of the *haftarah* is the ideal repentance and its effects: God has mercy on even the greatest sinner if he sincerely repents. The day ends with *Neilah* ('closing of the gate'), a special service that serves as a reminder that the gates of heaven, which have remained open all day to receive the prayer of repentance, are about to close. At this point, the shofar is sounded, marking the end of the fast.

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