4 *A New Hebrew Festival Calendar*

Darkness, darkness, go away!	בָּאנוּ חֹשֶׁךְ לְגָרֵשׁ.
We will burn you out today.	בְּיָדֵינוּ אוֹר וְאֵשׁ.
Each of us – a little light,	כָּל אֶחָד הוּא אוֹר קָטָן,
but together we are bright.	וְכֻלָּנוּ – אוֹר אֵיתָן.
Scram, O darkness, go, O black!	סוּרָה חֹשֶׁךְ! הָלְאָה שְׁחוֹר!
Scram, our light is back!	סוּרָה מִפָּנֵי הָאוֹר!

A popular children's song for Hanukkah by Sara Levi-Tanai from the 1940s that contrasts the realms of darkness and light in striking ways.

Cultural innovations were all well and good; the problem was how to consolidate them and make them last. Zionists met the challenge with help from the Jewish festival calendar. They revised old Jewish festivals and came up with completely new ones as part of an updated program that enshrined their revolution in the spirit of Hebrew nationalism.[1] And, since Jewish history is relatively long, they had a lot to work with. At the opening of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in 1925, the poet Haim Nahman Bialik reminded those present that "modern nations are not animated by religion anymore but by culture, a creative culture based on a national heritage that should be reexamined and renewed."[2]

Educational institutions played a crucial role in the spread of new Jewish festivals. This was true especially of kindergartens, where the future generations of the envisioned Jewish state were first socialized. It made the role of teachers more than usually important. Many educators were excited to shape the cultural curriculum of their new Hebrew

[1] A simple separation between religion and state was not really possible, perhaps not even desired in the Jewish case. See Hizky Shoham, "The History of Planting on Tu Bishvat" (מן העיר - ומן הכפר? על היווצרות הנטיעות הטקסיות בט"ו בשבט), *Israel* 22 (2014): 21–44, at p. 25.

[2] Ya'acov Shavit, "Culture Work" (עבודת הקולטורא), in Yehuda Reinharz, Yosef Shalmon, and Gideon Shimoni, eds., *Nationalism and Jewish Politics* (לאומיות ופוליטיקה יהודית), Zalman Shazar, 1997, p. 141.

society, and since the majority of them were women, this was a singular opportunity for many of them to contribute significantly to a cultural revolution that often betrayed the promises of equality it made them. Yemima Avidar-Tchernowitz (1909–1998) was one of those extraordinary teachers, whose popular book *My Kindergarten* (גן ילדי, 1947) introduced young children to the core Zionist festival calendar, shaped it, and circulated it.[3]

A quick look through the book's table of contents gives a clear picture of a national calendar that updated traditional Jewish festivals such as Passover, Hanukkah, and Purim, and introduced more original Zionist innovations, such as Arbor Day or Tu Bishvat, Shavu'ot (Pentecost), and Lag Ba'omer, which celebrated Jewish military prowess, the agricultural cycle, and the natural world of Palestine and its seasons. Toward the end of the book the editors inserted a short song that reminded readers why a book of this kind was needed. It is a duet between Jewish immigrants who arrive in the country and the community that welcomes them:

Song of the Jewish Immigrants (שיר העולים) by Levin Kipnis:

IMMIGRANTS: From far and away we came here to stay. We escaped exile with fear, glad to be here!	COMMUNITY: Bless you one and all! Bless you.
IMMIGRANTS: We were the first to go, but others will soon come in tow. Exile is dark, our land, a bright spark!	COMMUNITY: Bless you one and all! Bless you.
IMMIGRANTS: In exile we toiled for others, and worked not for our brothers. Here we shall be free, to revive our land with glee.	COMMUNITY: Bless you one and all! Bless you.

Some of the renewed Zionist holidays, such as Hanukkah and Purim, emphasized Jewish military power. Others, such as Passover, stressed the

[3] Yemima Avidar-Tchernowitz and Levin Kipnis, *My Kindergarten* (גן ילדי), facsimile ed., Oranit Publishing, 2011.

agrarian origin of Jewish culture. Context often determined the thematic boundaries between them. Purim was an urban festival; Passover was connected with the farming sector. Other holidays, such as Hanukkah or Shavu'ot, were popular in schools. Most of the festivals Zionists renewed were relatively minor ones in the traditional Jewish calendar. Some of them, such as Lag Ba'omer and Tu Bishvat, were completely new. This gave Zionists a good deal of creative freedom.

Festivals in the Yishuv were ceremonious affairs, some of them even sacramental. In the Diaspora, wrote shepherd-poet Matityahu Shellem, outside of a national context, Jews replaced their ancient ceremonies with humbler celebrations in the family circle.[4] The creation of a modern Jewish nation returned festivals to the public sphere, usually with an addition called מְסֶכֶת, a program of texts that were declaimed at the opening of festivals with a solemnity we would probably think bombastic today. The texts were meant to educate people and draw a new time map for the new national community. Declamations gave New Hebrews an opportunity to pause and reflect on the meaning of the national project they were engaged in, and ceremonies lent majesty to those moments.

Celebrating Jewish Power: Hanukkah, Purim, Lag Ba'omer

Zionists longed for power – physical power in particular. It wasn't a violent urge at first. When Nordau spoke about a muscular Judaism, he meant gym culture, replacing the sedentary habits of Jews with physical exercise and a love of nature. The desire for power was a desire for the recognition and respect it would bring from non-Jews. Militarism was absent from early Zionist thought, certainly from mainstream Zionist thinking, as it was from traditional Jewish culture. The rabbis had paid almost no attention to Jewish military heroes such as Judah Maccabee or Shimon Bar Kokhba, because they had little relevance for Jewish life in the Diaspora. Zionists wanted to change that, and used the festival calendar to introduce physical and then political power into the vocabulary of their new secular culture. Hanukkah was the first in a line of festivals that celebrated Jewish power even before the rise of Zionism.

[4] Ellah Zevulun and Dov Meisel, eds., *Matityahu Shellem: Kibbutz Festivals* (החג ביישוב הקיבוצי), Ramat Yohanan, 1984, pp. 14–5.

It was followed by Purim and finalized by Lag Ba'omer, a completely new addition to the festival calendar.

