

## BALANCING ABSTINENCE AND FESTIVITY

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### What can we learn from Judaism?

This is a disturbing week. We are experiencing the chaos caused by the parting of the ways of Jews and Christians. Today Eastern Christians are celebrating Maundy Thursday, Jews are passing at this hour from the fourth to the fifth day of *Chol Hamoed* Pesach. For Western Christians it is one more week to Ascension Day. Therefore, I felt enticed to forgo the agreed subject and talk about the calendar as evidence of that shocking parting of the ways. But I was taught to keep my promises and I had promised to talk about balancing abstinence and festivity.

The question of abstinence and/or festivity has returned to the agenda in my native country, the Netherlands, a country with almost equal numbers of Roman Catholics and Protestants. Our Dutch Roman Catholics used to emphasize both in theory and praxis the notion of abstention. They used to keep fast days on a regular basis. In the course of the 20th century the praxis weakened until it almost disappeared. Carnival became more and more popular, but the forty days of fasting afterwards are fading away. Already over fifty years ago, far ahead of the Second Vatican Council, the lack of honestly keeping the traditional practice of fasting was described critically by one of the most popular and at that time still ardently Roman Catholic Dutch authors, Godfried Bomans. He wrote in one of his fairy-tales: 'The parish priest was eating fried eel, for it was a fasting day'. For those of you who might not be familiar with this delicacy, it is quite expensive.

Protestants like us, on the other hand, rejected what we called these 'Roman' practices. Fasting was seen and criticized as an effort to be justified by 'works'. We were taught that one could only be justified by 'grace', *sola gratia*. So we did not fast. But we were also not allowed to be too festive either. An abundant meal was seen as gluttony and criticized on the basis of verses like: "and do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs." The following was told of a poor family that depended on the church's social welfare. Before Christmas they had received a number of eggs. The housewife had bought a bottle of cheap brandy and made egg liquor. My mother in law was an expert in making this delicious drink. They had a life-time of experience. The particular church that had provided the eggs was furious. They condemned these poor people of the sin of gluttony and punished them by removing from the list of assistance receivers.

This way of life too was overhauled during the sixties. Secularization swept the church from the center of Dutch society. Festivals lost much of their religious meaning. Easter became a shopping spree and Pentecost a touring festival. Only Christmas continued to be celebrated at home. Less people went to Church, but more Christmas trees were bought. Houses and streets are illuminated. The meals have become luxurious dinners. Santa Claus, however, never conquered Holland, as we are proudly celebrating the eve of the birthday of the original Santa Claus, St. Nicolas, December 5th with surprise packages and self-written ironic rhymes.

The changing reality of celebrating Christmas evoked a typical Calvinist reaction. As a countermeasure to overeating, more traditional Christian families preferred simple food. As overeating is not only a problem at Christmas time, there are more and more groups of Protestants in Holland who pay some attention to the historic period of fasting in Lent too. No real fast, of course, but eating once a week a simple meal together.

With this background we arrived in Jerusalem in 1982 with our three children. Living in a Jewish neighborhood in Jerusalem we became increasingly aware that there is no Christmas unless you create the atmosphere of Christmas yourself. If we would not make Christmas with our family and celebrate it together, Christmas would be non-existent. The same applies, by the way, to every special date of the calendar. It does not exist, unless we make it something special: whether it is the memorial of a wedding or of the passing away of a beloved one, a birthday or a religious holiday. There is no Christmas unless we create it. There is no Advent or Lent or Easter or Pentecost unless we create a special atmosphere.

Once I had become aware of this, it began to strike me that Jews have done something incredible over the past twenty centuries. While we have almost lost the celebration of our main religious holidays within one generation due to secularization, the Jews have maintained an impressive tradition of celebration of their festivals and keeping their fast days. They did so century after century, despite living as a minority in an often hostile environment. It is an outstanding phenomenon. For all of us, who are one way or another facing the impact of secularization, there is something to learn from them.

