

Holiday of the Exiles

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THE "extra days" added to all major festivals observed by Jews in the Diaspora have been a subject for discussion for over a century. Reform Jews have banished these days altogether from their religious calendar. Some Conservative leaders have tended toward abolition, though most Conservative synagogues presently observe the extra days.

Orthodox Jews are increasingly called upon to explain the discrepancy between the holy days we observe and the festivals as prescribed in the Torah. We observe one extra day each at the beginning and at the end of Passover and Sukkot as well as an extra day of Rosh Hashanah and of Shavuot. Except in the case of Rosh Hashanah, which is observed for two days in Israel as well, all the extra days are observed only in the Diaspora. Hence, they are called *Yom Tov Sheni Shel Galuyot*, the "Second Holiday of the Exiles."

How did this practice originate? Since a complete halakhic and his-

torical answer would require volumes, a simplified explanation must suffice here.

THE JEWISH CALENDAR is based upon the moon (with built-in corrections for accommodation to the solar year). Before the exile which followed the destruction of the Temple and the widespread use of a fixed calendar, the new month was determined by visual observation. Some lunar months are twenty-nine days, other thirty, depending on when the new moon is first sighted. In the old days, the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem would officially declare the new month begun only after hearing from witnesses who had actually seen the new moon. This decree was called *Kiddush Hachodesh*, sanctification of the month.

As soon as the Sanhedrin thus sanctified the month, messengers would be sent to all Jewish communities, informing them which day had been declared *Rosh Hodesh*, and hence when all holidays of that month would fall. While the Jewish communities of the Holy Land received the news quickly, communities in the far-flung Diaspora often experienced a long wait. Sometimes, the holy days of that month would come to pass before the messengers had even arrived. Hence, there was always doubt about one day: the Talmud calls it the *sefeka de'yoma*.

This is why the Diaspora communities would observe each holiday for two days—just to make sure that they had observed the proper one. Even after the calendar was formalized, based on a sound mathematical foundation predicting precisely the new moon centuries in advance, Jews in the Diaspora main-

tained the tradition of two days. So universal had this practice become that the rabbis then pronounced the "Holiday of the Exiles" (*Yom Tov Shení Shel Galuyot*) as formally binding on all the Diaspora. The only ones to reject them were the medieval Karaites and, in our own day, Reform Judaism.

Orthodox Jews remain loyal to this tradition, and have not deviated from the age-old acceptance of the sanctity of the "Holiday of the Exiles." The codes, from Maimonides to the *Shulhan Arukh* down to our own day, are unanimous in declaring the "second days" an integral part of Judaism in the Diaspora. No authority, not even a reconstituted Sanhedrin—according to the structure of Jewish law—could abolish their observance. Traditional Jews maintain this practice because of their commitment to Jewish law, despite the facts that we now have a scientifically correct calendar, that we can accurately predict the appearance of the new moon, and that our communications are almost instantaneous. Abolition of the "second days" will not increase observance of the "first days" any more than the abandonment of Hebrew by Reform enhanced their followers' practice of regular prayer.

IN ADDITION TO HALAKHAH, there are spiritual values that inhere in these "second days." First, our observance of the "Holiday of the Exiles" evinces a respect for *minhag*, for Jewish custom or tradition. The question had already been asked in Talmudic times by the sages of Babylon as to why the two days had to be observed since the calendar was already known with

precision. The Sages of Palestine sent back the answer: "be careful to observe the customs your ancestors transmitted to you" (*Betzah* 4b). According to the Geonim, the custom originated as far back as the days of the Prophets.

In Jewish life observance is an expression either of *din*, law or *minhag*, custom. *Din* and *minhag* differ essentially in this respect: *din* issues from without, *minhag* from within. *Din* is what God reveals. *Minhag* is Israel groping for God—the expression of the collective religious will of the people of Israel. While *din* tells us what Jews should be, *minhag* tells us what they already are. *Minhag* is the mirror of the Jew's life and, like the reflector of a telescope, it focuses into one point all the various strains and tendencies of the Jewish heart and soul.

What matters is not that we now have telephone, telegraph, satellite communications and that we no longer are beset by doubts over the correct day of the month. What matters is that Jews observed these days for centuries—even when they knew the right day with certainty—and this observance expresses the collective inner spirit of our people. The late Rav Kook maintained that when we observe a *din*, a law, it is essentially an expression of our love of God. When, however, we observe a *minhag*, a custom, it is a profound reflection of our love of Israel. Hence, when we observe the "Holiday of the Exiles," we proclaim that we are not only children of God but also brothers to our fellow Jews of all ages.

Even more than *minhag*, however, the "Holiday of the Exiles" is today part of rabbinic law. The

Rabbis, approving the widespread observance of this tradition, declared it mandatory. Judaism is more than folkways, more than dogmatic faith, religious experience, study of Torah, and even more than the sum total of its commandments. Judaism is primarily the authority of the Rabbis in interpreting the Bible. The Jewish faith cherishes the Oral Law equally with the Written Law, and accepts Scripture only according to the authoritative interpretation of the Sages. The Torah itself commands us to obey the duly constituted religious authorities of each age. What distinguishes Judaism from various forms of fundamentalism is our acceptance of rabbinic interpretation and legislation. There is no single *mitzvah*, no single Jewish religious institution, that is not rabbinically defined.

So IT IS with the "Holiday of the Exiles": it is not only a custom, but an irrevocable rabbinic ordinance. These "second days" are of sufficient importance for us to refrain from laying *tefillin*, even though, insofar as the calendar is concerned, they are really weekdays. Similarly, we recite the holiday *Kiddush* and prayers, although normally an unnecessary or irrelevant blessing is considered a violation of the third commandment. The second day of *Yom Tov* is as precious as the first; we observe both equally (with the exception of certain emergency situations which the Rabbis exempted).

Finally, our observance of the Holiday of the Exiles reminds Jews that we are in exile. Israelis do not need to observe these days because they are in Zion. R. Moses Sofer

(*Derashot Hatam Sofer*, to Bo) declared that these days will be observed in the Diaspora forever, if only as a remembrance of our bitter two thousand-year-old *galut*, just as we still observe tokens of our earlier exiles in Egypt and Babylon. Exile, in the Jewish view, is not necessarily defined as loss of freedom or the state of being subject to overt persecution; it is not primarily a political concept or an economic state, but a spiritual and psychological condition. In ancient days, even Jews in the Diaspora who enjoyed a large measure of autonomy never doubted that they were anything but exiles; whereas Jews in Palestine, even under a brutal foreign yoke, never considered themselves exiles.

From this point of view, the Holiday of the Exiles is more important for the modern Diaspora Jew than it was for his parents and grandparents in Russia, Germany, Poland, Hungary. They knew they were in exile; they needed no reminder. But we who have made such great political and economic strides and who enjoy such a marvelous measure of freedom need a Holiday of the Exiles to remind us of our spiritual *galut*. This is probably what the great kabbalist Rabbi Moses Cordovero meant when he said that every holiday is, in essence, a channel for transmitting holiness to the Jews.

Every festival is a specific means for Israel to attain a higher degree of sanctity. Exile, with its threat to the spiritual vitality of Jews, requires twice the number of days. The assimilatory tendencies that threaten our existence as Jews in the Diaspora can be countered not by less, but by more *kedushah*. END