Hanukkah

Hanukkah commemorates the first Jewish war of independence, waged by Judean rebels against the Seleucids in 164 BCE, and the establishment of an independent Jewish kingdom under the Hasmonean kings following its success. The book of Maccabees recounts that war and the rededication (*hanukkah* in Hebrew) of the Hebrew Temple in Jerusalem after the Jewish victory. Chapter 4 in the first book of Maccabees chronicles the rededication ceremony and the lighting of the temple menorah or candelabra, which became a symbol of the event:

> They burnt incense on the altar, and lighted the lamps on the candlestick to shine light in the Temple. 49
>
> And they kept the dedication of the altar for eight days and offered burnt offerings with gladness and offered the sacrifice of deliverance and praise. 54
>
> Moreover, Judas and his brothers with the whole congregation of Israel ordained that the days of the dedication of the altar should be kept in their season from year to year for eight days, from the five and twentieth day of the month Kislev, with joy and gladness. 59

Since Jews in the Diaspora were seldom involved in politics before the modern era, the national dimensions of Hanukkah gradually lost their relevance. Until the end of the nineteenth century the festival was celebrated mainly by children, who marked it by lighting a menorah for eight days and by playing parlor games. The festival rose in importance during the Haskala, when it became a "Jewish Christmas" of sorts, a convenient day for Jews who were not completely assimilated to mark their distinct identity and still participate in the general European bourgeois culture – the festival was frequently referred to as a Maccabee party or ball.

Hanukkah owed its secular popularity to the social discomfort of assimilated Jews, who were "a kind of superior proletariat," as Herzl wrote in *Altneuland*. Jewish doctors and lawyers could not "simply slip into public posts, like their Christian colleagues," Herzl observed. If they did not want to become merchants, they had to improvise and engage "in secret diseases and unlawful legal affairs." While many Jews

integrated fairly well into Christian society, barriers to their complete acceptance by non-Jews remained stubbornly in place. The Austro-Hungarian composer Gustav Mahler, for instance, felt it advantageous to convert to Catholicism before applying to head the Vienna Court Opera, the Hofoper.

The sense of social and cultural alienation must have been felt especially during the Christmas season, which became the highest point of the civic religious calendar in Europe by the end of the nineteenth century. Think about Charles Dickens' 1848 *A Christmas Carol*, or Thomas Mann's 1901 German epic *Buddenbrooks*, and the central place Christmas plays in those and similar novels that helped define the European middle class. Even after Christmas was commercialized as a bourgeois family festival, it retained Christian associations that were not comfortable for many Jews. Shall we call it a "Hanukkah Tree"? wondered Herzl, with a tinge of guilt perhaps, after Moritz Güdemann, a prominent Viennese rabbi, visited his home in December 1895 and was surprised to see that the Herzls had a decorated Christmas tree. The festival of Hanukkah solved that problem, and became an opportunity for secular Jews to get together during the Christmas season without feeling guilty about it. "After the guests ate and drank their fill," we read in Agnon's novel *A Simple Story*, "they began making merry, singing Passover songs whose lyrics they replaced with silly words." The organizers of the party are described as Zionists, and the festival is an excuse for an evening of drinking and card games.

Hanukkah had an additional benefit: it was a story about strong Jews, and Zionists loved it. Romantic ideas about honor were integral to national ideology and the military culture it encouraged. Both Herzl and his colleague Max Nordau frequently referred to honor and railed against the popular image of Jews as cowards. They urged their coreligionists to "toughen up" and become feisty and fearless, and to prove their mettle by the national standards of the day. Celebrating Hanukkah became a good opportunity to fight antisemitism, to remind the world of the Jewish heroic past and of its future potential. Bialik could not understand why the great book of Maccabees, as he put it, had not been incorporated into the books of the Hebrew Bible. "O children of the Maccabees," he concluded his 1899 poem "The Vanguard" (למתנדבים בעם), "Let the nation rise, let the people stand! / Rekindle the light, rekindle the light!" The first Hanukkah soirées in

the German-speaking world emphasized the military heroism of Jews, and programs usually included speeches and music that celebrated it (see Figure 4.1).

Hanukkah and Zionism

The potent aspects of Hanukkah developed in the Yishuv into an open celebration of Jewish nationalism, and then militarism, after the conflict with the Arabs escalated. The festival became more didactic too, and, ironically, directed at children again. But if in the Diaspora children played diverting games and received candy, Yishuv children learned

Fig. 4.1 Illustration of Judah Maccabee by Tzvi Livni (Malevanchik) from a collection of stories for children, Ya'acov Hurgin, ed., *The Chain of Heroism* (שלשלת הגבורה), Tel Aviv, El-Hama'ayan, 1946. In the introduction Hurgin writes: "In these dark days for our people, this is a timely book that will foster in our children a sense of pride in their glorious past and a respect for the heroic acts of yore … and will discourage feelings of inferiority that the oppressive present may arouse in their fragile souls." Israel Museum, Illustration Library, courtesy of Ilana Gil.

about Jewish political history, held torchlit marches, sang heroic songs, and staged plays about the ancient Jewish wars for independence.

The knot between Hanukkah and nationalism was first tied by the principal of Rishon Letzion's high school – Yehuda Leib Matmon-Cohen, who later ran the Herzlia Gymnasium – who in 1905 organized a public torchlit march to commemorate the victory of the Maccabees. He was summarily fired, however, as a precaution against retaliation from the Turkish authorities, who were wary of such public displays of nationalism. But it was a small snag in Hanukkah's quick promotion to the Yishuv's most patriotic festival, an early Zionist Independence Day to which various national causes were routinely pinned. "We wanted to stress the heroic sides of Hanukkah," said Yemima Avidar-Tchernowitz, who encouraged kindergartens and schools to focus on Judah Maccabee and other ancient heroes.[5] Another teacher remembered the first celebrations of Hanukkah "as a huge festival ... the preparations lasted for weeks … we would dance and sing in the streets for hours."[6] In the 1920s "there were marches all over Tel Aviv. It was an enormous event, candles everywhere, heaven on earth. [And] the children marching in the middle with the adults beside them holding torches, [with] singing, and [music] … everything was so wonderfully Zionistic," that is, patriotic.[7]

Artists, composers, choreographers, writers, and poets were enlisted to help teachers shape the new Zionist festival calendar. There was a constant demand for original materials in Hebrew, remembered Levin Kipnis, songwriter and pedagogue extraordinaire. The Hebrew language war of 1913–1914 saw Kipnis and other educators at the forefront. "We convened the first [teachers'] seminar then … and everyone was terribly excited about it. There weren't many of us at the time, but we were all [very committed to the Hebrew national idea] and so the first children's song I wrote was for Hanukkah."[8] Teachers were hungry for new materials, and were "always running after [poets], pleading with them to write something for their young charges" so they could use it

