

Bo February 4, 2017

וְהָיָה הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה לָכֶם לְזִכְרוֹן, וְחִגְתֶּם אֹתוֹ חֵג לַיהוָה: לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם, חֻקַּת עוֹלָם תִּחְגְּלוּהוּ

Exodus 12:14 *And this day shall be for you for a memorial, and you shall keep it a feast to Adonai; throughout your generations you shall keep it a feast by an ordinance forever.*



According to rabbinic tradition, twenty *mitzvot* (commandments) arise out of this week's Torah portion. The majority of these commandments (16) focus on the observance of Passover and its many rituals.

Attending a Passover *seder* is the most widely observed Jewish tradition for Jews the world over, irrespective of the level of religious observance. This is true of Israeli Jews. The [Pew Report](#) published on March 8, 2016 entitled, *Israel's Religiously Divided Society* reflects the most recent study on the religious beliefs and observances of Israeli Jews, drawing attention to the intersection between their religious and cultural life. The report states that 87% of secular Jewish Israelis say they hosted or attended a *Seder* last Passover, clearly the highest measure of any holiday observed by any segment of Jewish society. In an earlier [Guttman Center study](#), a much smaller number, 67%, responded with “important” or “very important” when asked about refraining from eating *hametz* (leavened products) during Passover. What does this tell us about the way that Israeli Jews view the relationship between the cultural and religious aspects of their sacred history and legal traditions?

The confluence of family values and religious traditions during Passover is unique for Israeli Jews. While the vast majority lead secular lives, most observe Passover by making or attending a *seder*. Israeli Jews gather for *seders* not primarily to observe the religious rules described in our weekly Torah portion. Rather the high adherence reflects a powerful cultural norm: Gathering as a family and following an historic convention. The Guttman Center report quotes Charles Liebman, professor of Political Science at Bar Ilan University, who learned through his research that “Israeli society is a family-oriented society, grounded on norms of family and home life; and this makes it extremely difficult to distinguish religious behavior in the sense used in the literature from behavior that is based on family values. Holding a Passover *seder* and lighting the Sabbath candles express the family value of being together but have no religious significance; these practices express family traditionalism, not religious traditionalism.”

This entwining of Jewish religious life and Jewish peoplehood existed in the early days of Israel's establishment. Despite living non-religious lives, early state-builders referred to the people of Israel as a nation realizing Divine will. David Ben-Gurion addressed the uniqueness of Israel and the Zionist dream in 1944 when he stated, “This people rose to prophetic visions of the unity of the Creator with His creation, of the dignity and infinite worth of the individual (because every man is created in the Divine Image), of social justice, universal peace and love.” And, later in a letter to Rabbi David Ben Maimon about religious authority, Ben-Gurion wrote

about the legitimacy of secular Jews, somewhat ironically by quoting scripture. Asserting that Psalm 15 “is the essence of Jewishness,” the Prime Minister asked: “Why should he that observes the *Sabbath* and *Kashrut* be considered a Jew but he who lives according to the Psalmist definition not be considered a Jew?” (JTA, 1958)

Many other Israeli statesmen have merged nationalist interests with subtle and sometimes not so subtle references to the sacredness of the Jewish people and the Land of Israel. Howard M. Sachar wrote in his seminal book, [The Course of Modern Jewish History](#), “The propaganda of the Religious Bloc obscured the fact that many of the country’s leading intellectuals were embarking on a serious quest for faith and were sharply questioning whether Israel’s future lay with pure secularism. They had seen their faith in socialism and international brotherhood shattered by the wars of the twentieth century, and were awakening, as a result, to the simple, undialectical humanism of the ancient Jewish tradition. This feeling was becoming so widespread that *sabras*—young, native-born Israelis—who once scorned religion as a symbol of Diaspora passivity, began to demonstrate a friendly interest in the theological viewpoint.” (1990 edition, p. 749)

Religious Zionists and their political parties exhibit an extreme adherence to *halacha*, Jewish law, as the only true expression of Jewish religious life in Israel. This delegitimizes the varied observances of Israeli Jews. Many traditions lie between the two extremes of the religious-secular spectrum. And perhaps this “in-between” group is the largest of all. As Daniel Elazar asserts in his essay, [“How Religious are Israeli Jews?”](#), published by the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, “Israel’s Jews are not divided into two groups but into four: ultra-Orthodox, religious Zionists, traditional Jews, and secular.” He says that this third group of Israeli Jews, “are people who value traditional Jewish life but who are prepared to modify *halakhically* required Jewish practices in those cases where they believe it to be personally necessary or attractive to do so. They cover the whole range of belief and observance from people of fundamentalist belief and looser practice to people who have interpreted Judaism in the most modern manner but retain some of its customs and ceremonies.”

In a couple of months 90% of Israeli Jews will bring this week’s Torah portion to life. Gathering around the *seder* table, retelling and reliving a 3,000 year old tradition, they will demonstrate that Israel’s history, based in religious scripture and liturgy, is felt by most Jews residing in the modern Jewish State.

Discussion Question:

Should Israelis strengthen their efforts to show the civil religious nature of the majority of Jewish citizens? If so, how would you suggest doing this? What is civil religion?

A study of Passover *Haggadot* created by early Zionist kibbutzniks shows that many made changes or additions to reflect their experience. One example can be found [here](#). Discuss the differences and similarities in content of these and more traditional *haggadot*.

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