Tonight I want to explore two aspects. To begin with, I give some examples of the phenomenon of abstinence as part of the celebration of festivities. Afterwards I want to discuss some aspects of Jesus' forty days in the desert, as it is the basis of the forty day fasting period in Lent.

### **Abstinence in the celebration of festivities**

All other Jewish festivals can only be understood against the background of the Sabbath. Every day of the Jewish year begins at sunset, *wayyehi erev wayyehi boker yom echad*. By consequence, the first important event of each new day is eating together. Celebrating at home became important in Jewish life. With the exception of the Jewish New Year and some fast days, that which happens at home is much more decisive for the religious experience than the synagogue service. So the mistress of the house, the *baalat habayit*, marks the beginning of the Sabbath and the festivals by lighting the candles at home. She proclaims the arrival of the festival. The actual celebration of the Sabbath and the festivals begins with the sanctification of the day, the *Kiddush*, at home. The master of the house, the *baal bayit*, performs this ritual by pouring a cup of the fruit of the vine, *pri hagefen*.

Ahead of this sanctification of the Sabbath each father is allowed to bless his sons and daughters to become like Ephraim and Manasse or like Sarah, Rebekkah, Rachel and Leah. Each father is a priest at home. Moreover, the dinner table is compared to the altar in the temple. In this way Judaism is realizing the concept of the priesthood of all believers found in 1 Peter 2. Because of the prime importance of what is done at home, Jews have been able to maintain their Jewish conscience during persecutions and compulsive conversions. This applied theology enabled conversos or marranos to keep

their Jewish identity for centuries. A couple of years ago it became known that a few Muslim families in Hebron use to burn candles on Friday night. They told to know that their ancestors were forced to convert to Islam in the eighth century.

Because the main celebration takes place at home, the presence and participation of children of all ages is taken for granted. By consequence, children have their own role in religious practice. Usually their role is a pleasant one. They have privileges that grown-up people have lost. But nobody seems to resent this, for one has pleasant memories of enjoying these same privileges as a child.

It is remarkable that one does not have to go to a religious service in order to know which Jewish festival is being kept. It is even easier to have a look at the table, to see what is eaten and when.

You will know that tomorrow and Saturday it is still Pesach for there are *matzot* on the table. Dependent on one's constitution and appetite that means either two more days of enjoying *matzot* or two more days of suffering constipation. One might have thought that because Pesach is the celebration of the delivery of slavery, any kind of food would be allowed. Not so. Not only is there a stringent prescription with regard to bread. There is also a precise indication of the kind of vegetables that has to be eaten on the first night, Seder eve. Preparing this lecture, it struck me that all of the four famous questions of the *ma nishtanah* deal with material issues: 'why do we on this night eat unleavened bread only, why do we eat this bitter herb as vegetable, why are we dipping twice, why are we not sitting but reclining?' The main questions the Jewish child has to put have nothing of a higher, spiritual nature. They have nothing of the theological load of the questions of catechisms the older ones among us may have had to learn in their youth. The questions of the *ma nishtanah* are amazingly down to earth. According to some custom the bitter herb, *maror*, has to be horseradish. It has a very outspoken taste. I don't think many people will regard it a delicacy. As many first time visitors at the Seder table, I took a good bite of it. And of course someone had encouraged me to chew it carefully. So the tears came into my eyes. As soon as the tears appeared in my eyes I was 'comforted' with 'do you feel now what it means to live in slavery?' There are more food prescriptions. No yeast containing products are allowed. Thus beer too is forbidden. The Ashkenazim have the most rigid regime. They are not allowed to eat rice, humus and other attractive foods, known as *kitniot*.

As most of you may know, children don't only play a role by asking the four questions. They are usually also the 'keepers' of the *Afikoman*, the piece of *matza* needed for the completion of the meal. And they always make a good deal, receiving a kind of present.

One of the prescribed festive elements is the obligation to drink four times more than half a glass of wine or grape juice. It has taken me a couple of years to regard as normal that the majority of the participants will drink grape juice instead of wine. It is all 'fruit of the vine' (Jews today use the same liturgical expression as Jesus did at the Last Supper). How different from the heated discussions in theological school on the questions whether grape juice was allowed, even for alcoholics.