[5] Nillie Arieh-Sapir, "The Procession of Lights: Hanukkah as a National Festival in Tel Aviv, 1909–1936" (תהלוכת האור: חנוכה כחג לאומי בתל-אביב), *Katedra* 103 (2002): 131–150, at p. 136.
[6] Ibid., p. 137.
[7] Ibid., p. 141.
[8] Tsippi Fleischer, *Historical Development of the Hebrew Song*, 1964/2009, www.tsippifleischer.com/book/, vol. II, p. 387.

to celebrate the festivals.[9] Their zeal must have been substantial because as early as 1933 the poet Nathan Alterman parodied it in his popular children's poem "A Great Big Miracle" (נס גדול היה פה).[10] The rhymes poke fun at the jingoism of the Hanukkah tradition that developed in the Yishuv by staging the heroic revolt of the Maccabees as a Zionist *Toy Story*, with dishes, rags, toys, and pets staging a mighty fight for Jewish independence.

Purim

The Purim festival as recounted in the book of Esther commemorates an unsuccessful plot to exterminate the Jews of Persia. The plot is hatched by the king's chief advisor, Haman, who feels disrespected by a Jew named Mordecai and decides to punish him by killing off all the kingdom's Jews on a day chosen by lot (*purim* means 'lots'). As it happens, the king's favorite concubine is Esther, Mordecai's niece. When Esther tells him about the plot to kill her people, the outraged king orders Haman's execution and promotes Mordecai to his position. However, since Haman had already incited the pogrom, the king permits the Jews to defend themselves, and they do so with great success. The festival of Purim marks their victory.

As in the Hanukkah story, the instruction to observe this victory is ordained not by God but by leaders of the community:

> 20 And Mordecai wrote these things, and sent letters unto all the Jews that were in all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus, near and far, 21 to fix the fourteenth day and the fifteenth day of the month of Adar, every single year, 22 the days when the Jews had rest from their enemies, and the month which was turned for them from sorrow to gladness, and from mourning into a good day; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, and of sending portions of food to one to another, and gifts to the poor. (Esther 9:20–22)

If Hanukkah became a prominent festival prior to the rise of Zionism in Europe, Purim was the first modern Jewish festival to be revived in Palestine. It was an important part of early Yishuv culture, certainly

[9] Ibid.

[10] Nathan Alterman, *It Happened on Hanukkah or the Great Miracle* (זה היה בחנוכה או נס גדול היה פה), illustrations by Danny Kerman, Hakibbutz Hame'uhad, 2001.

the most visible part of it. But something peculiar happened to the festival in the Yishuv. While traditional celebrations of Purim emphasized Jewish power and celebrated it, Yishuv society underplayed it and chose to emphasize other aspects of the story instead. Observant Jews mark Purim by a public reading of the book of Esther in synagogue, a ritual that involves public gloating over the fall of the Jew-hating Haman and joy over the destruction of the Jews' enemies in the spirit of Esther 9:5: "Thus the Jews struck all their enemies with the stroke of the sword by slaughter and destruction, and did as they willed to those who hated them."

A decisive military victory of this kind should have appealed to Zionists. Instead, they emphasized the more carnivalesque sides of the occasion, its general merrymaking, drinking, and the tradition of the *Purimspiel*, the staging of shows based on the book of Esther. Perhaps it was due to the nature of the Jewish triumph in Esther, a surprising, last-minute victory that was negotiated by a VIP, a very bloody triumph – the Bible tells us of 800 people butchered in the city of Susa, and of 75,000 more casualties throughout the kingdom – and the distasteful gloating over it. Since the existence of Jewish communities in the Diaspora was often precarious, the Purim story was reassuring. It was comforting to fantasize about the influence of a clever Jewish intermediary, a last-minute escape from danger, a complete trouncing of their enemies, etc. But Zionists wanted to change this power dynamic, and used the festival to affirm the energy and the joy of their young national community. The costumes, floats, and slogans during Purim promoted the achievements of the Yishuv and put them on display. Almost from the start the Tel Aviv Purim carnival was sanctioned by the municipal authorities, who helped to organize it and led it.[11]

The Zionist overhaul of the festival began in Tel Aviv early in the 1900s with dance parties and masquerades organized by the dancer and dynamic cultural agent Baruch Agadati. Following the great popularity of Agadati's private Purim parties, they were quickly made public and received official sanction. In 1912 Tel Aviv had its first Purim carnival with a public procession and participants wearing costumes and masks, an annual event that became a venerable civic tradition in the Yishuv until budget problems and then World War II diminished it.

[11] For a photo of the Purim carnival procession in the early 1930s see https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:PikiWiki_Israel_47268_Tel_aviv.jpg.

In 1926 the Purim carnival – or Adloyada (from the Hebrew "to oblivion") a reference to the customary binge drinking – saw the addition of a beauty pageant, named Esther the Hebrew Queen after its biblical namesake. The objectifying criteria of the Zionist beauty contests tell us a lot about the values of their organizers, who wanted to select "the most beautiful and typical woman of Tel Aviv," as the daily *Doar Hayom* announced on January 29, 1926, someone who would represent the aesthetic side of the Yishuv and become the face of the new Hebrew nation that was being created in Palestine.

The first beauty queens to win the title between 1926 and 1929 represented the aesthetic values of their day. The politics of taste behind the selection of the first beauty queen in 1926 were obscured by the fact that, instead of the official contenders, an exceptionally attractive member of the audience, a woman named Lyla Tchertkov, was selected spontaneously by the audience. "She had gentle green eyes, and her black hair surrounded her head like a sparkling crown," reported *Doar Hayom* (see Figure 4.2).

Rekieta Chelouch, the 1927 queen, was selected for her Sephardi origin and her long roots in Palestine, which strengthened the Zionist claims of native connections (see Figure 4.3).

Fig. 4.2 Lyla Tchertkov, Tel Aviv Purim beauty pageant queen, 1926. Photo: A. Tchertkov Collection, Tel Aviv/National Library of Israel.

Fig. 4.3 Rekieta Chelouch, Tel Aviv Purim beauty pageant queen, 1927. Photo: National Library of Israel.

