

Eid al-Fitr and Diwali

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

There is so much evil in the world that one almost gets inured. The senseless killing of innocents, regardless of where, is a disgrace to humanity. But obviously when it touches us personally it becomes so much more painful. I cannot write about the three young men abducted and murdered in Israel. Neither can I write about many of the reactions. An amazing sense of coming together and sadly, on the other hand, so much inhumane, prejudiced, and vengeful. Emotions are too raw. I will come back to it. But this week I offer you something trivial and abstract as a distraction.

Throughout Europe and parts of the USA there are moves to add Muslim and other holy days to the list of official state holidays. Is this about personal identity or evangelism? How should we as Jews respond? Our interaction with civil authorities has always tended to be passive or defensive on such issues. We have fought for the right of Jews to take holy days off school and work in order to celebrate our own religious occasions. In my youth I got permission to sit my Cambridge finals three days after everyone else, because the exams were held on Shabbat which was followed by two days of Shavuot. I was invigilated throughout those three days. But I certainly did not campaign for the university to change the date of the exams for everyone else. To my knowledge, in the Diaspora we have never sought to impose our holy days on others. But then, unlike others, we do not think it is an obligation to convert the rest of the world.

In the Jewish state, Israel, the recognition of Jewish holy days is enshrined in the law in the same way that most states recognize religious or political celebrations and milestones. But how far should one go in extending this idea in other countries? And perhaps more importantly, what happens when one religion's or people's festive days actually conflict ideologically with the established state's? In my youth we celebrated Guy Fawkes Day, commemorating when the Catholic Guy Fawkes tried to blow up the Houses of Parliament. Anti-Catholic sentiment was deeply enshrined in English custom for many centuries. Nowadays the fireworks in London are more likely due to Diwali, but we don't need a bank holiday for it.

The idea of state holidays is now common, and it's an unholy and illogical mess. Some holidays are religious ones, like Christmas and Easter. But of course within Christianity different denominations have their own special and particular dates for such occasions. So even a decision on when Christmas falls is theological. Then you have civil celebrations. These may include an Independence Day or a V-Day or Memorial Day for military victories, and the Left Wing have a May Day. Now we have a Holocaust Day, but it often seems only to encourage anti-Semitism. These are not necessarily days when parts of the economy, public offices, or schools are closed.

There is much debate nowadays as to whether religious holidays are really religious altogether. Is Halloween a religious festival or a civil one? What

about St. Patrick's Day, Mother's Day and Fathers' Days? Are they civil, religious, political, or commercial? Perhaps all holidays are now simply commercial opportunities, because if once upon a time they were days for everyone to be free from work, nowadays the retail and entertainment sectors are busier and more fully employed than at any other time.

And if in this multicultural world we want to be fair, we must allow all religions to have their holy days, and indeed we tend to, and so why not also have an Atheists' Day too? I am all for having days that different cultures or interests find significant. It is all part of a broad education. The problem is only when they impinge on others.

The logic would be for states to preserve their historic culture, which includes religion. But in a rapidly mobile world, it does not make sense to accommodate every immigrant culture as if it were THE national culture. There are more Frenchmen than almost any other minority in London now. Should they observe Bastille Day?

I do strongly believe in the separation of state and religion in matters of legislation, other than symbolically. But I also believe in making outsiders, immigrants, and minorities feel welcome and validated. So by all means, let there be days for Buddhists, Hindus, Scientologists, and Wiccans and Rastas and hippies and bikers, and let them celebrate their founders and their special days and their myths. But official state holidays, if at all, should reflect the origins of the particular state's culture, values, political origins, and survival. Everything else is an optional extra and should remain so.

And those poor suffering Englishmen who want a St. George's Day, or feel so discriminated against that they need to have a St. George's Parade up Fifth Avenue in New York, should get one. So long as I am not forced to celebrate it!