On the eve of Pesach the firstborn males are supposed to keep a fast day. That serves as a reminder that their ancestors were the only male firstborns in Egypt, who were saved in the Pesach night, when the angel of death was slaying the firstborn of the Egyptians.

Religious Jews are tonight counting the fifth day of the Omer. When they reach the fiftieth day of this counting, in Greek πεντηκοστή, they will celebrate Shavuot. That is according to the Jewish calendar what is known to us as the birthday of the Church, Pentecost. Shavuot, the feast of weeks, also has its special food instruction. While at all other festivals the main dish consists of meat, on Shavuot the main meal has to be dairy. Rabbinic sources have no clue about the age of this practice. I think it to be at least 2000 years old. It is a symbolic reminder of the fact that at Shavuot the Torah was given at Mount Sinai. At that festival Israel was born as the people of the covenant. Just like new born babies begin with milk and only later on are able to consume solid food, so it is also with the people, who begin to study the Torah, as given at Sinai. Reference to this idea is found in Hebrews 5, 12-14: For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of God's word. You need milk, not solid food; for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their faculties trained by practice to distinguish good from evil. According to 1 Peter 2,2, it is the preferred way of behavior of the new members of the community: Like newborn babes, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to salvation.

So, the two first traditional pilgrim festivals are characterized by the need to eat specific foods and to refrain from others. In that way they differ from the third and most festive of the pilgrim festivals, the festival of booths, Succoth. Succoth is known in Hebrew as the festival, *chag*. If one speaks of *chag* without further explanation, one means Succoth. It plays a very important role in the Gospel of John. The chapters 5, 7, 8 and 9 - four complete chapters - deal with it. At the time that the Temple still was functioning, it was not only the main harvesting festival, but also the festival of water drawing. During the long centuries of exile this aspect withdrew to the background. In recent years, there is a renewal of the memory of the festival of water drawing, *simhat bet hashoeva*. As far as allowed within the system of *kashrut* all kinds of food are allowed. And yet, everybody knows that one is not allowed to use any meal during the festival in one's air-conditioned dining room. For one week one is supposed to live in a shaky shack with a shade providing roof that is pervious to light and rain. Ironically it is called in more solemn Bible translations a "Tabernacle". Whoever was invited for the first time in his life to pay a visit to a Succah, having imagined something looking like the good old Tabernacle the Israelites were carrying on their journey through the desert, will have been very disappointed. Of course, the booth is a magnificent symbol of living in the unhindered nearness and under the continuous protection of the Almighty. The joy wherewith one is supposed to celebrate is sometimes seriously hampered by the omnipresence of wasps and wild cats who want to share your meal, or by a cloud that bursts open just at the moment that you are enjoying a good soup or a good glass of wine.

I could continue this list with particulars of *Purim*, *Hanukkah*, Jewish New Year and weddings, but also address *Tisha be-Av* and *Yom Kippur*. Every special day has its own festive elements and its own particular limitations. No two are the same.

### **The background of the forty-day period**

Since the early centuries of its existence the church has kept a forty-day period of fasting in Lent. These forty days are a reminder and a symbolic sharing of Jesus' forty days in the desert. According to the Gospels the Holy Spirit led Him into the desert,

where He was tempted by the devil. This happened immediately upon His baptism, when a voice from heaven (*bat kol*) was heard proclaiming him to be the Son, the beloved one, in whom God was pleased. Jesus' forty days can be a reminder of the forty years the Israelites spent in the desert, of the forty days Moses was with God on Mount Sinai or of the forty days of Elia's journey towards the same mountain. The forty days of Lent became a period for repentance that is achieved by reminding ourselves of the suffering He went through for our sake.