Fig. 4.4 Zipora Tzabari, Tel Aviv Purim beauty pageant queen, 1928. Photo: S. Korbman, the Museum of the History of Tel Aviv–Yafo Collection/ National Library of Israel.

The third and most well-known beauty queen was Zipora Tzabari, a shy milkmaid from a Yemeni family, who was discovered on one of her milk routes. Her dark complexion satisfied the Zionist pursuit of native Mediterranean, or "oriental," credentials, as they were called at the time (see Figure 4.4).

The fourth was Hannah Meyuhas-Polani, whose blonde hair and light skin represented the Ashkenazi community, as the papers put it (see

Fig. 4.5 Hannah Meyuhas-Polani, Tel Aviv Purim beauty pageant queen, 1929. Photo: National Library of Israel.

Figure 4.5). Taken together, they literally embodied the physical shape that the new Zionist society wished to take. The pageant acknowledged the diverse ethnic heritage of Jews – contestants wore ethnic costumes instead of swimsuits – and the hope that a native type would emerge by mixing them all.

Like other civic holidays that developed with the spread of nationalism, the festival of Purim had distinct commercial aspects.[12] But it was also the most visible and elaborate display of Zionist cultural inventiveness. Purim became hugely popular in the Yishuv and demonstrated the thirst for cultural invention and the creative energy of a secular Jewish society that emphasized life over learning. It was also the only urban festival of a culture that frowned on city life and encouraged farming. Nevertheless, the association of Purim with Tel Aviv, the so-called first Hebrew city, validated its credentials as a Zionist celebration.

[12] Hizky Shoham, "A Huge National Assemblage: Tel Aviv as a Pilgrimage Site in Purim Celebrations (1920–1935)," *Journal of Israeli History* 28: 1 (March 2009): 1–20.

Lag Ba'omer

The festival of Lag Ba'omer capped the Zionist celebration of Jewish power and political agency. Not surprisingly it was also one of two holidays that had no precedent in Jewish history – the other is Tu Bishvat or Arbor Day. The festival celebrates a Jewish strongman, Shimon Bar Kokhba, the leader of the failed Jewish rebellion against the Romans in the second century CE. Bar Kokhba presided over a spectacular political and military failure, a rebellion that brought death to half a million Jews and angered the Romans so much that they sold many of the surviving Jews into slavery and erased the name of Judea from their records, changing it to the province of Syria Palaestina. For much of Jewish history Bar Kokhba languished in a relative obscurity that many felt was well deserved. In the Middle Ages he was briefly revived by Spanish Jews as proof of the nation's military credentials. But it was Romantic Nationalism that made him into a Jewish King Arthur or William Tell, a national liberator whose name became the stuff of legends.[13]

The change was first suggested by a creative German Rabbi, Samuel Mayer, who in 1840 published a serial novel called *Bar Kokhba the Messiah King*.[14] In one of the more imaginative moments in the novel the Jewish leader meets a fierce lion, overcomes the beast, and tames it. It was a simplistic literary device that reworked the Samson story, but it was readily embraced by German Jews eager for "manly" credentials. Bar Kokhba soon joined Judah Maccabee as a paragon of Jewish heraldry and the namesake of Jewish sports clubs and youth movements throughout Europe. The fanatical general also inspired Nordau to tell delegates to the Second Zionist Congress that, "for the first time since the desperate war of the great Bar Kokhba, we can finally understand the terrible damage that 1800 years of exile have done to us."[15]

The rising popularity of Bar Kokhba and his heroic appeal called for commemoration, and in the early 1900s it was fixed for LG Ba'omer, the thirty-third day of the Omer period (the numerical value of the letters L and G in the Hebrew alphabet is 33; Omer refers to ancient

[13] For a 1905 statue of Bar Kokhba by the artist Enrico Glicenstein see www.nli.org.il/he/archives/NNL_ARCHIVE_AL997009633120605171/NLI#$FL170200444.

[14] Sara Turel, "Bar Kokhba, Creating a Myth," in *Bar Kokhba: Historical Memory and the Myth of Heroism* (בר כוכבא: הבנייתו של מיתוס), Land of Israel Museum, 2016, p. 13.

[15] Ibid., p. 15.

farming dates that marked different harvests). The date was associated with old traditions of mourning over the failed rebellion, which end on that day and are marked by expressions of joy. At some point they included outings to the countryside and games of different kinds, including archery. Another custom that developed separately in Palestine around that day included lighting candles, torches, or fires in honor of Galilean rabbis connected with the ancient rebellion. In the 1920s Zionists combined these disparate traditions to create a new festival and another day that celebrated Jewish strength and the struggle for national independence.

"I believe we need to connect the story of Bar Kokhba to the situation in the Galilee today," wrote Rachel Yana'it Ben-Zvi in the early 1900s. She was referring to the security problems at Zionist farms that were attacked by neighboring Arabs. "I decided to put together a pamphlet that will give people a better picture of the leader of the rebellion against the Romans, not just one for school children. I wonder if he was anything like Ezekiel, was he as short as him? Maybe he was more like Alexander Zaïd, a man of few words … or like Mendeleh Portugali, tall and cheerful?" Ezekiel, Alexander, and Mendeleh were friends of Yana'it Ben-Zvi who worked as watchmen in Jewish settlements in the Galilee. Like many Zionists she conflated present and past. When she handed out the pamphlet to people who came for the more traditional fire-lighting Lag Ba'omer celebrations in the Galilee, they were confused at first. "How is [Bar Kokhba] connected to Lag Ba'omer?" someone asked.[16]

But by the 1920s the connection was clear to all, and the new festival became a big hit in the Yishuv. In kindergarten, children declaimed a rousing song about the general's meeting with the lion:

Bar Kokhva,[17] as you know,
was a brave bro.
He climbed the lion,
And rode it to Zion,
Over valleys and hill,
Shouting freedom with thrill.
The nation all clapped,
Our hero is back!
He's back!

[16] Yana'it Ben-Zvi, *We Are Immigrating to Israel*, (אנו עולים) pp. 103–104.
[17] The colloquial Israeli pronunciation is Kochva.

