

**JEWISH LITERACY**  
**Michael Lotker**  
**The Holidays: Hanukkah, Purim, Sukkot, Pesach & Shavuot**

**1. Hanukkah**

- a) Story - 167 BCE - Syrian/Greek rulers who would destroy Judaism. Summary given in Lotker, pages 75-76.
- b) Hanukkah means “dedication” referring to the re-dedication of the Temple.
- c) Without Hanukkah, there would be no Christmas (Judaism would have ended some 160 years before the birth of Jesus).
- d) Without the Christian Church, we would know much less about Hanukkah (the Church preserved the Books of Maccabees).
- e) Menorah - 8 candles + shammes. Place from right to left and light from left to right. Menorah should be seen (as from a window). See Handbook, pp. 73-76,
- f) Latkes – for the oil
- g) Dreidle: Has the letters for the words nes gadol haya sham (“a great miracle happened there” – in Israel, nes gadol haya po, “a great miracle happened here”). Nun (get none), gimel (take all), hay (get half), shin (put one in). See Handbook pp. 77-78.
- h) Darkest moment of the year – most religions have a celebration of light
  - i) Halley’s comet connection?
- i) Check out “Hanukkah Service for the Home” at  
[<http://scheinerman.net/judaism/Holidays/index.html>]
- j) December dilemma discussion
- k) Deeper meanings
  - i) You have enough
  - ii) What was impure can be made pure.
  - iii) Note that we don’t celebrate the original dedication of the Temple, only it’s re-dedication that we observe.

**2. Purim**

- i) The Book of Esther: Story of Haman, Ahasuerus, Mordecai and Esther in Persia. Summary in Lotker, pages 76-77.
  - a) Note that God is not mentioned: this is the way God acts in history in the post prophetic age.
- ii) Name refers to the lots used to select the day of execution.
- iii) In non-Christian lands, Purim is the big children’s holiday.
- iv) Customs:
  - a) Dressing in costumes
  - b) Reading the Megillah (cheering and booing)
  - c) Sending gifts to friends and the poor
  - d) Eating Hamantaschen [Handbook: pp. 366-367]
  - e) Getting drunk
- v) Deeper meaning: no matter how good you have it in the diaspora – even if a Jew can become queen – at the whim of a government official, all Jews can face death. We are never safe in the diaspora.
- vi) Another lesson – never write off assimilated Jews like Esther and Mordecai
  - a) Esther from Ishtar; Mordecai from Marduk (equivalent to Mary and Christopher)
- vii) Another lesson – whosoever would be God must destroy the Jews totally!

3. **The Pilgrimage Festivals;** So called because on these holidays all men were required to go to the Temple in Jerusalem. We read in **Exodus 23: 14**. “Three times you shall keep a feast to me in the year. **15**. You shall keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread (*Pesach*); you shall eat unleavened bread seven days, as I commanded you, in the time appointed in the month *Abib*; for in it you came out from Egypt; and none shall appear before me empty; **16**. And the Feast of Harvest (*Shavuot*), the first fruits of your labors, which you have sown in the field; and the Feast of Ingathering (*Sukkot*), which is at the end of the year, when you have gathered in your labors from the field. **17**. Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the Lord God.”
  
4. **Sukkot**
  - a) Joyful holiday immediately following the solemnity of the HHD
  - b) Living in booths to commemorate the 40 years wandering and the need to live in huts during the harvest.
  - c) **Lev.: 23:39** “Also in the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the fruit of the land, you shall keep a feast to the Lord seven days; on the first day shall be a Sabbath, and on the eighth day shall be a Sabbath. **40**. And you shall take on the first day the boughs of goodly trees (the *etrog*), branches of palm trees (*lulav*), and the boughs of thick trees (myrtle=*hadaism*), and willows (*aravot*) of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days.
  - d) The booths are a reminder of the fragility of life itself. [See handbook 65-72, 368-9, 406-7 for more info].
  - e) Biblical reading is the Book of Ecclesiastes.
  - f) On the last day of Sukkot, we pray for rain (now that the rainy season has begun).
    - i) These were among the most important prayers in Biblical times.
    - ii) This may be the reason for the High Holy Days – to purify our souls so that our prayers for rain will be successful.
  - g) The 8<sup>th</sup> day of Sukkot is a separate holiday, *Shemini Atzeret* (meaning “gathering on the eighth”), upon which *Simchat Torah* (the rejoicing of the Torah) is celebrated
  
5. **Pesach**
  - a) 8 day holiday commemorating the Exodus.
  - b) Originally two holidays with separate biblical sources;
    - i) **Ex. 23:15** “You shall keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread (*Chag HaMatzot*); you shall eat unleavened bread seven days, as I commanded you, in the time appointed in the month *Abib*; for in it you came out from Egypt” **Ex 12:14**. “And this day shall be to you for a memorial; and you shall keep it a feast to the Lord throughout your generations; you shall keep it a feast by an ordinance forever. **15**. Seven days shall you eat unleavened bread; the first day you shall put away leaven out of your houses; for whoever eats leavened bread from the first day until the seventh day, that soul shall be cut off from Israel. **16**. And in the first day there shall be a holy convocation, and in the seventh day there shall be a holy convocation to you; no kind of work shall be done in them, save that which every man must eat, only that may be done by you. **17**. And you shall observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread; for in this same day have I brought your armies out of the land of Egypt; therefore shall you observe this day in your generations by an ordinance forever.

- ii) **Ex 34:25:** " You shall not offer the blood of my sacrifice with leaven; nor shall the sacrifice of the Feast of the Passover (*Chag Ha Pesach*) be left to the morning."
- c) Must eat matzah (at the Seder) and cannot eat *chametz* (for entire period).
- d) Haggadah read – it does not contain mention of Moses (concern that Moses would be worshipped as God).
- e) 90% of Jews attend a Seder (the word means "order")
- f) Come to our community Seder (2<sup>nd</sup> night, on Sunday, April 20, 2008) for more information.
- g) Deeper meaning – live as though you were personally freed from Egypt. Examine your life to see what you are slave to.

6. **Shavuot**

- a) Means "weeks" – we count the days from *Pesach* to *Shavuot* (the counting of the Omer)
  - i) Also called the Festival of First Fruits (*Chag Habikurim*), and the Harvest Festival (*Chag Hakatzir*)
- b) Handbook pp. 89-91,
- c) According to the Talmud, *Shavuot* celebrates the receipt of the Torah on Sinai.
  - i) This is the reason for the freedom gained at Pesach
  - ii) Every time Moses says "let my people go" he adds "to worship God"
- d) What exactly happened at Sinai is the questions that defines the various Jewish Movements.
- e) God binds Himself to Law – the universe can be understood.
- f) Also celebrate the first harvest.
- g) Read the book of Ruth (themes of faith and harvest).
- h) Tradition of *Siyum Leil Shavuot* – an (almost) all night Torah study session.
- i) Confirmation traditionally celebrated on this day.
- j) We will read the *Asseret Hadibrot* (the 10 Utterances, commonly called the 10 Commandments).

7. **For lots of wonderful information about Judaism and the holidays, go to Rabbi Amy R. Scheinerman's web site <http://www.scheinerman.net/Judaism>.**

8. **Next Class: The Bible. Read Lotker 14-17, Handbook look at 130-137, 147-148, 177-178, 279-280, 284-290, 312-315, 323-349, 419-421, 449-451, 468-469, 478-483, 486-496, 502, 528-531, 547-559**