While studying the Jewish liturgical calendar I asked myself, which period of the year would be – liturgically speaking - the most appropriate to follow Moses' example. For Jewish tradition knows of two different periods of forty days that Moses spent fasting on Mount Sinai. The first of these periods are the forty days from the day after Shavuot till the 17th of Tammuz. Originally the fast of the 17th of Tammuz was just related to the day on which during the siege by Nebuchadnezzar the sacrifices in the Temple came to a standstill. Early rabbinic tradition combined this event with the golden calf. Moses' first descent from Mount Sinai and the breaking of the two tablets of the Torah are said to have taken place on the 17th of Tammuz.

According to rabbinic understanding Moses spent a second period of forty days on the mountain. This second period of forty days lasted from the first day of the month of Elul until the Day of Atonement. On the Day of Atonement Moses was placed in the cleft of the rock. That day God passed him and addressed Moses with the thirteen-fold name mentioned in Exodus 34, 6f. That same day Moses descended from the mountain with the second set of tables of the covenant to announce to the people that God in his mercy had forgiven them.

So, if we suppose that Jesus is following Moses' example, which of the two periods would be more appropriate? The midrash tells that Satan was tempting the Israelites daily during the first period of forty days. He fails in his attempt until the fortieth day. At the last moment Satan convinces the people that Moses had died on the mountain. Then they decide to make themselves a golden calf. As we are told that Jesus too was tempted by the devil, this might be the intended parallel. It suits the concept that Jesus was participating in the history of the Jewish people.

While I still thought this to be the preferable explanation, I read the article by Rachel Elijor, in Lee I. Levine ed. *Retsef u-Temurah, Continuity and Renewal. Jews and Judaism in Byzantine-Christian Palestine*, Jerusalem 2004, p.131. Mrs. Elijor wrote that early Jewish mystical tradition knew of two different periods of preparation for a mystical experience. This preparation could either last seven days like the period Aaron and his sons needed in advance of their dedication. As a reminder thereof, the high priest was kept in isolation for seven days each year in preparation for the Day of Atonement. The other period of preparation for a mystical experience lasted for forty days, like the second period Moses spent on the mountain. She added that in any case the preparation of either a week or forty days began with a ritual cleansing by going through the ritual bath, the *mikwah*.

Rabbinical tradition also knows that the main danger during the forty days of fasting ahead of a mystical experience is temptation by the devil. That is clear from the best known rabbinic tradition about mystical experience. It tells of four who wanted to enter paradise together: Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Elisha ben Abuya and Akiva. Rabbi Akiva

warned the others, “When you approach the pillars of marble do not cry out, ‘Water, Water!’ and don’t be misled by the outer appearances of what you see.” This in itself is a beautiful description of a *fata morgana*. A *fata morgana* is a real threat for those who are suffering from thirst. Fasting in this context means also refraining from drinking. The midrash tells us that Ben Azzai looked at the mysteries too long and died; Ben Zoma looked too long and lost his mind; Elisha ben Abuya looked too long and became the exemplary heretic, known as *Acher*, ‘the other’. Rabbi Akiba was the only one of the four who entered in peace and came out of the experience in peace. We are told, however, that Akiba too nearly came to a bad end because the ministering angels wanted to push him away. But God defended him and said, “Let him be. This old man is destined to minister to Me in my heavenly court.” (T Chagiga 2,3-4 parr). In bChag. 15a it is added that Elisha ben Abuya was led astray, as he saw also Metatron sitting on a throne the heavenly court. Thus he concluded that there are two divinities.

While reconsidering this story against the background of the remarks made by Rachel Elior I realized all of a sudden that this story contains striking parallels with the description of the temptations of Christ in the desert. Before being brought to the desert Jesus was baptized by John. This baptismal experience as such may hint to a specific period in the liturgical calendar. In his prophetic garb John was reminding the people of their sins and calling them to do *teshuva*, repentance. The most appropriate period for doing *teshuva*, repentance, of course is the period from the first of Elul to the tenth of Tishri, Yom Kippur.