Teenagers loved the lion tamer too and spent the day playing with makeshift bows and arrows in his honor. At night they lit bonfires and gathered around them, bonding as a nation in the making, a nation of strong Jewish men, who in the words of 2 Samuel 1:17, "teach the children of Judea archery." Literally.[18]

Celebrating the Jewish Return to the Land: Passover, Shavu'ot, Sukkot, Omer, Tu Bishvat

The Zionist desire for physical agency was complemented by the wish for a return to the land in literal and symbolic ways. This figment of European Romantic Nationalism was actually inscribed in the festival calendar of Jews, who began their national life as a pastoral people, after all, and whose ancient festivals focused on farming. Indeed, one of the greatest feats of the rabbis after the fall of Bar Kokhba was to replace the centrality of the land in the Israelite cult with a focus on text. It changed Jews from an agricultural community to a textual or imagined community. One of the greatest feats Zionists managed was to swing that pendulum back by retrofitting existing festivals, by resurrecting extinct festivals, and by inventing completely new festivals in the spirit of modern nationalism that turned Jews into a political community again.

Passover: From a Family Festival to an Agricultural Feast

Passover, *pesach* in Hebrew, is one of the most important festivals in the traditional Jewish calendar. It is a national foundation story that describes the exodus of the Israelites from captivity in Egypt and their re-formation as an independent nation on their way back to their ancestral land, the Land of Israel.[19] It is the first of three major holidays in the Bible that mandated pilgrimage to Jerusalem. With the destruction of the Temple in the first century CE and the eventual growth of substantial Jewish communities outside Palestine, annual trips to Jerusalem became moot. Instead, an alternative festival tradition developed for Passover

[18] For a photo of Lag Ba'omer on Kibbutz Migdal Oz in 1932 see www.nli.org.il/he/archives/NNL_ARCHIVE_AL990100969683450517 1/NLI#$FL5532637.

[19] For a discussion of Passover as a myth invented by the sixth-century BCE Judean king Josiah see Elon Gilad, *The Secret History of Judaism* (ההיסטוריה הסודית של היהדות), Am Oved, 2023, pp. 29–35, as well as Jacob L. Wright, *Why the Bible Began*, Cambridge University Press, 2023.

that was eventually centered around the family. At some time in the Middle Ages the tradition became rich enough to be compiled into a miscellany or instructional reader. Named the Passover Haggadah, it was a compendium of stories, homilies, benedictions, prayers, and ritual poems that retell the exodus from Egypt as a kind of revenge story in which the terrible punishment God visits on the Egyptians becomes a projection of the Jews' wish to avenge themselves on their persecutors. Vengeance was initially directed at crusading Christians, but ultimately became a wish to take revenge on any persecutor of Jews, at any time. While the reading of the Haggadah during the ritual meal transformed the family into a symbolic nation that reenacted its past on an annual basis, the vengeful aspects of the celebration perpetuated a Jewish sense of victimhood.

Because Passover was such a major Jewish festival, the ability to modify it significantly was limited, but it wasn't necessary because the festival already spoke about national birth. Zionists simply emphasized the historical parallels between the exodus from Egypt and the settlement of Canaan and their own national project. These changes were not unusual, in fact, and followed an old tradition. Official bibliographies list thousands of different *haggadot* that were created throughout history in Jewish communities around the world. The basic order or *seder* of the festival is identical in all of them, although many readers include added materials that reflect local traditions. Zionists did the same, and the changes they made were telling. They minimized the sense of persecution and victimhood and emphasized instead the agricultural roots of the festival and their connection to the land.

Not surprisingly, the kibbutz movement contributed some of the most significant changes to the Passover celebration under Zionism and, in the tradition of the genre, produced a variety of *haggadot*. Common to all of them was a shift from a revenge story and a reliance on God to a story of national rebirth and an independent life on the nation's ancestral soil. The fact that the contents of the Haggadah were amenable to change as a matter of tradition lessened the force of the new additions. At the same time, because the celebration of Passover on kibbutzim retained many of its traditional elements – including a festive meal that involved the entire kibbutz community as a symbolic family – its ideological rewriting stood out in contrast. It was another example of the Zionist fondness for filling old vessels with new wine.

The changes were not obvious, or even coherent, at first. An early Passover on Kibbutz Bet Alfa was held in the mountains nearby. As

celebrants seated themselves on one side of a small canyon, "several other members stood on a rock on the opposite side and recounted the life of Moses through song and dance." One of the dancers remembered how terrified she was that one of the performers might fall off the rock during the performance.[20] Not everyone liked it. "The difference between the majesty of the Passover seder at my father's house [in Eastern Europe] and our first frivolous attempts at it was very painful to me," recalled a member of another kibbutz. "I would lock myself up in my room and long not just for my parents' home … but for a more meaningful secular existence."[21]

In time, the kibbutz Haggadah took on a distinct form through changes to the text, the artwork, and especially the music, all of which emphasized a particular Hebrew nationalism. Thanksgivings to God were replaced with poems about the agricultural cycle and the beauty of the land, and rabbinic homilies about the exodus were replaced with biblical citations about it. References to the persecution of Jews were counterbalanced with an emphasis on Zionist defiance, especially during the 1940s. Finally, traditional songs in praise of God – "Ehad mi Yode'a," "Had Gadya," and "Dayeynu" – were often replaced with poems or proclamations of a more nationalistic type.

Music played an important part in the kibbutz *seder*, as in the exemplary Haggadah of Kibbutz Yagur. It was composed by Yehuda Sharet (1901–1979), an accomplished folk musician, who wrote a rich festival program of original music, texts, and staged agricultural rituals that became one of his most celebrated works. In many ways the Yagur Haggadah was a Jewish passion play that replaced the passion of Christ with the passion of the exodus from Egypt, which it staged before the whole community as a public profession of its core beliefs.

The 1947 edition of the Yagur Haggadah replaced the traditional blessing that opens the *seder* with a dramatic proclamation about the spring harvest. SPRING, reads the first page, which goes on to announce the first harvest of the year:

> The field in its sheaves is ready for harvest.
> Each sheaf heavy with grains.
> Is the sun setting? Asks the reaper.
> Yea – replies the congregation.

[20] Yoram Goren, *Fields Dressed in Dance* (שדות לבשו מחול), Ramat Yohanan, 1984, p. 33.
[21] Zevulun and Misel, eds., *Kibbutz Festivals*, p. 98.

> Shall I use this sickle to harvest?
> Yea – replies the congregation.
> Shall I harvest this field? He asks again.
> Yea – replies the congregation.

