

The Holiest Day of the Year

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Every Shabbat, we open the Torah scroll, and we read the same portion shared by Jews throughout the world. Right? Well, not exactly, not this Shabbat.

At Conservative and Orthodox synagogues outside of Israel, the Torah is opened this week to a special reading for the eighth day of Passover. Here, at Reform congregations throughout the diaspora, and at every congregation in Israel, Passover ended this evening, as Shabbat began. We are reading the first half of *Parashat Acharei Mot*, the remainder of which we shall read next week, when our Conservative and Orthodox friends will read that entire portion.

Why do we observe seven days of Passover, while some Jews observe eight?

Of course, Passover is not the only time when this issue presents itself. We sanctify one day of Rosh Hashanah, for example, while others observe two.

As we examine our reasons for observing fewer holy days, we could easily fall into the trap of assuming that Reform Judaism is less Judaism. Such an assumption would be incorrect, however. On principle, and not for ease, the founders of Reform Judaism decreed our observance of each holy day exclusively on its appointed day. In the Torah, Passover is a seven day festival. The length of our observances is explicitly in keeping with the words of the Torah.

Since when, though, are Reform Jews biblical literalists? We do not usually define ourselves as the strict constructionists of traditional Jewish practice. On many occasions, we do not observe the specific commands of the Torah. Faithfulness to Scripture cannot be the sole reason for our one day festival celebrations. In order to understand the matter better, we must examine the reasons why many of our fellow Jews observe an additional day of each holiday.

During the days of the ancient rabbis, our Jewish people already lived both in Israel and in Diaspora, albeit not as widely dispersed as today. Without modern communication, though, word traveled slowly. The most important message regularly sent out from Jerusalem, to all the scattered Jewish communities of the ancient near east, was the proclamation of the new moon, which is also the beginning of the month. Calendars were not fixed, so the Sanhedrin, the rabbinic court in Jerusalem, would declare the arrival of each new moon. Fires were lit on hilltops, and messages sent from province to province, so that people would

know that the month has begun. With holidays falling on specific days of set months, one really does need to know when the month begins!

News took time to arrive, though, so people often wouldn't know the exact dates until late in the month. Based on the previous month's information, they did always know the correct date within a one day margin of error. Therefore, a practice was established: Each holiday was observed for one extra day outside the land of Israel. That way, everybody was certain to hit the festivals on the appropriate days.

Within the land of Israel, the practice was somewhat different. There, news could get around to everybody within a reasonable period of time. As a result, the extra day of celebration was not necessary. The only exception was Rosh Hashanah, which is observed on the first day of a month. By the time testimony of the new moon had arrived, the holiday might have been missed. Therefore, even in Israel, Rosh Hashanah is observed for two days even in modern times.

The matter could have been settled centuries ago, when a fixed calendar was accepted by all Jews. Now, and for well over a millennium, everybody agrees on the date of the first day of each month. In fact, I have a book that tells me when Passover ends in 2100.

The original reason for the extra day of each holiday was rendered null and void as soon as the calendar was fixed, centuries before the creation of Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, or Reconstructionist Judaism. The rabbis of the Talmud maintained the extra day of each holiday in the diaspora, because they were reluctant to depart from the practices of prior generations. Perhaps they also wished to maintain the extra day's observance as a sharp reminder of the distinction between living in the land of Israel and living in the diaspora, which they considered to be exile.

For Reform Jews, the simple fact that Jews of a previous age have observed a certain way is not a sufficient reason to maintain a particular ritual practice. Moreover, although we affirm the sanctity of the land of Israel, we also rejoice that we who live in the diaspora, certainly in America, are no longer in exile.

Celebrating an additional day of each holiday is perfectly appropriate for Orthodox and Conservative Jews, in keeping with the values and traditions of those movements, which we respect and honor. We cherish the unity of our Jewish people. When Shabbat falls on the day we consider to be the day after Passover, when some Jews are observing the eighth day, we make sure that

Passover-appropriate food is offered as an option at our Oneg Shabbat and Kiddush, which the Shempers will gladly provide tomorrow. We even split one Torah portion in half, rather than re-working the entire cycle of Torah readings, so that we will be back to reading the same Torah portions as our sister synagogues in just one week's time.

When Shabbat falling on the day after Passover ends for Reform Jews, though, we see a special virtue in the seven-day observance. If we were to consider today to be the eighth day of a festival, it would still be Shabbat. And yet, the Sabbath, which comes every week, would likely be overshadowed by the holiday, as it was last week, since the festival comes but once a year. We affirm the unique and paramount importance of Shabbat when we do not permit it to be overtaken by the second day of any festival.

Shabbat is, after all, the most important day in the Jewish year. We live in a society that venerates annual occasions – the Christmas season, the Super Bowl – and, for this crowd, I'll add the Arkansas-Alabama game. Judaism, by contrast, emphasizes more regular observance. We indicate our values by the way we live our lives throughout the year. When we set aside a day every week to honor God, to rest, to worship, and to study Torah, we indicate that God and our Jewish faith are paramount in our lives.

Reform Jews study our tradition with both loving reverence and a healthy skepticism, with our hearts and with our minds. We must respect the words of Torah, the teachings of the ancient rabbis, and the judgments of our Reform founders. For us, the answer is clear: Rosh Hashanah and Shavuot are one day holidays; Sukkot lasts eight days, and Passover is celebrated for a week. And Shabbat is the most important of them all.

Amen.