This ritual cleansing was followed by forty days of fasting in the desert. Temptations are waiting everyone who is fasting as a preparation for a mystical experience. There is a striking parallel between the three temptations mentioned in the gospels of Matthew and Luke and the temptations Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma en Elisha ben Abuya failed to withstand. The first in both gospels is the challenge to change stones into bread. Only one who has lost his mind will set his teeth in a stone. That could have happened to Ben Zoma. The second according to Matthew and the third for Luke is the invitation to jump from the pinnacle of the Temple. It is an invitation to commit suicide. Did something like that have caused the death of Ben Azzai? The third in Matthew and the second in Luke is the invitation to serve the pagan gods of this world instead of the God of Israel. The imagery of two competing powers in heaven creates the same kind of impression as given in this temptation. It means losing one’s faith in the God of Israel and sharing the fate of Elisha ben Abuya. In the Talmudic tradition, the ministering angels have to serve Akiva against their will. The gospels seem to indicate that in Jesus’ case the angels were more willing to serve.

So, once again I asked myself, what is the most suitable parallel in the Mosaic tradition to Jesus’ forty day period? As Jesus comes to John with the request to be baptized He insists, saying for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness. It is a declaration of solidarity with all who have sinned and transgressed the Torah. That is a more likely parallel for the second than for the first period Moses climbed the mountain.

It also teaches something about the acceptable aim of the mystical experience. A mystical experience should be valued as the final step in religious life. It is not leading to splendid isolation, but is on the contrary the first step on the difficult road of dealing with the problems of the members of a particular community. It is the climax of the preparation for leadership in a religious community. Moses reaches his mystic

experience after the success of liberating the people and the disappointment over the sin with the golden calf. His second term on Mount Sinai prepares him for the tough years ahead. Elijah searches the neighborhood of God because of his utter disappointment in the people of Israel after the failing success at Carmel. He now has to look for his own replacement. Both the four rabbis and Jesus are looking for the spiritual support in leading the people by following the path of Moses. In choosing this path Jesus apparently follows the example of Moses by first identifying with the sinning community.

### **Closing remarks:**

Although I am convinced that my talk tonight makes sense and can be useful to prepare us for the future, I have no idea yet how to apply my findings. Nevertheless, a few points.

Once again, the latter is a warning to those who are longing for a mystical experience. The failure of Ben Zoma, Ben Azzai and Elisha ben Abuya might be caused by their longing for the experience for a wrong reason. Their failure might be compared to the well meant, but ultimately selfish bringing of 'strange fire' (*esh zara*) by Aharon's sons Nadab and Abihu. A similar danger exists for all religiously motivated people.

Considering the first part of my talk, it seems to have been the wisdom of the rabbinic sages to understand that one can only maintain a community if the regulations are not only bearable but also agreeable and practicable for all concerned. This concept is well formulated in a famous midrash in Bavli Baba Bathra 60b. It tells of 'separatists' (Hebrew: *perushim*, Pharisees) who as an expression of mourning for the destruction of the temple decided to put an end to all joys of life:

Our Rabbis taught: When the Temple was destroyed for the second time, large numbers in Israel became ascetics (Pharisees), disallowing themselves from eating meat or drinking wine. R. Joshua got into conversation with them and said to them: 'My sons, why do you not eat meat nor drink wine?' They replied: 'Shall we eat flesh, which used to be brought as an offering on the altar, now that the altar is in abeyance? Shall we drink wine, which used to be poured as a libation on the altar, but now no longer?' He said to them: 'If that is so, we should not eat bread either, because the meal offerings have ceased.' They said: ['That is so, and] we can manage with fruit.' 'We should not eat fruit either, [he said,] because there is no longer an offering of first fruits.' 'Then we can manage with other fruits' [they said]. 'But, [he said,] we should not drink water, because there is no longer any ceremony of the pouring of water.' To this they could find no answer, so he said to them: 'My sons come and listen to me. Not to mourn at all is impossible, because the blow has fallen. To mourn overmuch is also impossible, because we do not impose on the community hardship, which the majority cannot endure...'

We will have to find our own middle way.