The exchange is based on a Mishnaic text – this was unusual for kibbutz festivals, which preferred the more "genuine" Hebrew Bible – about an ancient Jewish cultic ritual which was adapted here to the new Jewish life on the land. It also refers to the kibbutz community by the traditional Jewish term, "congregation." Old and new are mixed here together, the ancient roots of the festival with Zionist innovations.

Haggadot on kibbutzim often replaced traditional references to God with more nationalist materials, such as Bialik's grand poem "The Last Mortals of the Desert" (מתי מדבר אחרונים), which emphasizes Jewish self-sufficiency and independence: "No! We shall not eat stale bread, partridge or manna from heaven," it asserts. Instead, Zionists declare their intention to eat "the fruits of their labor." Likewise, the hard labor that Adam and Eve are sentenced to after their ejection from Eden is embraced in kibbutz *haggadot* as a blessing, not a curse.

Agricultural rituals became integral parts of the Passover passion play on kibbutzim that emphasized connection to the land. Before the text above was read, a column of children carrying bundles of sheaves would enter the dining hall, pass before the community, lift the bundles up, and then lay them down as the choir declaimed: "What are these bundles of sheaves in your hands? It is the blessing of the earth and of labor / sheaves of a new crop."

The kibbutz *seder* was much more performative than the intimate family meals of traditional *seder*s. It was probably inevitable given the size of the community. Still, the combination was unique and telling. On the eve of Passover, the entire kibbutz sat together to eat as one big family and celebrated the nation's renewal in grand fashion. "From time to time I had to get outside and wipe my eyes," recalled the participant who had been upset by the first feeble attempts to celebrate the festival. He was deeply moved by the meaningful changes that had been made to it since. For some, the experience of renewal was sensual, and they remembered "the smell of cooking food, of wine, of freshly cut flowers … [that] drifted through the kibbutz [on the eve of the holiday], mixed with the smell of freshly cut hay, of cow dung and of tree blossom."[22] If the simulation of

[22] Ibid., pp. 150–151.

Torah study within the family circle was a medieval innovation of the traditional *seder*, as Hizky Shoham showed, the kibbutz *seder* became a passion[ate] [dis]play of a community of Zionist believers.[23]

Shavu'ot (Pentecost)

Shavu'ot, or the Feast of Weeks, was renewed in ways that should be familiar by now: an ancient Jewish festival that received a Zionist update according to the ideals of Romantic Nationalism. Shavu'ot completes the cycle of spring festivals that begins with Passover. The name refers to the seven weeks of the Omer period between the end of spring and beginning of summer and the Temple offerings connected with it. Again, the festival lost much of its significance after the destruction of the Temple. Instead, traditions that associated Shavu'ot with the law-giving event at Sinai developed and emphasized the study of scripture. Zionists did away with those traditions and revived the ancient farming roots of a festival that was celebrated mainly by children in the Yishuv.

The festival received a significant boost in the early 1930s, when it began to be hosted by the city of Haifa in an attempt to compete with Tel Aviv and its popular Purim festival. For one of the first celebrations of the festival, in June 1930, the farmers of the plains and valleys around Haifa were invited to display and celebrate the fruits of their labor. "Thousands of people came to see the children of Haifa and [Kibbutz] Yagur, who brought the fruits of their harvest and other products from factories in the area. An orchestra played music, and the Haifa school choir sang Hebrew songs."[24]

Two years later the city issued the following announcement "to the residents of Hadar-Hacarmel!" in Haifa, which read: "Popular celebrations are planned in the city over the next few days. The celebration of the 'First Fruits' will attract many guests from around Haifa, from the valley, from Samaria, and from the country at large and will be held in [the neighborhood of] Hadar-Hacarmel."

[23] Hizky Shoham, "The Jewish Family: Passover," in *Israel Celebrates: Jewish Holidays and Civic Culture in Israel*, Brill, 2017, pp. 20–63. For a photo of a Passover *seder* on Kibbutz Gan Shmuel see https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:PikiWiki_Israel_1542_Kibutz_Gan-Shmuel_sk1-_10_ _גן-שמואל-סדר_הפסח_1947.jpg.

[24] Yair Safran and Tamir Goren, "Shavu'ot Celebrations in Haifa" (חגיגת שבועות בחיפה), *Haifa Historical Society Bulletin* (בטאון העמותה לתולדות חיפה) 16 (December 2018): 25–27.

"Popular" and "planned" are not complementary. The prediction about guest numbers is speculative as well. Both disclose the engineering aspects of cultural innovation in the Yishuv and the energy behind it. The announcement instructs the public that "the days of the festival and the popular celebrations that will follow will symbolize the gladness of the Hebrew nation on its soil during the feast of the first fruit." Residents are also told that they "should feel very lucky to have the good fortune to host the festival in [their] neighborhood." They are asked to "appreciate the project that the [voluntary] festival committee took upon itself" and "help by beautifying the houses and the streets." The note concludes with an enthusiastic injunction that uses language from the Purim story: "Let there be gladness and light during the [upcoming festival] in the Hebrew city of Haifa!"[25]

Shavu'ot provided a good opportunity for a community that wished to become politically independent and economically self-sufficient, and put great emphasis on realizing both through a physical and spiritual connection to the soil. The occasion stressed these values and displayed the skill of Jewish laborers and the potential of the land to flow with "milk and honey." In 1932 the Haifa celebrations were extended to include

> an artistic program of theater, athletic shows, dance concerts and balls. The next day saw a concert by local choirs and a morning show for children. The high point of the day was a festive procession with samples of produce, that ended at the technical school, the Technion, where the produce was ceremoniously received by various officials with the ancient Temple benediction, "Brothers, welcome in peace."

Two years later, in 1934, the festival had become a hopping success. The papers reported that Haifa was "teeming with people … and that the organizers expected 25,000 participants."[26]

Like many festivals that lost their religious context in modern times, and not just in Jewish culture, Shavu'ot was celebrated mainly by children and became a staple of the festival calendar in kindergartens and schools. The focus on children was an opportunity to extend the agricultural display of plenty to fruits of the womb, the future

[25] From a poster titled "To the Residents of Hadar Hacarmel" (אל תושבי הדר הכרמל), National Library of Israel.

