

Insights in Liturgy

The Jewish Holy Days

Part II
By FATHER

BENEDICT EHMANN
I can't hope, in the small space allotted me here, to give more than a smidgen, a meagre antipasto, from the richness of the Jewish holy days. Skipping the weekly Sabbath, and the monthly New Moon, I'll hold only to the annual feasts. Read your Bible for what it tells you about each of them: Leviticus 23, for five of them; Esther 10, for the sixth one; First Maccabees 4:36-59, for the seventh. For over 3,000 years, even to this day, the Jews have been celebrating these feasts.

1. **ROSH HASHANAH**, the New Year, in late September or early October (this year Oct. 1-9). Nine days long, it closes on the tenth day with Yom Kippur. Each day the

ram's horn (the Shofar) is blown in the synagogue. At home, bread, wine, and honey are blessed by the father, who prays that God will make the New Year sweet as honey. One of the day's treats is dipping apple slices into the honey.

2. **YOM KIPPUR**, Day of Atonement, closes the New Year week (this year, Oct. 10). It's a day of strict fast, searching the heart, making amends for all the years' wrongdoings, renewing one's dedication to God's law (Torah). The poignant Kol Nidre is chanted. Confessions of sin are prayed out loud. The people ask for God's pardon, for their own sins and those of others: all Jews hold themselves responsible for one another. In Bible days, a priest confessed the sins of all with his hands laid upon a "scapegoat", and then drove it out into the desert, as a symbol of expelling

sins from the people and the holy place (cf. Leviticus 16: 20-28). In the Temple, the high priest, after ceremonial bathing, entered the Holy of Holies (where only he was allowed this one time a year) with sacrificial blood of an animal, and offered it in atonement for sins. In his prayer he used that Name of God (Yahwe) which only he was allowed to use, and only on this day, at this solemn moment).

3. **SUKKOTH**, the Feast of Booths, at the end of Oct. Either outdoors or indoors, depending on the climate, booths or pavilions are built. In these they pray and feast as they remember the tents in which their forefathers lived during the wilderness journey to the Promised Land. Thanks are offered for the fruits of the harvest, as with us at Thanksgiving. In Bible times, the people took branches and held them over the altar in the

Temple, dancing around it with joyful music. A priest filled a large golden pitcher with water from Siloam Pool, and poured it over the altar. Look up chapter 7 of John's Gospel, and see how Jesus went up for this Feast and told the people that anyone who believes in Him, "from within him rivers of living water shall flow."

4. **PASSOVER**, Pesach, the springtime feast that celebrates the freeing of the Hebrews from Egypt under Moses. Its very special meal, called the Seder, has a very ritualized ceremonial. All old bread is disposed of, new unleavened bread (matzoh) is eaten, the story of the bondage in Egypt, the plagues and the flight, is read, wine is blessed and drunk as a toast to God, once at the beginning of the Seder, twice during it, and a fourth time at the end. It was with this final cup that Jesus at the Last Supper gave us His Blood of the new and everlasting

covenant", after He had given His Body under the form of the unleavened bread. Jesus was becoming our new Passover, delivering us from the bondage of evil by His death and resurrection. Our Christian Passover is not once a year, but every day, in the Eucharist.

5. **PENTECOST**, Shebuaht, the Feast of Weeks, 50 days after Passover. It commemorates the Giving of the Law by God to Moses on Mt. Sinai. In ancient days it also marked the first wheat harvest. Thanks are offered to God for His commandment, the Book of Ruth is read, remembering how Ruth, the "outsider", came to share in the Covenant after gleaning in the harvest time. Children often bring flowers to their mothers to show they love them as Ruth loved Naomi and left her homeland to be with her.

6. **PURIM**, the Feast of Lots, jolliest and noisiest of the holy days. It com-

memorates how the villain Haman was bested in his plot to destroy the Jews when Queen Esther pleaded with King Ahasuerus for her people. The Book of Esther is read, and often acted out in costumes and masks. The children clap loudly for Esther and Mordecai, but for Haman they boo and rattle their noisemakers. And, of course, there are good things to eat.

7. **HANUKKAH**, Feast of Lights, in December, celebrates the work of Judas Maccabeus championing his people, rebuilding and dedicating the desecrated Temple altar (cf. 1 Maccabees 4: 36-59). Jesus celebrated this feast: see John 10:22-23. The eight-branched Candlestick, the menorah, highlights the Festival throughout the week, like the great one in the Temple when Judas Maccabeus restored it. This holy day coincides with our Christmas season.

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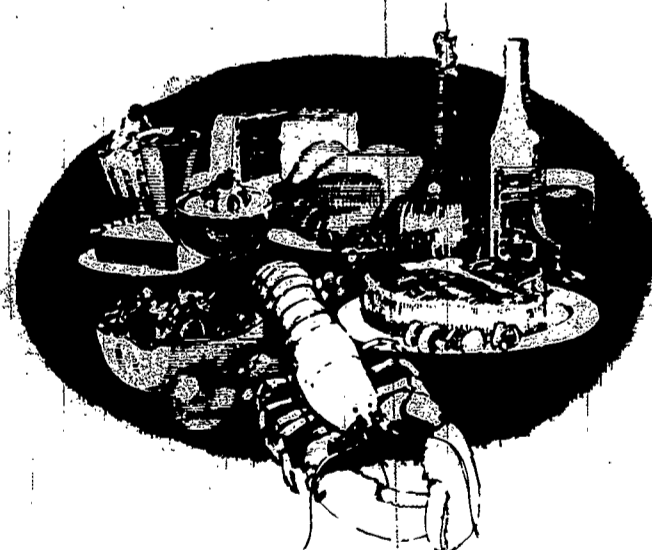
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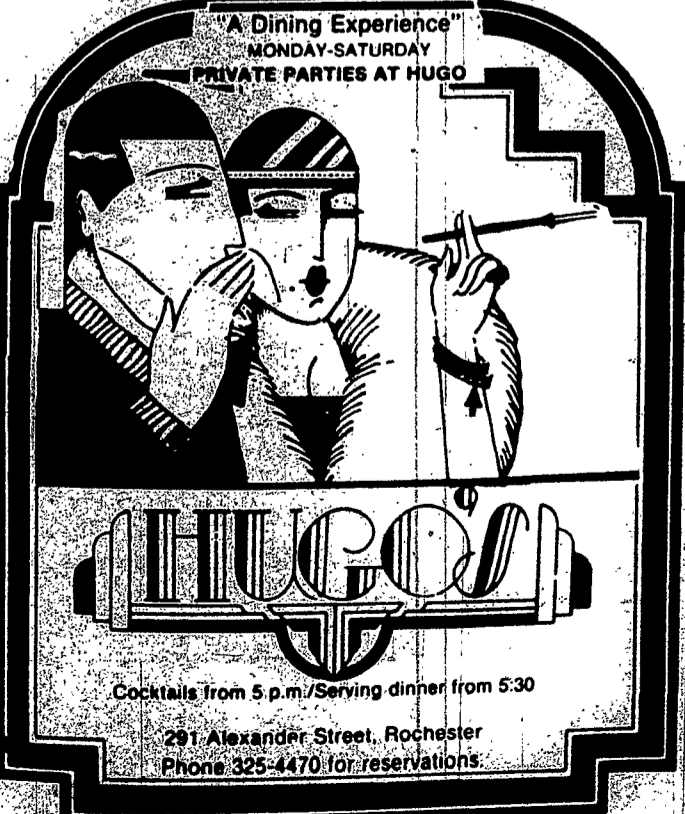
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