

Two Day Festivals

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Judaism began with 40 years of wandering in the desert, with plenty of time to celebrate festive days. Its calendar, based on both the solar and the lunar system, was the product of agricultural societies in the northern hemisphere. There was a commercial element, it is true, but nothing like the brute, mechanical, industrial societies that developed in the nineteenth century, which spawned our modern world.

Nowadays humans are divided into three categories. There are those who inherit their wealth, those who have to work for it, and those who rely on government handouts. It is the poor middle class, squeezed now from both sides, who must find living a Jewish religious life the most stressful nowadays, over three thousand years since the religion was founded.

In our advanced western societies, we live in an ethos where work has become an end in itself rather than simply a means of supporting one's family or surviving in order to accomplish more meaningful goals.

Work group peer pressures often expect us to put in the hours, to come in early and leave late not because the work demands it, but because appearance requires it. You have to show how dedicated you are, to the point where work must be your ultimate priority. Even if this might work to weed out the slackers on one level, it is bound to lead to other levels of dysfunction. But still, this is the zeitgeist.

So how does someone who is religious cope with these demands? I don't only refer to Orthodox Jews, but anyone of any religion which requires a measure of commitment to values and routines that are not necessarily compatible with work. What about Christians who do not want to work on Sundays or Muslims who want to fast all day during Ramadan? Well their problems are nothing when compared to ours!

Take this year. You take off your Shabbat on September the 12th, and then the following evening it's the Eve of Rosh Hashanah—two days off work, Monday and Tuesday. If you are strict, you will have the Fast of Gedaliah the day after. That leaves Thursday and Friday when you are double-tasking to make up, then wham, on Friday evening comes Shabbat again. OK, so you have Sunday and Monday as normal, but then Tuesday evening is Kol Nidrei and on Wednesday Yom Kipur. And you know it takes a day to recover your physical rhythms. But with barely time to regain your equilibrium, it is Friday night, and we are into Shabbat again.

Yes, it's true that you have now survived the heavy part and it's the Festival of Succot, which is much less cerebral, more sensual, and more fun. Except, if you are building a Succah where do you find the time to do all the work involved in setting it up and decorating it? What about all the cooking someone has to do for the holidays (unless you are hyper rich so can

afford those pricey kosher hotels). Come Sunday evening Sucot begins, so no work on Monday and Tuesday.

Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday you're playing catchup again. Friday evening it's Shabbat. Sunday morning and it is Hoshanah Rabba, with a much longer morning service. Sunday evening it's the final two days. First Shmini Atzeret and then Simchat Torah with lots of dancing, drinking, and eating, and you are utterly, utterly exhausted and drained, even if you do feel virtuous and spiritually cleansed. Regardless, come Wednesday you had better be bright-eyed and bushy-tailed at work, because everyone thinks you have just had a holiday.

In other words, out of 25 days you have taken off 13 for religious days.

If you are self-employed it might be easier (although it might cost you more). If you are employed by a religious Jew you can get away with it. If, like me, you have worked in Jewish education or the rabbinate all your life, you will have no problem. If you live on welfare or belong to a Chasidic court where work always takes a backseat it is easy. But otherwise? If your employment is in the general workplace, how the heck do you manage without having a nervous breakdown? I honestly do not know, and I can only hope the Almighty is very understanding of those who cannot!

One might argue that this only goes to prove that Judaism was always intended as a religion to be lived within a community where everyone was adhering to the Jewish calendar. It is true that in Israel it's so much easier because everyone has Jewish religious days off and of course because as a rule they only keep one day instead of two.

Except that Rosh Hashanah is two days in Israel as well and has been for more than two thousand years, because Rosh Hashanah is the only festival that starts on the first day of the month. In ancient times the lunar calendar that decided on New Months was fixed by visual sighting. Temple routines were exacting, and different days had different routines. So if you didn't find out until the last minute on a Monday that the New Moon had already begun, it might have been too late to carry out the complicated rituals. As many Jews were by then living in Babylon, and the old system of lighting bonfires from Jerusalem took so long, they decided that keeping two days for Rosh Hashanah would be the easiest solution.

The fact is that since the days of Hillel the Second, around 380 C.E., our calendars have relied on calculation, not sightings. We know precisely when the first day of Rosh Hashanah is every single year. So why do we still keep two days on all the other festivals, too, wherever we live in exile? Perhaps it was some sort of penalty for living outside Israel. Except that living in Israel adds so many extra agricultural rules that do not apply in the diaspora that it at least balances out. You can come up with any number of ingenious justifications and explanations. The simple fact is, it is tradition!

But, you might wonder, what if tradition is so demanding that it actually prevents people from keeping it? Doesn't the Talmud say, "You

cannot impose on the community new laws they simply cannot adhere to?" The trouble is that such arguments are both relativist and the thin edge of the wedge. Once you start overruling laws and customs on the grounds of difficulty, it is so easy to slide down the path of convenience and indulgence.

Here's the core of the issue. Those parts of Judaism that do indeed drop days do not see a rise in attendance and observance. On the contrary, once you start reducing officially, the slide begins all the way to assimilation. If I had any evidence that removing second days would help Jews become more observant, I'd be inclined to support it, but I don't. Those for whom Judaism is not a priority do not even keep one day. And those for whom it is, find a way of coping, however hard.

It is not easy. But it really is worth it. The more that the secular, material society encroaches and imposes, the more important it is to have an alternative value system and way of life. That way you get the best of two worlds. Nothing worthwhile comes easily.