[26] For a photo of the 1932 Shavu'ot procession on Herzl Street, Haifa, see https://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/קובץ:תהלוכת_שבועות_בהדר_הכרמל_-_חיפה,_1928.jpg.

generations of the Yishuv, as in the words of this 1933 song, written by Pinchas Elad and composed by David Zehavi: "Our barns are full of grain and our wineries flow with wine. / Our homes are teeming with babies / and our cattle are fruitful." But the song that came to represent the festival even better was the 1929 hit "With Baskets on our Shoulders" (סלינו על כתפינו), written by Levin Kipnis and composed by Yedidya Admon:

> With baskets on our shoulders,
> garlands on our heads,
> we come from all the country's corners,
> our harvest here to spread.
>
> From Judea, from Samaria,
> from the valley, from Galilee—
> make way for us,
> the harvest we amassed,
> bang the drum, play the flute![27]

Sukkot

The festival of Sukkot, also called Tabernacles, belongs to the harvest cycle too. But since the festival has a secondary historical and non-agricultural significance – to commemorate the wandering of the Israelites in the desert – it continued to be celebrated in the Jewish Diaspora. As a result, and since both Omer and Shavu'ot sated the Zionist appetite for the pastoral, Sukkot was not renewed in ways that were significantly different from its celebration in the Jewish Diaspora.

Omer

The Omer festival was the most elaborate Zionist cultural creation, a high example of Zionist tastes and sensibilities. *Omer*, which literally means a bundle of sheaves in Hebrew as well as a measurement, most often refers to the sheaf offering in biblical times that marked the

[27] In a 1931 photo from a Shavu'ot program in Tel Aviv, schoolchildren wear garlands of flowers and leaves, a staple of the festival's finery. Baskets with produce can be seen on the ground on the right. See www.israelhayom.com/2023/05/25/kkl-jnf-unveils-photos-of-shavuot-festivities-in-british-mandate-era/.

beginning of the Omer period, the fifty days that separate spring and summer. On the second day of Passover, offerings from the year's first harvest were brought to the Jerusalem Temple for a public ceremony of thanksgiving. The first part of the ancient custom, which opened the Yagur Haggadah, took place out in a field, where representatives from the Temple would harvest bundles of sheaves and then deliver them to Jerusalem. The second part took place in the Temple, where the priests would thresh the sheaves, roast the grains, grind them, mix them with oil and incense, and place the concoction on the altar. This cultic ritual disappeared together with the Temple in 68 CE. In the 1940s, almost two thousand years later, it was revived in the spirit of nationalism by two prolific cultural entrepreneurs, Matityahu Shellem (1904–1975) and Leah Bergstein (1902–1989), both from Kibbutz Ramat Yohanan.[28]

Shellem and Bergstein came to Palestine in the early 1920s and became two of the most creative contributors to the festival tradition that thrived on kibbutzim, Shellem as a songwriter and Bergstein as a dancer and choreographer. They were dynamic collaborators who created several original festivals, such as the Shearing Festival (חג הגז) and the Water Festival (חג המים). The first was a romantic celebration of sheep-shearing inspired by biblical sources. The second was based on an ancient rain ritual. Both were short-lived, whereas the Omer continues to be celebrated, or rather performed, today.

Sporadic attempts to revive the Omer ceremony began in the 1920s before Shellem and Bergstein gave it a lasting shape. An early account from Kibbutz Ein Harod that brings to mind a community of farmers somewhere in Eastern Europe describes how "the sun was still high in the sky when all work has stopped. A solemn hush fell." After the bell announced the beginning of the ceremony, people began marching down to the field. "The reapers led the way, carrying gleaming scythes over their shoulders. They were followed by the gathering women, carrying pitchforks and rakes and adorned with flowers." The rest of the community followed behind.[29]

Shellem took part in one of those early celebrations and felt deeply moved by it. The symbolic recreation of a Jewish harvest for the first

[28] An initial attempt to reintroduce the ancient ritual into the Yishuv's festival cycle was made in Kibbutz Ein Harod in the late 1930s by the composer and kibbutz member Shalom Postolsky (1893–1949). But Postolsky's version of the Omer was partial and gained little traction until the idea was fully developed and instituted by Shellem and Bergstein.

[29] Zevulun and Meisel, eds., *Kibbutz Festivals*, p. 170.

time in 2,000 years was a spiritual experience for him.[30] A few years later he created a fuller version of the festival for his kibbutz – not an easy task, as he confessed. Sources on the ancient ritual were few, their meaning was not clear, the celebrants and their faith were different, and farming had also changed; such challenges were common in Zionist cultural innovations. "The first thing I did was to go to [Jewish] sources to find out about the Omer," said Shellem. "I also consulted scholars at the university … and read the rabbis."[31] What became clear to him "is that [the Omer] was not just a religious ceremony, but a Hebrew spring festival that was conditioned by the life and customs of a nation of farmers."[32]

By the end of 1943 Shellem had finished writing the festival program. He asked Bergstein to add a number of dances to it, and the two brewed a rich concoction made up of Bible, farm work, and references to nature. "This Omer celebration is a legacy from our fathers before they were exiled from their land," proclaims an announcer at the opening of a ceremony staged in the middle of a wheat field as a reenactment of God's old promise that the people of Israel would inherit the land.

The Zionist festival was fortified with elements from the local Bedouin culture. In the early 1920s Shellem worked side by side with Arab laborers. "It wasn't very easy to communicate with them, but I tried my best because I was … fascinated by their music." Later he worked with Bedouin "who would sing at work" and dance the Debka, an Eastern Mediterranean line dance.[33] Bergstein was also captivated by the dance, which she saw for the first time at a Bedouin wedding. As she was watching a line of dancing men, "a magnificent woman burst out of the tent carrying a heavy sword, faced the men, and began to dance."[34] Bergstein was deeply struck by it and felt immediately drawn to a folk culture she saw as rooted in the soil and attuned to nature. She turned her experience into a short, powerful dance, a rousing number Shellem called "Sing Forth" (הֵן יְרוֹנֵן), which paraphrases Isaiah 16:10: "Sing forth, proclaim and announce / may the State of Israel / blossom and multiply and go forth / on the soil of Israel," an ironic paraphrase, given the Arabic source of the dance.

[30] Ibid., p. 59.
[31] Fleischer, *Historical Development*, p. 369.
[32] Goren, *Fields Dressed in Dance*, p. 63. For a performance see www.youtube.com/watch?v=iC1xjyBpSKk&t=2297s.
[33] Fleischer, *Historical Development*, p. 363.
[34] Zevulun and Meisel, eds., *Kibbutz Festivals*, p. 34.

