



Daily Reflections

JOURNEYING THROUGH CHALLENGING TIMES

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THE MYSTICAL CYCLE OF SEVENS IN JEWISH RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

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Reflection

In the unfolding of priestly ministry and purity codes in Leviticus, we track the ongoing dialog of Moses with God concerning the cycle of feasts within Hebrew religious practices each year. As in the previous revelations of Exodus regarding the life of the people as God's covenant community—a family of the Commandments and religious fidelity—we discover the merging of daily history and sacred time. The calendar of events to be observed is a cycle which embodies remembrances of God's great saving acts among the faithful. The first thing we observe is the constant repetition of the number 7. In the Hebrew community, as in many ancient religions, seven represents a state of closure and perfection. The examples are varied and endless, but its importance is undeniable. The consistency of the numerology highlights the totality of the way in which God's salvific intentions are completely woven into the communal

and religious calendars of the people.

The first festival in the cycle, on the fourteenth day of the first month, is the *Passover of the Lord*. This celebration commemorates the initiation of the Exodus, the liberation of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. On the following day falls the *Feast of the Unleavened Bread*, which initiates a week of oblations or sacrifices aimed at assisting the community in its growth toward 'holiness,' being set apart for God in daily life. This is also a week in which no work is done, after the model of God's post-creation rest. Upon entering the Promised Land and reaping the harvest, the people are to bring the First Fruits (*bikkurim*) to the priest to be blessed before God. Then begins the counting of seven full weeks, and on the day following, the fiftieth day, another cereal offering is made. On the tenth day of the seventh month (*tishrei*), the Day of Atonement is observed. It is a day of fasting and asceticism, one of the High Holy Days in the Jewish calendar. Again, it is a day of no work. The people enter a time of personal repentance for sin, to prepare themselves for the coming year. On the day before, it is customary to ask forgiveness of others as well. On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, the Feast of Booths (*haghasukkot*) is celebrated in remembrance of the years the people lived in huts in the wilderness, with seven days of sacred assembly and sacrifices. This calendar of days constitutes the major cycle of observances in the Jewish year.

The Hebrew calendar of festivals and sacrifices may seem like a dizzying array of activities to a 21st century Christian. The churches indeed have a calendar of holy days (Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, etc.) with their special celebrations, and some even have 'octaves' of extended observances. However, the manner in which Jewish religious tradition has woven the history of the personal, familial, social, and even mercantile dimensions of life into a stunning tapestry of spiritual remembrance and historical recollection is singular. In our contemporary way of life, we have not allowed much personal 'space' for such a multi-faceted religious practice. Admittedly, modern Jewish observance has also frequently been 'trimmed' to accommodate the practical demands of daily life. Nonetheless, the manner in which the tradition has placed the Jewish history of God and faith at the very heart of spiritual and communal identity is a reminder to all: our calling invites us to embrace a walk with God that locates the divine relationship at the heart of all that we are, to the tender touch that leads us to freedom and unity as the family of God.



The feast of unleavened bread

For Pondering

- In your daily faith walk, what aspects of your religious tradition have most enriched your relationship to God?
 - What elements of your spiritual life could most benefit from greater attention to the gifts of your religious formation?
 - How has your identity as a 'religious' person evolved through the years as a fruit of your life in the church?
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