



III. CELEBRATING THE JEWISH CYCLE OF LIFE

RJ: What has been your most meaningful Jewish holiday experience?

Martin Graffman: My most meaningful holiday has always been Passover. It speaks to the modern and existential problems of living: slavery (of any kind), destiny, freedom, responsibility, the role of God, joy, suffering, family, evil, and goodness.

John Planer: For me Shabbat and Pesach are the most meaningful. Shabbat is the day of rest when I can devote time to the study of sacred Jewish texts, reflect on my rich heritage, and ponder life's meaning. Pesach links me with my immediate and distant ancestors, with my children, and hopefully their descendants, with the Jewish people, and with all peoples. Our seder table is filled with fresh flowers, silver *kiddush* cups, holiday dishes and table service—objects which once adorned the Passover table of my parents and grandparents. In retelling the Exodus story I relate who I am and where I came from, and underscore my obligations to my fellow human beings.

Chanukah means very little to me; it is a minor, non-biblical holiday whose importance we have greatly inflated to counterbalance Christmas. Sukkot and Shavuot likewise hold little importance for me; we live in an agricultural cycle far removed from biblical harvests and pilgrimages to the Temple in Jerusalem. On the other hand I wish we would place more emphasis on Tisha b'Av—not so much because of the destruction of the Temple—heaven forbid we should return to sacrificial rituals!—but rather because we would do well to contemplate *sinat chinam* (gratuitous

hatred), especially in preparation for Elul and the High Holy Days.

In my view the holidays bear no



Sarah Bloch and Jeffrey DeBruin, Baltimore, October 14, 2007. Rabbi Elissa Sachs-Kohen of Baltimore Hebrew Congregation performed the wedding ceremony.

inherent meaning, even though their sources are Torah commandments. It is *we* who endow them with meaning.

Mary Hofmann: My favorite holiday is Tu B'Shvat. No frantic preparations, none of the harried flurry of gift buying, just the blessed planting of new trees and flowers and a delightful seder we've adapted that centers on the youngest of our children and their introduction to growing things. It's often the happiest holiday of my year!

Dawn Mollenkopf: I find holiday observances meaningful, but lonely. Although I was born Jewish, my mom joined a church when I was 6, so I was raised as a Christian. My Jewish grand-

parents ignored Jewish festivals, and my immediate family has always celebrated Christian holidays. My mother expresses her hope that I will go back to the “way I was raised” rather than practice the religion of my birth. So when I celebrate, I find that the Jewish community stands in as my family because I am essentially cut off from mine.

Jennifer Warriner: There's an old joke that sums up the Jewish holidays in nine words: “They tried to kill us, we lived, let's eat.” Some people focus too much on the first part—that someone tried to kill us—forgetting the real point: Jewish holidays consistently remind us to celebrate life, even if the circumstances are not what we would have wanted them to be. When I approach holidays remembering they are an opportunity to celebrate life, every holiday experience is meaningful.

RJ: How do you observe/enjoy Shabbat these days?

Steve Arnold: For me the border between Shabbat and the rest of week comes about two thirds of the way through the erev Shabbat service, after the few moments of silent prayer. In those moments I focus my mind not on

THE RABBIS SPEAK

“We mark the milestones of our personal journeys with traditional and creative rites that reveal the holiness in each stage of life.”

—A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism, CCAR, 1999