Finally, in his popular song "A Stalk in the Field" (שבולת בשדה), Shellem celebrated his love for the land, for its nature, and for the rustic landscapes his generation created:

A stalk in the field
bent in the wind
heavy with grains
In the sweeping mountains
the day is coming to an end
the sun is all orange and gold.

The dancers of this Zionist pastoral begin with sweeping movements that simulate stalks swaying in the wind. Bergstein thought of it as "the dance of the lumbering farmers" and tried to cast inexperienced dancers, usually men, whose awkwardness, she believed, represented working people who were unaccustomed to the cultural refinement of dancing.[35] She was meticulous indeed.

Special outfits completed the theatrical celebration. Bergstein designed long dresses that reflected older traditions and made the dancers look impressive as they moved about the stage, slowed by garments that swayed dramatically in the wind. She chose a priestly white and embellished it with elements she borrowed from other traditions: Greek, Arabic, Eastern European, and Indian. She was completely honest about it. "There is no point pretending we're natives," she said, "so let's celebrate our multiple belongings."[36] She also designed an ornament she dubbed "ear curls," short, knotted ropes that hung over the heads of female dancers to invoke lambs' ears. The inspiration for it came from a pastoral poem by Shellem.

But if Bergstein had no illusions about being a native, her cultural engineering project appears to have been more successful than she imagined. As one of her young disciples confessed, the Omer was a transportive experience.

I remember how once, after dancing at the Omer, I walked back home wearing the dress Leah designed and thought about the clothes people wore in the past. … I suddenly felt that it was not [just] me walking there but that [with me were] thousands, millions of young women like me, Israeli, Jewish, who [used

[35] Ibid., p. 67.
[36] Goren, *Fields Dressed in Dance*, p. 120.

to] live on this soil. With every step I took, I felt as if millions of other women were walking with me. I had a feeling that I was not living in the present but in history … a feeling that grew from a sense of continuity. … Something in the dance I [had] just performed made me a part of this landscape.[37]

The Omer was an immediate success, and the annual celebration in Ramat Yohanan and other communities attracted hundreds of guests from around the country (see Figure 4.6). But its remit remained confined to a small number of kibbutzim. It was not surprising, given the specifically agricultural nature of the festival. Even in biblical times the ritual was performative, a symbolic gesture by a community of anxious farmers. Zionists modified the symbolism, but not by much.

Fig. 4.6 The Omer festival in Kibbutz Ramat Yohanan, 1940s. Ramat Yohanan Archive, Pikiwiki.

Tu Bishvat

Tu Bishvat, like Lag Ba'omer, was a radically new festival. As Hizky Shoham pointed out, it was the Zionist version of an American holiday, Arbor Day, dedicated to the romance of nature as a cure for the ills

[37] Ibid., p. 72.

Fig. 4.7 Students from an agricultural school in Nahalal with produce they grew and brought to the festival celebration in Haifa, 1932. Central Zionist Archive.

of urban society.[38] The day was usually marked by planting trees, and Zionists grafted it onto the fifteenth day of the month of Shevat (t+u (טו) = 15), an ancient administrative date connected to agricultural taxation. In the Jewish Diaspora the original date lost its relevance and was replaced with a vague sense of appreciation for nature. People ate dried fruit on that day, and children received time off from school. Toward the end of the nineteenth century it became more closely associated with the renewal of Jewish life in Palestine. In 1894 the first suggestion to link Arbor Day with Tu Bishvat was made in the Hebrew journal *Hatzfira*, which claimed the festival was a Jewish invention to begin with, as Shoham notes: "Our forefathers marked the festival in the past with much ado and named it the Rosh Hashana of Trees (Arbor Day)."[39]

[38] Hizky Shoham, "The History of Planting on Tu Bishvat," in *Israel Celebrates*.
[39] Ibid., p. 30.

The fiction was probably not necessary to convince Zionists, who were happy for any reason to commune with nature and get close to the soil. Tree-planting initiatives were common among the Jewish settlers of Palestine long before then, but they were not officially associated with a date until 1906, when the Hebrew Teachers' Union suggested it. A year later 300 students from the Mikveh Yisrael School held the first official tree-planting ceremony, with an extensive program of readings and songs.

Tu Bishvat, like other invented Zionist holidays, was observed primarily in educational institutions (see Figure 4.7). The program often included a procession of children who marched to a planting area with saplings in their hands, singing the "Planters' Song," with lyrics by Itzhak Shenhar and music by Yedidya Admon:

> Here come the planters:
> With a song in our hearts and a hoe in our hands.
> We come from all corners of the land,
> from near, from afar –
> On Tu Bishvat!
> On Tu Bishvat!
>
> What are you here for?
> We're here to prep the soil,
> to dig holes with toil,
> the earth to roil,
> On Tu Bishvat!
> On Tu Bishvat!
>
> What shall you plant?
> A tree in every hole,
> so that a forest grows tall,
> and covers our doleful land over all –
> On Tu Bishvat!
> On Tu Bishvat!

Arbor Day provided Zionists with a wonderful opportunity to mark their restorative ideology officially and turn it into a festival that was quickly added to the Zionist festival calendar. During the Yishuv period and the early decades of statehood it was a prominent date that was not always limited to one day or to Palestine/Israel. Tree planting became a powerful acculturation device that had obvious practical and symbolic

qualities. The planning of new forests was announced with great fanfare in the Hebrew press and was often connected to an event or a cause. The planting itself usually involved an official ceremony, and the greening agenda extended to Jewish communities around the world, who were invited to contribute to it and support the national Jewish project.

All societies draw lines between disconnected events in their history and create illusions of continuity or topographies of the past, as the sociologist Evyatar Zerubavel calls them.[40] These traditions of remembering, which began in the Hebrew Bible, played an important part in the renewal of the Jewish festival calendar in the Yishuv. Festivals do this especially well because their repetition year after year allows societies to emphasize historical connections and revise their stories of origin by creating unique emotional maps. The Zionist festival calendar did it especially well.

[40] Evyatar Zerubavel, *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past*, University of Chicago Press, 2003. See also Orit Baskin, "Hanukkah according to the *Book of Festivals*" (חג חנוכה על פי ספר המועדים), *Zmanin* 61 (1997): 38–50.